

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Premiers side-stepping responsibility

Since the beginning of time ? perhaps even before that ? politicians at one level of government love to blame politicians at another level for any problems they have.

That way, so the thinking goes, they can sidestep the issue of personal responsibility (a very unpopular notion these days, alas) and, like the old TV comedian, claim, ?The devil made me do it.?

The ?devil? in this case, of course, is Prime Minister Stephen Harper who, to the absolute surprise of nobody, was subjected to the customary verbal abuse last week when Canada's premiers met for their annual gabfest.

Back in the days when Ontario really was the engine of the Canadian economy ? as opposed to the perpetual whiner it is today ? your correspondent spent many hours covering these events. Then, of course, they were simply called the annual Premier's Conference, as opposed to the current, absurdly grand title of the Council of the Federation.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the premiers, with as much fanfare as they could muster, announced an agreement on future energy strategy which New Brunswick Premier Brian Gallant called a ?monumental document.?

The late American novelist Emerson Hough, in his book ?54-40 or Fight,? could have been writing about the premiers (obviously he wasn't) when we wrote of two leading politicians of the 19th century: ?Each having thus delivered himself of words which meant nothing, both now seated themselves and proceeded to look mighty grave.?

While the premiers ? especially Ontario's Kathleen Wynne ? railed on about the significance of this non-binding document, the fact is their pledge to cut back on greenhouse gases actually takes effect in 2050. That's right folks, 35 years from now, when all of the current crop of premiers will be but a vague memory for those who are still around to care about it.

With the notable exception of Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall ? who had the audacity to defend the oil industry, the most important industry in this country ? the premiers spent their time dumping on both Big Oil and Harper, as if they were responsible for the fiscal mess most of these premiers find themselves facing.

Again, why take responsibility for your incompetence, when you can spread the blame upwards?

In an essay earlier last week in the National Post, William Robson, president and CEO of the C.D. Howe Institute, put the economic state of the federation into some perspective. (Spoiler alert for readers: Robson actually depends upon proven facts as opposed to partisan rhetoric for his arguments.)

Here's some of what he wrote:

?Federal support for other governments' infrastructure has risen five-fold in the past decade, and now stands at \$5 billion. The Canada Health Transfer has been rising 6 per cent annually, and the Canada Social Transfer 3 per cent annually; they now stand at \$32 and \$13 billion, respectively. Equalization and territorial government supports now amount to \$20 billion.

?Add about \$20 billion in miscellaneous smaller grants to local, territorial, and provincial governments, and Ottawa's transfers will surpass \$90 billion this year. They have grown 50 per cent in the past decade ? faster than the economy, and faster than total government budgets at either level. One-third of every dollar the feds raise now flows out in intergovernmental transfers. And more than one-fifth of every dollar of provincial revenue now comes from Ottawa.?

There's more, but you get the point.

While Wynne, for example, loves to blame Harper for pretty much everything, her government ? and the McGuinty government preceeding it (in which Wynne was a senior minister) ? has arguably the worst record in the country of fiscal incompetence.

Just to put that into understandable terms, everybody knows that California has such a debt load that it is flirting with the possibility of bankruptcy.

What most people likely don't know is that on a per capita basis, California's gross debt at the end of fiscal 2012 was \$3,844, about one-fifth the per capita debt that the Liberals have piled onto the backs of Ontario taxpayers, much of it flowing from their ill-conceived alternative energy plans, plans which a)-haven't produced much usable energy, but b)- have saddled generations of Ontarians yet to come with enormous debts.

Indeed, on the aforementioned per capita basis, Alberta was the only province in Canada with less debt than California, and since the oil industry has contracted the last couple of years, Alberta may soon be worse off than California as well.

The point here is that while the premiers are constantly nagging Ottawa for more, they are doing little to reign in their own excesses. As for Ottawa, love them or hate them, they have actually been fiscally responsible under Harper.

In purely political terms, politicians who promise the world are more popular than those who try to be responsible. But there you have it.

