

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Budget bill another broken promise

Somebody once said that when people are two-faced the only thing you know for sure is that you can't trust either one of them. Which brings us, alas, to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Actually, it brings us to pretty well any politician, but the most recent example of a politician campaigning on one side of an issue and governing on the other happens to involve the current occupant of the Prime Minister's Office.

You may recall that leading up to the last election, one of the most enduring criticisms of then prime minister Stephen Harper was that he didn't respect democracy, i.e. that he was prone to doing an end run around open public debate of his policies by loading a ton of them in the so-called ?omnibus bills.?

Those who criticized Harper for this ? Justin Trudeau being one of the main players ? were quite right in insisting that these bills are a disgraceful abuse of parliamentary power.

Harper himself, we should remember, had railed against them in opposition when then Liberal prime minister Paul Martin was using the tactic. Harper argued that the subject matter of omnibus bills is so diverse that a single vote on the contents puts members in conflict with their own principles. He strongly advocated dividing these bills into separate components to allow voting and debate on each particular subject.

The Liberals, naturally, ignored his advice and carried on.

When Harper took over it seems he forgot his outrage about omnibus bills and picked up right where the Liberals had left off, a practice that ? surprise, surprise ? prompted the Liberals to express outrage and demand an end to this heinous practice.

Indeed, during the election campaign itself, Trudeau accused Harper directly of having ?used omnibus bills to prevent Parliament from properly reviewing and debating his proposals. We will change the House of Commons standing orders to bring an end to this undemocratic practice,? he said.

Here. Here. The voters apparently shouted.

Once again, however, a funny thing happened on the way from the campaign trail to the actual cabinet office, and we now find our brave reformer Sir Justin dumping a huge omnibus bill on the Commons, a huge budget bill that contains 307 pages covering a host of various subjects, many of them having nothing to do with a budget.

As Globe and Mail columnist John Ibbitson wrote, this omnibus bill ?contains, among other things, clauses that could limit the independence of the Parliamentary Budget Officer . . . a new law that creates the Canada Infrastructure Bank, which deserves separate scrutiny. The bill increases the number of judges on the Court of Queen's Bench in Alberta. It changes the rules for immigration applicants, toughens the Canada Labour Code rules concerning ?employer reprisals . . .' And on and on.?

This is precisely the sort of thing that Trudeau had promised to put an end to. Well, so much for that promise.

There's a certain irony here in that the first omnibus bill in Ottawa was introduced by ? ta da! ? Pierre Elliot Trudeau, late father of our current prime minister, who, as justice minister in 1967 introduced legislation that partially legalized abortion, legalized homosexual acts between consenting adults, imposed new limits on gun ownership, allowed government-run lotteries and authorized police use of breathalyzers, all in one sweeping bill. It also prompted one of the elder Trudeau's most famous quotes, i.e. ?there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.?

Every prime minister since that time has a)- railed against the use of omnibus bills while not in the prime minister's seat and b)- used omnibus bills at the first opportunity upon being elected.

In his Globe column, Ibbitson neatly ties the current Trudeau's disregard of his election promise to the presence of two senior advisers ? principle secretary Gerald Butts and chief of staff Katie Telford ? who were young Liberal advisors during the Mike Harris years at Queen's Park. Butts became Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty's principal secretary and helped him ram several omnibus bills through the Legislature before scooting off to Ottawa to help Trudeau thumb his nose at the electorate.

Trudeau himself told the Commons that ?any budget bill includes a broad range of provisions? that ?will touch on a broad range of issues,? prompting NDP MP Nathan Cullen to quip ?I didn't think I'd see him (Trudeau) quoting Stephen Harper.?

Well, when it comes to political hypocrisy, they pretty well follow the same script.

And they wonder why the public doesn't trust them.

