

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Strange sort of moral compass

It was the late George Orwell who once quipped that political language ?is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.?

Which brings us, of course, to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and her (mis)handling of serious accusations of bribery being leveled against two of her party apparatchiks.

Obviously, we're not talking about making murder respectable, but we are talking about Wynne's attempt to deflect the accusations by accusing both the Tories and NDP of ?hypocrisy? for doing the same thing her people did.

First, it's not the same thing at all. And second, even if it were, what sort of political moral compass is Wynne waving around by suggesting that it's okay for her and/or her surrogates to break the law ? assuming that's the ultimate outcome of this scandal ? just because her opponents may have done something they shouldn't have?

By now, you're likely familiar with the details.

Ontario's Chief Electoral Officer Greg Essensa, in what he called an ?unprecedented? ruling, found that two senior Liberal operatives, Patricia Sorbara ? who is Wynne's deputy chief of staff ? and Gerry Lougheed , a party official and chairman of the Greater Sudbury Police Services Board, appear to have broken Ontario bribery laws by offering former Liberal candidate Andrew Olivier a job in exchange for stepping down as the party's candidate in the recent Sudbury by-election race.

The Liberals wanted to bump Olivier ? a paraplegic ? in favour of Glenn Thibeault, a federal NDP MP who switched parties to run provincially for the Liberals and who eventually won the by-election.

In their attempts to get Olivier to step aside quietly and make room for the NDP turncoat, both Lougheed and Sorbara contacted him and it's pretty clear from the tapes made by Olivier ? he tapes everything because it's too difficult for him to write notes ? that they offered him a myriad of jobs in return for his vacating his attempt to run again for the Liberals.

In the face of initial denials from the Liberals, Wynne included, that any conversations of that nature took place, Olivier ultimately turned the tapes over to the police and elections officials. Essensa, having investigated the matter, then said ?it is my opinion? that the actions of the two Liberals ?constitute an apparent contravention? of anti-bribery provisions in the law.

That led to the OPP getting involved, and at the time of this writing that investigation is ongoing and no charges have been laid. Yet. Lougheed is heard on tape telling Olivier ?I come to you on behalf of the premier ? to ask you if you would consider stepping down.? He then adds ?The premier wants to talk to you. They would like to present options in terms of appointments, jobs, whatever, that you and her and Pat Sorbara could talk about.?

For her part, Sorbara was later caught on tape discussing a ?full-time or part-time job? for Olivier who, by the way, declined their advances and finished a respectable third as an independent candidate in the by-election.

And now the doublespeak.

You would hope that leaders with integrity would do the proper thing and step aside ? or that Wynne would set them aside ? until this matter is resolved one way or the other.

Not Wynne, however. Instead of being contrite or the least bit concerned about the morality of her operatives, she has come out guns blazing, denying any improprieties and adding that, anyway, she has been approached in the past by Tories and New Democrats (whom she hasn't named) seeking jobs in return for stepping aside.

Even if that is true, it's not the same thing.

It's one thing for a politician, or anybody else for that matter, to seek a patronage post. Nothing illegal there. But it is illegal to offer an inducement for somebody to step down as a candidate.

It gets worse. Despite the fact that any reasonable person reading the transcript of those tapes would conclude that Olivier was offered bribes to step down, Wynne insists that ?any suggestion that anything was offered in exchange for any action is false. The fact is that we were working to keep this young man in the process. That's what Patricia Sorbara was doing.?

Really? Not only that, says Wynne, whatever Sorbara was actually doing she wasn't doing it as Wynne's deputy chief of staff but was doing it in her dual role as the party's chief election organizer , and therefore, until charges are laid, there is no need for either Sorbara or Lougheed to step aside.

It is not clear whether Wynne made these absurd arguments in her role as premier of Ontario or her role as head of the Ontario Liberal Party, but there you have it.

