

Claire Hoy ? Flaherty was the real deal

Most people follow the old adage that "you should never speak ill of the dead." The reason is obvious: whatever you may or may not have thought of the deceased, you still want to show respect for those who loved him or her.

The result, of course, is that when somebody dies there is a predictable outpouring of kind words and glowing praise before life, as we know it, reverts back to its' normal course of events.

The problem is, not all deaths ? or lives ? should be treated with the same degree of reverence. Some people clearly deserve more praise than others for the way they lived their life.

Which brings us, as you may have guessed, to the tragic sudden death last week of long-time federal-provincial Tory politician Jim Flaherty.

In a cruel twist of fate, Flaherty, 64, having just recently announced he was scaling back after nearly two decades as an MPP and MP ? including the high-stress role as Prime Minister Stephen Harper's finance minister ? was denied his chance to spend some overdue time with his wife (Ontario Tory deputy leader Christine Elliott) and their triplet sons, John, Quinn and Galen.

Like most political leaders, and despite their high-profile media presence, Flaherty was known to the public not for his personal attributes, but for his political record, mainly for his fiscal prowess in leading Canada through the worst financial crisis in decades and his consistent fiscal conservatism (with the exception of his early bolstering of government spending to ride out the aforementioned crisis).

Some admired him for that. Some didn't. That's politics.

But in this case, as somebody who knew Flaherty personally, I can tell you that the all-party outpouring of grief ? the widespread shedding of tears ? in Ottawa and elsewhere at the tragic death of this man was not political acting by any stretch. It was real.

Flaherty was a man who, whatever your political bent might be, was impossible not to like. And admire.

He had a terrific leprechaun-like sense of humour, a constant twinkle in his eyes that, whatever your station in life might be, made anybody who came near him feel completely at ease. He was not the type of person who used ? or abused ? his important political status to lord it over anybody.

When the terrible news hit Parliament Hill last week, Harper, whose? public persona is often akin to an iceman, could barely blurt out the news. With his wife Laureen standing beside him, wiping tears from her eyes, Harper said, "This comes as an unexpected and terrible shock to Jim's family, to our caucus and to Laureen and me. And it with the heaviest of hearts that I offer my family's condolences and I know the condolences of the entire Parliament and the government of Canada."

NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, clearly a political opponent of Flaherty's fiscally conservative views, said, "He's a good person. We're very, very sad for the loss of a great Canadian. Jim Flaherty was an extraordinarily dedicated public servant and he will be greatly missed by all of us."

Former Ontario premier Mike Harris ? where Flaherty first began his political career ? said, "He touched a lot of people very positively as a person. We are all going to miss him. I really feel for his family."

And leaders in Canada's disability community ? an area of Flaherty's personal life which hasn't received much publicity (one of his three sons is disabled) ? expressed their immense gratitude for Flaherty's efforts on their behalf, particularly his grants to Special Olympics Canada and the registered disability savings plan, which allows money to be set aside tax free for people with disabilities, a plan unique in the world.

And the list goes on.

There's a theme in all those comments. Politics aside, there was the appreciation from all who knew him of just what a wonderful, genuine human being he was, a man who was just as comfortable sitting in the board room with high-level bankers as he was having a coffee in his local café or playing pickup hockey with his Ottawa pals.

Jim Flaherty was the real deal. He deserved a better fate.

God bless him.

