

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Balanced budget? Don?t believe it!

It was the late American children's author and illustrator Robert McCloskey who wrote: ?I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.?

Obviously, McCloskey was not speaking of last week's Ontario Liberal budget. But he could have been.

For the main lesson the Liberals wanted to come out of that pre-election exercise is ?we have balanced the budget. Hurrah for us!? They hope that by making this specious claim ? and repeating it over and over from now until the election next fall ? Ontario voters actually will believe they understand what they think the Liberal message was.

But anybody who takes the time to go beyond the partisan talking point will realize that what you heard them say bears little, if any, relationship to the truth of the matter.

As a self-admitted small ?c? conservative, I am routinely first in line to cheer on any government that actually does balance its books. But, alas, the only way the Liberal budget could be called ?balanced? is for everybody to set aside everything they know about debt and spending and buy into this transparent attempt by the Liberals to present themselves as responsible guardians of your tax dollars.

Put it this way. Say you discovered, after years of borrowing to make ends meet, that your income and expenses for a year finally match. But before you break out the champagne to celebrate this happy development, you have to head down the street to your friendly banker to borrow money to keep your household going. Add to that, your history of building up a debt load for year after year ? making the cost of just servicing the debt, not paying it down, your third most expensive item ? and you may have second thoughts about celebrating your fiscal brilliance.

The debt ? which has led to Ontario's credit rating being diminished (which means paying even more money to borrow) ? has skyrocketed under Liberal rule, and is predicted to increase by \$64 billion ? that's billion, with a ?b? ? to an astronomical \$370 billion by 2020-21 ? is a serious load on both current and future taxpayers. But if you don't count it as an expense, well then, bring out the champagne and celebrate.

In order to claim a balanced budget, the Liberals pulled out every actuarial trick in the book. Fact is, public borrowing will increase by another \$10 billion this year alone, added to the \$180 billion they've already piled onto the debt so far. But their budget doesn't count this as an expense because ? wait for it ? borrowing will be for ?investments? (which is what politicians like to call ?spending?) on capital assets. The fact that it's still spending and still one of the costliest parts of overall spending doesn't matter when you're out to con the public.

Not only that, the Liberals included one-time sales of various assets to prop up their revenue stream and make it appear as if they are doing better than they are.

With Premier Kathleen Wynne at a historically low 11 per cent in recent public opinion polls ? and Liberals publicly grouching about the possibilities of dumping her before the next election (and Wynne herself insisting she's not going anywhere) ? it is not surprising the Liberals are so desperate for good news that they'll try anything.

And so it was they trotted out even more large spending proposals, including a plan to provide free drugs to Ontarians 24 years old and younger and adding 24,000 new licensed child care spots, among other things.

The pharmacare plan brings back memories of the late Larry Grossman, then health minister under premier Bill Davis, who, with his party facing a tough upcoming electoral fight, introduced a plan to offer ?free? drugs for seniors.

Like the ?free? drugs for kids Liberal plan, it too was supposed to be a relatively modest expense. But, like pretty well all government programs, it too grow'd like topsy and quickly became one of the costliest parts of the health budget. Look for the Liberal plan to do the same. Why? Because they start modestly, but then people say ?what about my drug?? And, rather than put a lid on it, the politicians give in, and before long what was meant to cover a few drugs ends up including thousands.

And so it goes.

Which is why even during the halcyon years of Ontario being the engine of Canada, Bill Davis never managed a balanced budget either. Then again, unlike Wynne, he didn't claim that he did.

