

Claire Hoy ? No modern-day Scrooge

Here we are in the Christmas season when everything is supposed to be about love and joy, etc., etc., a time when any public figure is honest enough to deviate from the program he or she can expect a deluge of pooh-poohing from the usual suspects.

Case in point: widely-publicized comments by Industry Minister James Moore who ultimately apologized ? when he shouldn't have ? over comments deemed to be ?insensitive? about child poverty.

I'm not sure when this notion began about government being responsible for nurturing us from ?cradle to grave? ? to co-opt the term first used by the late Sir Winston Churchill in another context ? but it appears the idea of personal responsibility has been largely supplanted by the comfort of Big Brotherism, and woe be those who stray from the true path to righteousness, particularly during this season of unfettered group hugs.

The headlines for Moore's comments continue to spout the minister's question: ?Is it the government's job ? my job ? to feed my neighbour's child? I don't think so.?

Put in such stark terms ? particularly without including the rest of his comments ? it sounds heartless. Indeed, as Toronto Star publisher John Cruickshank wrote in a Saturday column: ?The spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge lives on.?

The truth, of course, is rather different, but those who wish to exploit their political enemies, with The Star being a prime example, don't seem to worry about a)-quoting the minister's full comments or b)-asking themselves if, in fact, what he actually said has merit. I think it does, and I offer as the first bit of evidence before the court of public opinion the rest of what Moore actually said in his radio interview, the part being conveniently ignored by all but a few (National Post columnist Andrew Coyne being a notable exception) journalists and political opponents.

The uproar began when a Vancouver radio reporter asked: ?Child poverty in B.C. is at an all-time high. What does the federal government plan to do about that??

After the interview, the radio station's website reported: ?Federal minister says child poverty not Ottawa's problem.?

Moore did not say that at all, but that has not deterred Tory-haters from reporting it anyway.

Moore, clearly caught off guard, could have pointed out that ?child poverty? is NOT at an all-time high or even close to it. Even if you accept the consistent and deliberate misrepresentation by poverty activists and journalists of Statistics Canada's Low Income cut-off (after tax) as a ?poverty line? ? the rate is higher in B.C. than elsewhere, but at 11.4 per cent is down from 19 per cent a decade ago. (Nationally, it's at 8.5 per cent, almost a record low, despite constant reportage that ?little progress? has been made in fighting poverty.)

While Ottawa obviously is involved in fighting poverty, social assistance is primarily under provincial jurisdiction, which is why he began his reply by saying: ?We're not going to usurp the province's jurisdiction on that. How one certainly scales and define poverty is not quite an apples to apples comparison all across the country ? More Canadians are working now than ever before ? We've never been wealthier as a country??

He went on to say, ?Of course, nobody wants kids to go to school hungry ? We want to make sure that kids go to school full-bellied ? Empowering families with more power and resources so that they can feed their own children is, I think, a good thing.?

And then the apparently offensive, Scrooge-like part: ?Is it my job to feed my neighbour's child? I don't think so ? is that always the government's job to be there to serve people their breakfast??

The cad, cried the haters. The heartless twit doesn't care if kids starve! Scrooge is alive and well! None of which, of course, he actually said.

He did ask legitimately if it is the government's job to feed your neighbour's child? Well, is it? Really? Few would say ?yes.?

It is, as Moore said, the government's job to assist where it can, but surely not to usurp parental responsibility. Yes, if parent's can't ? or won't ? do their job, then social services move in. That's not disavowing a government role at all. It's simply defining what it is. There is no way that a reasonable person can legitimately compare Moore's comments to Scrooge ? who, you'll recall, didn't care if kids starved to death ? but that is exactly the comparison the Star's publisher and others have made.

One hopes they sleep well, contented by their own sanctimony, and unbothered by their grievous misrepresentation of a man who, by all accounts, is one of the few really good guys in the political jungle.

