

Claire Hoy ? Public servants doing well, thank you

One of the things that really gets up most people's noses these days ? unless, of course, your particular nose is employed by the government ? is the fact that civil servants get a better shake than workers in the private sector, even when they're performing the same jobs.

There are countless studies to show that the old concept of public ?service? ? where you were ready to sacrifice pay and perks for stability and service to the public ? has gone the way of the dodo bird.

Which is why your correspondent was taken aback last week upon reading a Canadian Press story published in the Toronto Star with the headline: ?Study on public service wages dispels fat-cat myth.?

The story went on to claim that the latest report by Canada's parliamentary budget office ?appears to put to rest the myth of fat-cat public servants collecting far larger pay packets than their counterparts in the private sector.

?Virtually all growth in federal public service pay over the last 11 years has merely kept up with inflation, and additional hires comprised about half of the extra \$7.8 billion in pay for public servants between 2001-02 and 2011-12??

Naturally, NDP critics were quick to highlight on this extraordinary report. NDP Treasury Board critic Mathieu Ravignat said: ?The Conservatives like to point the finger at workers, unions and everyone but themselves for increasing costs, but this report shows the real story.

?The reality is, employees took a pay cut while the Conservatives went on a hiring binge.?

And NDP MP Paul Dewar, who had asked newly-appointed watchdog Jean-Denis Frechette for the report, chimed in that the Tories ?are using the public service as whipping boys and as a wedge between those who are having a hard time at the moment and public servants.?

All of this would be quite legitimate if, in fact, the report actually showed what the Canadian Press story and the NDP critics claim it does. But, alas, they're wrong. It shows no such thing.

Indeed, way down near the end of the CP story itself, readers are giving the startling news that, ?The budget office report does not attempt to compare public to private sector salary scales, only whether public service remuneration had grown substantially in the past decade or so.?

Think about that. We're told off the top that the report shows the public service isn't outstripping private sector workers, in a report which makes no comparisons between public and private sector workers. What's wrong with this picture?

Something else that is wrong with it is that the report conveniently ? and dishonestly, in my view ? does not include benefits, the one area where public servants, thanks to generous pension deals, have clearly shot ahead of their private worker counterparts.

Indeed, the story mentions that on average public servants earned slightly less than \$70,000 last year, pointing out that that is less than the \$114,000 estimate the budget office reported last December.

How can that be? Again, because the new guy on the job ? and who knows why? ? decided the benefits don't count.

Well, fact is, if the two figures from the budget office are correct ? and they likely are ? it means that in addition to their salaries, which aren't bad, by the way, they get \$44,000 in benefits, more than half again what their salary is. How many private sector workers get benefits worth that much? Not many, I'll bet. Sure, those wealthy people at the top of the ladder do, but your average private-sector employee struggling to make ends meet doesn't get anywhere near that, but he or she is expected to keep pumping tax dollars into public service pensions.

The spurious claim by NDP critic Ravignat that public servants ?took a pay cut? is, to be kind, utter nonsense. This report makes it clear that ?most? ? though not all ? of pay increases were keeping up with inflation. That means a)-they didn't fall behind; and b)-they actually did slightly better than inflation; and c)-how can that add up to a pay cut?

An email response to Canadian Press from Treasury Board President Tony Clement's office says the \$43 billion price tag for public sector pay and benefits accounts for the government's largest operating cost.

Let us not shed tears for government workers.

