

National Grid lays trail of tears

CHARLES PINNING

THIS IS A VERY DIFFICULT time of the year for me," she said. "Don't mind it if I buy you a box of crayons."

It was Labor Day weekend, and she looked across to him. Her eyes were red and wet. Her daughters were grown-up and off on their own, but she talked about how much she had enjoyed getting them ready for school each year.

Fresh tears rolled forth. "Shall we visit them?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's not that. . . I was at the Shaw's in East Providence today. . . and the people — oh my God!"

"Just horrible-looking?"

She nodded.

"I don't see these people. . . I go to Whole Foods. . . East Side Market. God! They just looked — Aaaaah! . . ."

"Misshapen."

She nodded again. "They were so skinny. . . This one little man, his jeans were all bunched up behind," and she pressed the heels of her palms together to show how small his bottom was. "Or they're so fat!" she said, spreading her

hands apart. "And their faces. . . I have never seen faces like that. And they were filling their baskets with crappy food, and paying out their dollars one at a time. But they had their re-usable bags. That has been drummed into them. They are *trying* . . . but they don't know where to begin. Go to Shaw's — that's where the rubber really meets the road."

"I know, darlin'," he sympathized. "I've spent the last 25 years of my life living on the west side of Providence, seeing it every day." "And the children crying and the mother's slapping them and screaming at them and cursing and saying, 'C'mon!'"

"I know, sweetheart. . . It's about education . . . and parents raising their children responsibly. Being home with them. Spending time with them. Reading to them. Guiding them responsibly. And being given a chance. They just. . ."

and she held her hands out, palms up, shifting them back and forth.

"Right — they're always kept off-balance. It is the goal of corporations to do this. Deny traction, and you keep people herky-jerky, running in place and churning profits for you. Listen to this:" (He

picked up the newspaper.)

"August 27, Business section, front page, headline: 'National Grid asks rate hike of about 5 percent.' It goes on to say . . . 'National Grid also wants the Public Utilities Commission to restructure distribution rates in a way that would *protect the company from revenue losses that result from the conservation efforts of its customers.*'"

"Got that? The raping has been so blatant for so long that National Squid feels it can come straight out and essentially say, 'You can conserve all you want. We're still going to squeeze the same amount of money out of you! We're just shifting the charges to another area.'"

"It's the same thing that the Narragansett Bay Commission is trying to pull by asking the PUC to raise rates because of revenue loss due to customers' conserving water over the past three years. People logically think they're going to save a few bucks by using less water or less natural gas — but no! The utilities . . . Narragansett Bay . . . they're petitioning the PUC to get the same level of bucks they want no matter how much water or gas you use. Where's the incentive to conserve? We might as well keep nice and cozy and warm, or use as much water as we want because they're gonna get the same amount of money, whether you use five therms of gas or five hundred; a thimbleful of water or a hundred gallons a day!

"How do I make it clear to people that these corporations have people on a gerbil wheel? That instead of being rewarded for doing the right thing, you will be punished."

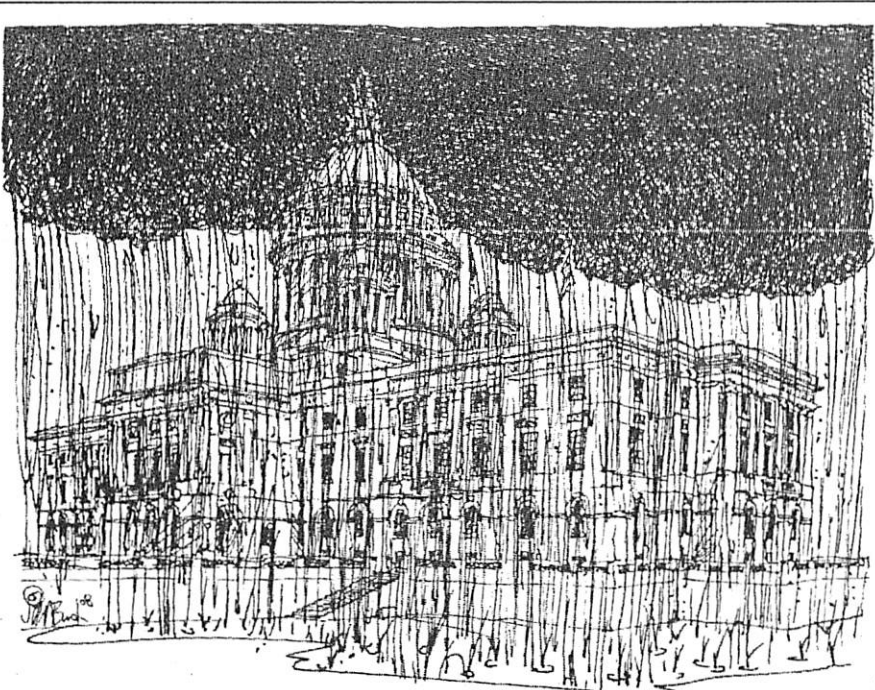
"Say it just the way you said it."

"But will people hear it? Will they see that we are taking a screwing, so that Grid can show profits to its shareholders and pay its CEO Steve Holliday \$3.6 million a year . . . so that Narragansett Bay can continue to funnel hundreds of millions to construction companies to dig a billion-dollar hole in the ground?"

"Just keep on telling it. Also, try to mention that natural gas belongs to everybody — National Grid only delivers it."

"Oh, sweetheart — the Cherokee in you is coming out." That brought the tears afresh.

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer.



News item: Governor Carcieri asks Legislature for permission to scoop \$33.6 million out of rainy day fund to cover deficit for second year in a row.