

Eating from Flaherty's hand

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One thing is clear: Finance Minister Jim Flaherty got new communications advisors.

A few years back, as a senior minister in the Ontario governments of Mike Harris and Ernie Eves, Flaherty (or his advisors) favoured gimmicky, puerile media stunts. Such as running for the provincial Progressive Conservative leadership in 2004 -- and then forcing hundreds of delegates to watch his speech on TV monitors. Such as, in the 2001 Ontario PC leadership, sending out a supporter dressed up as a pink waffle to chase around Eves, the frontrunner.

Flaherty got plenty of ink, but not much in the way of delegate support. The amiable Irishman lost both races, decisively.

In his latest incarnation -- as the first federal Conservative Minister of Finance in more than a decade, presenting the first Conservative budget in just as long -- the Jim Flaherty on display was calm, confident and clear.

Accordingly, Flaherty and the Harper government didn't just score a media home run with the 2006 budget. In fact, the Conservatives batted this one over the back fence, and the ball is still believed to be rolling through the parking lot. In the immortal phrasing of Dodgers' announcer Vin Scully: "It's gone! It's gone!"

A budget's success, you see, is not simply measured by the good things the national news media have to say about it (of which there was plenty, even in the pages of the Toronto Star and in the broadcasts of the CBC). Instead, a budget is a winner when a government's desired headlines match, exactly, with the media's actual headlines. In this case, they do. Big time.

With a straight face, political people will always tell reporters, post facto, that the coverage they got is the coverage they desired. So the key is: Get to them in advance.

Days before the budget's House of Commons debut, two really, really, really senior Conservatives -- not Stephen Harper, mind you, but that's the only hint you'll be getting -- were asked what they wanted to see in the media.

Said senior Conservative: "At the end of the day, we want the budget [headlines] to say: 'Tories deliver for the middle class,' or something like that."

And: "A focus on tax cuts. Focused spending. And an acknowledgement ... that the budget remains balanced, with debt pay-down."

That's what they wanted. And that, almost eerily, is what they got.

The Globe and Mail, page one: "Harper hands middle-class voters a plethora of benefits." The Globe's main budget story, above the fold: "... targeted measures chosen in a clear effort to appeal to working families and to make tax relief tangible for Canadians." First line in the lead Globe editorial: "Ever aware of the huge middle-class constituency, the Conservatives have crafted a budget that is all political gain."

The Toronto Star, page one: "Taxpayers can breathe a sigh of relief ..." Turn-page headline: "Taxpayers can expect reductions." Calling the budget a "carefully crafted political document," One Yonge's editorial board admitted that "Flaherty seemed to have something for everyone."

La Presse: "The Conservatives respect their electoral promises."

From the CBC's Web site, in the hours following the budget's release, this headline: "Tax-cut budget delivers on PM's promises." Said the CBC, which was uncharacteristically cheery about Flaherty's handiwork: "The Conservative government used its first budget to follow through on several campaign promises ..."

The National Post, meanwhile, contained surprises -- which is why, I believe, people read the Post in the first place. Andrew Coyne, who is never afraid to dissent from the conventional wisdom, dismissed the Conservative document as "a budget any Liberal finance minister could have brought down." Terry Corcoran, also no fool, similarly castigated the Conservatives for delivering "what can only be called modest tax cuts."

There were some discordant notes, to be sure -- such as a bizarre Keith Boag item on CBC-TV, splicing black-and-white footage of ballroom dancers with political figures, or an Eric Sorenson report that twice described particular budget measures as "so called" -- an old trick used to subtly express journalistic doubt. But those were the exceptions.

On balance, the Canadian media's uncritical reliance upon desired Conservative headlines -- to wit, "middle class," "tax cuts," "focused spending" and so on -- was widespread. While the budget may be fiscally unsound, or unpopular in the long term, it was -- without any doubt -- a massive media home run.

As he ambles past third base, then, Jim Flaherty may want to hold onto his new media coaches. They're quite good.

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