

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Premier, Tory deserve one another

It has long bemused me when politicians are accused, either by their political opponents or the media, of ? wait for it ? ?playing politics.?

It's akin to accusing General Motors of building cars. That's what they do.

And politicians? Well, they do politics.

Which, of course, brings us to the current dispute between Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and Toronto Mayor John Tory over the prospect of punishing commuters for driving into downtown Toronto by imposing road tolls on the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway.

If only politicians would put as much effort into finding ways to spend less money as they do in finding ways to make us pay more, we'd all be better off.

But that's not how it works. And despite his campaign promises to bring Toronto's spending under control, Tory, looking at \$30 billion in unfunded capital projects in Toronto, settled upon road tolls as a way to pick up some relatively easy cash without making Toronto residents that unhappy.

He knew, of course, that the commuters in the 905 area would be unhappy, but hey, he doesn't have to get their votes to get re-elected.

Wynne, on the other hand, does.

And so began the latest saga of which politician is the most hypocritical and, dare we say it, the most brazenly political.

To hear Tory tell it ? along with the bulk of the Toronto media ? the clear winner in the boo-hiss category is Wynne. We learn that Tory went trudging up to Queen's Park last September to see the Premier and, when he raised the idea of road tolls, was told by her to: ?Go for it, we won't stand in the way.?

With that assurance in his pocket then, Tory came out publicly during a Nov. 24 speech, and Dec. 13, City council approved the tolls by a resounding 32-9 tally. In the legislature, when Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown, mindful of outrageous increases in energy prices already facing the public, said ?families can't afford this new toll tax,? Wynne accused him of having ?no plan for building transit or for building transportation infrastructure in this province . . .?

But a funny thing happened on the way to road tolls when Wynne's nervous caucus members went back to their ridings over Christmas, were deluged with complaints from their constituents ? the ones who would be paying most of these road taxes ? and convinced Wynne that, on top of the aforementioned unpopularity of Liberal energy prices, this would pretty much doom their chances of re-election.

And so, according to the Sunday Star, Jan. 18 ? the day after one of Wynne's senior officials met with the city manager to discuss details of the tolls ? the Premier called Tory and told him the road tolls were off. Period. End of story.

Tory was beside himself, blurting out to reporters that he is sick of ?being treated as a little boy going up to Queen's Park in short pants.?

Clearly, Wynne had been convinced by her worried caucus that road tolls would be simply adding fuel to the fire of the Liberal demise, so she reneged on her ?promise.?

The media coverage in Toronto since then has basically presented Tory as the aggrieved party here, and Wynne as the villain.

For sure, Wynne gave her word, only to betray herself (offering instead a sop in the form of more gas taxes for the city.)

But before we rush off to crown Tory as the good guy in this fight, let us take you back to 2003, the first time Tory ran for mayor, when rival David Miller suggested road tolls. Tory called the idea ?highway robbery,? and stationed his supporters at the Spadina Avenue entrance to the Gardiner holding signs saying, ?Honk if you hate tolls.?

Tory said he was concerned about ?the impact . . . on the downtown . . .?

Indeed. But in January 2013, as a private citizen on a panel, Tory said he'd ?performed a disservice? by attacking Miller, but added ?road tolls (are not) the best answer of all the sort of (revenue) tools that are available, but . . . we need some combination of tools to raise this money.?

In 2014, in his successful bid for mayor, Tory flatly ruled out road tolls. ?We need to make Toronto more affordable and imposing new taxes is not the way to tackle traffic congestion,? he said, promising his SmartTrack line and more transit instead.

Once elected, alas, his solemn promises were cast aside and, lo and behold, Tory suddenly believed road tolls were a good thing.

So which is worse: Wynne giving the OK and then reneging, or Tory campaigning against tolls then wanting to impose them?

Two peas in a pod, it seems to me. They deserve each other.

