

# A TALE OF TWO PREMIERS

**QUICK NOW**, what do Darrell Dexter and Doug Ford have in common?

Wha—? Who? What could those two (Darrell Dexter, Nova Scotia's mild-mannered democratic socialist NDP premier from 2009 to 2013, and Doug Ford, Ontario's bombastic Tiny Trump Progressive Conservative premier from 2018 to... god-knows-when/god-help-us-all) possibly have in common?

Well, consider this.

Darrell Dexter ran his 2009 election campaign on high-wire-act promises to balance Nova Scotia's budget without raising taxes or cutting spending.

After he won, however, one of his first acts was to commission an outside review of the province's finances. "One of the most sobering days in this office," Dexter lamented to an interviewer back then, "was the first day we saw [the Deloitte and Touche report] because that was the point in which we realized that things were extraordinarily out of balance."

Oh, dear. Dexter claimed the previous Tory government had lied about Nova Scotia's fiscal health. The cupboard wasn't just bare, the Tories had given away all its shelves and most of the drawers.

No new taxes? That promise was... no longer operative. In its first budget, Dexter increased the harmonized sales tax to 15 per cent, the highest in the country. No program cuts? The NDP swiftly announced plans to reduce the size of the civil service, rejig public sector pensions and reduce departmental spending. Balanced budget? The NDP's 2009-10 budget projected a deficit of \$488 million.

Doug Ford's 2018 Ontario election campaign had a similarly optimistic chicken-in-every-pot-every-Thursday feel: middle-class tax cuts, no taxes for minimum wage earners, a 12 per cent reduction in hydro rates, a 75 per cent child care rebate, \$5 billion for Toronto subways, and on and on.

And then, of course, Ford got elected with a free-to-be-Doug majority government. Just like Darrell Dexter. And then...? Well, as John Prine once sang, "the news just repeats itself."

Three months after the election, Ford discovered—you don't say?—that his Liberal predecessors had emptied the provincial piggy bank on their way out the door, leaving a \$15-billion deficit (instead of the originally projected \$6.7 billion) for the new govern-



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ment to deal with.

While the truth of Ford's "worst-political-coverup-in-Ontario's history" spin is dubious (the upwardly revised deficit numbers were largely the end result of a technical and public disagreement between the Wynne government and the auditor general over how to account for \$11 million in public sector pension funds) the reality is the new deficit number represents Ford's get-out-of-campaign-promises-free card.

No surprise. That election-promise-becomes-budget-reality bait and switch has become standard operating procedure for most new governments of all political stripes.

The new government's argument, of course, is that it couldn't have known the true state of the treasury until it got its hands on the real information after it got elected, so it therefore was free to promise whatever would win votes during the campaign, knowing it could walk those promises backwards once it learned the real numbers. Or the numbers it now claimed were real.

There's more than a little disingenuousness in that argument. I'm no economist, but I knew enough about Nova Scotia's fiscal state back in 2009 to understand you couldn't balance the budget without raising taxes and/or cutting programs.

The larger concern with all this political gamesmanship, of course, is that it erodes trust in the system. Why even vote if politicians don't at least mean some of what they say?

Is there a solution? I don't have a silver bullet, but let's start with this. If governments can now digitally track everything else—and they can—why can't they provide us with transparent real-time tracking of government income and expenses, projected and actual, so we can all know the current state of government finances, and so politicians will no longer be able to get away with their how-was-I-supposed-to-know excuses?

Discuss.

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**FEEDBACK**

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