

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Martin?s hardly a non-partisan

This just in, courtesy of a breathless CBC interview: Paul Martin hates the Tory budget. So does Thomas Mulcair. Mind you, neither man has seen the budget yet ? since Finance Minister Joe Oliver won't unveil it until April 21 ? but they know that whatever it contains, it won't be heavy on the profligate government spending that both Liberals and New Democrats like. Perhaps Martin, the former prime minister and Liberal finance minister, was tricked by CBC Radio's Evan Solomon, host of The House, into criticizing the Tories, but in an interview last week which the CBC immediately rushed into print on its website, this absolutely predictable partisan attack qualified as big news. Not only will the Tory plan to balance the budget to create jobs and growth not work, says Martin, ?If you don't invest in the future you will be running perpetual deficits.?

Really? Funny thing about that is that when Martin ran finance under Jean Chrétien he boasted vociferously how he, the mighty deficit slayer, had balanced the budgets and the result would be more jobs and economic growth. The difference, alas, is that Martin deliberately starved the provincial budgets ? downloading billions in social spending to them ? so that he could prance around the national stage and proclaim himself ?oh what a good boy am I.?

But we all know that for Liberals and New Democrats, when they do something , even if it's something stupid, at least their hearts are in the right places. Not so those evil Tories. And so it was to laugh when your scribe, upon reading Solomon's story of his fawning interview, the radio host wrote that, ?The weeks leading up to the new budget are always fraught with criticism from opposition parties. It is however unusual for a former prime minister to come out swinging hard.?

Not when you call him up and ask for an interview on an opposition budget. Oh, yes, I forgot. Solomon went on to explain that, ?Martin claims he doesn't want to engage in partisan politics?.

Of course not. That's why he called the Tory economic plan ?an absolute disgrace? and ?nonsensical.? Nothing partisan about that description, particularly in an election year where, as everyone knows, the upcoming budget will be a catalyst for much of the campaign debate. Here again, if a Tory were to criticize the Liberals and/or NDP ? and we see this reportage constantly ? that would be partisan. But with ?a former prime minister? ? who just happens to be a lifelong Liberal ? then it's not partisan. It just shows Martin's extraordinary love and concern for his beloved country. Bring out the trumpets! All hail to Canada!

One might ask ? not to be partisan or anything ? but if Martin is such a genius, how is it that when he finally got his chance to take over 24 Sussex Drive from Chrétien, Canadians threw him out of office at the first opportunity they were given? Whatever is ? or isn't ? in the actual budget, however, won't make that much difference to either a)- government boasting about its economic prowess or b)- opposition crowing about the government's incompetence. We've already seen many of the themes playing out. There is much distress from the opposition, for example, about the Tory income-splitting plan. They argue that a)-it only helps the rich, which is a complete lie, but no matter; and b)- it only helps out about 15 percent of the public, as if any tax plan has to cover every taxpayer, something very few (if any) plans actually accomplish. Tories have also been accused over and over of starving the scientific community. The Tories say they spent ? governments say ?invested,? but it's spending your tax dollars ? \$1.5 billion in the Canada First Research Excellence Fund to support scientific research (a stat Solomon mentioned in his article.) The opposition, as far as I can see, isn't disputing that public figure. But hey, what's that matter? The Tories are mean, miserly, controlling, dictatorial, ratbags, and everybody knows it. Don't sweat with the actual facts, for heaven's sake.

Much is also being made over the fact that a few Tory ministers aren't running again, as if this somehow shows they're deserting a sinking ship. Well, some NDP and Liberals aren't running again either, and I doubt there have been many elections in our history where this hasn't been true. It goes on. But you get the point. It's election season and from now until the fall there will be widespread gnashing of teeth and frowning of brows on all sides. Not to mention public opinion polls and more polls, even though for the last several years those polls are becoming less and less accurate and more and more irrelevant. But that's democracy. Nothing beats it.

