

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Something to cheer about

It was George Orwell who first defined 'doublethink' as 'the act of ordinary people simultaneously accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct, often in distinct social contexts.'

Nobody on earth is better at the art than politicians. Not by a long shot.

Take some of the current criticism by the opposition federal Liberals and New Democrats over the news that the Tories have finally axed their annual deficits ? much of which were needlessly brought on by their own politicking ? and have announced that there will be a \$5-billion surplus for fiscal year 2014-15.

You would think ? given previous attacks on Tory spending priorities ? that news of a surplus would be a good thing.

But to think that is to show that you don't understand the political brain (for want of a better term, mind you.)

Last week, in a story detailing the Finance Canada details about our federal finances, The Globe and Mail headline read: 'Ottawa under fire over shrinking deficit.'

Rather than heralding it as a good news story ? even if they didn't want to give the Tories any credit for it, which is to be expected in politics ? the opposition parties accused the government of using what they called 'stealth cuts' to achieve a surplus.

The New Democrats ? whose very existence is predicated on more and more government spending ? complained that the Tories were inflating their deficit estimates from last year (which, by the way, every government in the history of the universe does routinely) in order to make themselves look good.

'This is nothing to be proud of,' said NDP MP Guy Caron.

And Liberal finance critic MP Scott Brison ? a former Tory who fled across the aisle so he could enjoy a cabinet post when the Liberals were in power ? sniffed that more detail is needed on the cuts to see whether they are sustainable.

'Clearly, one-time asset sales and stealth cuts form a significant part of this adjustment, but again, the Conservatives aren't being open or transparent with the details,' he said.

And so it went.

Finance Canada says the main factor in the improved fiscal outlook was a \$7.7-billion increase in expected revenue from such things as personal and corporate income tax, employment insurance premiums and \$2.8-billion in 'other revenues.'

Treasury Board President Tony Clement claimed the improved bottom line comes from a culture change in the public service. 'The psychology of government in terms of seeking new funds has been broken,' he told The Globe and Mail.

Indeed, as a percentage of gross domestic product, overall federal spending has dropped from 17.7 per cent during the frenzy of stimulus spending five years ago, to just 14.7 per cent last year. But even that is just slightly below the 15 per cent Prime Minister Stephen Harper inherited when he first took office in 2006, so you can see that ? until lately anyway ? even the Tories were given to spend, spend, spend.

As a taxpayer, I'm thinking you should actually be pleased that the government is spending less ? which also means lower spending on servicing costs, long one of the major sources of government spending ? since ultimately it means less of your money in their pocket and more of it in your pocket.

I guess that attitude is what makes me an unabashed fiscal conservative, since I've always believed that the less money government takes away from our labours the better off society will be.

Yes, there are all sorts of reasons why governments need to spend, but there rarely is a legitimate excuse for a good chunk of the money they do spend.

And while Ottawa and a couple of the provinces actually seem to be getting their fiscal houses in order, you can be sure that it won't be long before the baying begins from many provinces ? particularly Ontario, where they've taken wasteful spending to new lows ? to help them out of the fiscal mess which is largely of their own making.

Not only that, all the usual special interest groups will be lining up at the trough pleading their collective case for more spending.

And, with an election about a year off, no doubt the Tories themselves will be sorely tempted to throw the surplus money at taxpayers in hopes of finding favor at the ballot box.

For the moment, however, there is a surplus. For me, that's something to cheer over the Thanksgiving Holiday.

