

Claire Hoy ? ?Group think? and ?common wisdom?

First, a brief lesson in how media ?group think? works.

In what seems like another lifetime now, your humble correspondent, as the Ottawa columnist for the Toronto Sun, was among a group of ?select? journalists invited for a private, on-the-record session with then finance minister Michael Wilson the day after Brian Mulroney's triumphant Tories had issued their first budget.

The key theme of that budget ? and of the election campaign leading up to it ? was that the Liberals had overspent and overtaxed Canadians and the Tories were about to change that. Deficit-slashing and tax and spending cuts would be the order of the day. And so it was, as each invited journalist around the table was given the chance one by one to ask Wilson a question, all the inquiries were based on the notion that all these spending cuts wouldn't sit well with the people whose collective oxen were being gored. With each question, Wilson solemnly acknowledged there would be political pushback, but emphasized the urgency of getting spending and the federal deficit under control.

When it was finally my turn, I asked Wilson why, in light of their advocacy of less government spending ? an ideology which meshes perfectly with my own, by the way ? why was it that when you look at his own numbers, government spending was actually increasing substantially.

As the saying goes, you could have heard a pin drop. Wilson haughtily dismissed the question. The other journalists never referred to the actual facts of the matter in their subsequent reports. And this correspondent never again was invited to join the inner circle of ?select? journalists for that or any other event.

This is not meant to tout my own personal courage ? if anything, it underscores my basic anti-social instincts ? only to demonstrate that in the Ottawa Press Gallery, or any other press collective you can name, there is strong pressure to go along in order to get along.

All of which brings us to the current avalanche of mainstream media stories based on the premise ? an absurd premise, it says here ? that Prime Minister Stephen Harper will likely decide to step down before the next election and allow somebody else to take over. Having spent 2013 trying to convince Canadians that the Mickey Mouse Senate ?scandal? really is earth-shattering ? it's ain't pretty, but it certainly doesn't compare with, let's say, the billion-dollar boondoggles from Ontario's own Liberal government over energy and health spending ? the media has now, it seems, collectively decided that Harper is truly on the ropes politically.

Keep in mind that the vast majority of journalists are not inclined to look upon Conservatives, any Conservatives, kindly. This isn't to suggest they are all shills for the opposition parties, only that they view the world from a different perspective.

Here's another illustration. Another time, when your correspondent was introduced for a speech to a large pro-life conference, the host introduced me as ?one of Canada's leading pro-life journalists.? I replied that it was probably true, but that's mainly because I could only think of three or four journalists who were actually pro-life. All the others were on the opposite side. Most ? but not all ? journalists try to be fair. But just as my own outlook affects the way I view the abortion issue, other journalists are equally affected by their philosophy, no matter how much they try to be fair and balanced. That's a reality that can't be avoided.

And so it is with the Ottawa Press Gallery having long ago decided that Harper is the most secretive and controlling prime minister ever ? even though a thorough Globe and Mail study on voting patterns showed Tory MPs split way more often from their party than either Liberals or New Democrats in actual parliamentary votes ? the current ?group think? is that the Tories have slipped so much in the opinion polls (never mind how badly polls have fared in several recent elections and by-elections) that Harper has no choice but to either step down gracefully or be forced out by his outraged party.

It's all complete nonsense, of course. Polls come and polls go. And polls two years before an election don't now ? and never have ? mean very much at all.

Indeed, it says here in this corner that the best news for Harper and his Tories ? apart from a host of additional seats being added for the next election, most of them in strong Tory areas ? is that Justin Trudeau appears to have resuscitated the moribund Liberal Party, a reality which is likely to hurt the NDP ? particularly in Quebec ? more than it will the Tories.

But then, I never was big on the notion of so-called ?common wisdom.?

Happy New Year.

