POLITICAL REPORTING

Politicians speak casually of millions, billions, trillions…

Who could not be impressed by their worldliness? My inflation calculator stopped in rural Manitoba circa 1979.

BY TOM KORSKI

Politicians speak casually of millions, billions, trillions. Who could not be impressed by their worldliness?

My inflation calculator stopped in rural Manitoba circa 1979. Canadian Tire sells bicycles for $400? My first *car* cost $400. I buy $12 shirts at a place I know and wear them 'til the cardboard pops out of the collar. There is a grocery store on the corner that charges 99 cents for a lemon. Like hell am I helping some lemon rancher pay off his speedboat.

It was something to see 214 MPs vote for shovel-ready deficits of $64-billion over the next two years. "Feel-good budget," wrote *The Moose Jaw Times Herald*. "Good ideas," agreed the *Windsor Star*. Who would not marvel at their sophistication?

Pundits noted everything is relative. The bill for the 2010 Winter Games is now $6-billion, by *Vancouver Sun* calculations. The municipal budget for the City of Toronto is $8.2-billion. What is $64-billion?

It is more than Canada spent to fight World War I.

It is more than it costs to run every school board in the country.

It is more than the economy of Costa Rica.

It is more, 200 times more, than Ethiopia requested in emergency winter food aid.

It is more than NASA spent to fly a rocket 60,000,000 kilometres through space, make a pinpoint landing on Mars and take photographs with a remote-controlled dune buggy.

"Stimulus," said Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, his smile growing tighter by the week. Reporters with long memories cast back to another stimulator.

"Bob Rae," recalled the *National Post*. "Bob Rae," wrote The *Globe and Mail*. "Bob Rae, who years ago was spending his way out of a recession…He was pilloried!" said CBC-TV reporter Julie Van Dusen in a radio commentary.

As one-term premier of Ontario Rae ran the biggest deficits of any provincial leader in history—$12-billion in 1993 alone—without any perceptible impact on economic recovery. "Don't try the 'my fault' stuff," he later told a CBC interviewer. "I've been through that, okay. I've had 25 years of that shit; I'm not going to do it again."

In a *Post* essay Rae last week recounted his years as a "punching bag" for doubling Ontario's debt. "Your deficits will be higher than you think." "You will shout, often, and with increasing frustration, 'We did what?'"

In some newsrooms nationwide, a few lemon-boycotters gasped at the size of a federal deficit much bigger than Rae ever budgeted.

"Spend, spend, spend," wrote *The North Bay Nugget*. "Is this how it ends?" asked *The Kenora Daily Miner & News*. "Debt is worse than cocaine," *The Calgary Herald* told readers.

News that the spree was to include 15 per cent tax credits for home renovations provoked sharp memories in Saskatchewan. That's where then-premier Grant Devine in 1986 offered every homeowner a $1,500 renovation grant in a pre-election stunt. They spent the money on hot tubs. By 1992 Saskatchewan's deficit hit $842-million, a staggering burden in a province of 989,000 people.

Now watching the Prime Minister tour a construction site and talk of free money, *The Regina Leader Post* wrote, "This isn't the first time." A headline in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* read, "Conservatives Abandon Principle."

Deficit enthusiasts pointed out $64-billion is small potatoes in the United States, where it would not even pay the annual budget for the Pentagon. America's deficit was a record $413-billion U.S. in 2004, then a record $455 billion in 2008, now a record $1.2-trillion in 2009 with potential "trillion-dollar deficits for years to come," President Barack Obama said Jan. 6.

Yet, even $64-billion is unnerving for anyone who cannot bear to part with 99 cents for a lemon.

"I can't truly fathom the numbers," wrote *London Free Press* columnist George Clark, who recounted dialogue from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "The White Queen asks Alice, 'Can you do addition? What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?

"How long will it be before a centillion becomes part of our culture?"

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OPINION

Canada urgently needs a national fresh water strategy

Canadians have subscribed to the false idea that we have an abundant water supply and are therefore immune to the water shortages we are seeing in other countries. Think again.

By ADELE BUCKLEY and PATRICK BOYER

The federal government's fall Throne Speech contained a welcome commitment to legislate a ban on bulk water exports and its January Throne Speech left the impression that commitment remains. However, as part of its commitment to renewed Parliamentary cooperation, the federal government must now work with the other parties to broaden their original promise and support a national freshwater strategy.

Canadians have subscribed to the false idea that we have an abundant water supply and are therefore immune to the water shortages we are seeing in other countries. In fact, much of Canada's water is a remnant from the last ice age and inaccessible to the more densely populated southern regions of the country. As only a small percentage of our water is replenished by snow and rainfall, we must be guided by this amount in our use of this resource.

In many regions, we overuse and abuse freshwater to the point of crisis. For example, water demand due to Western Canada's rapid development and population growth has greatly stressed its river basins and groundwater supplies.

It is these threats that inspired a number of prominent Canadian and international academics, water policy and legal experts and activists to sign a Freshwater Declaration which calls for a comprehensive, national freshwater strategy. The strategy would include implementation of measures to combat pollution, increase conservation, preserve ecosystems, invest in infrastructure and consider the impact on water when creating public policy.

A troubling example of the risks is the unprecedented pollution of the Athabasca River and northern Alberta groundwater which is a result of the massive development of the Alberta tar sands. Consider, it takes three to six barrels of water to produce one barrel of oil. Treated water, still laden with carcinogens, is returned to the Athabasca River or is retained in enormous ponds. As part of their ongoing thirst for water, oil companies are now proposing new refineries for oil sands bitumen on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes. A return of polluted water to the Great Lakes is virtually guaranteed because present regulatory standards provide insufficient protection.

Water governance and adaptation to climate change are so thoroughly intertwined that moving forward on one of them will often support the advancement of the other. Water treatment and distribution is energy intensive; energy production needs a plentiful supply of water. Thus conservation of either water or energy reduces greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to climate change mitigation. Without a national water strategy, the government is in no position to deliver a comprehensive energy policy or a climate change adaptation plan, both of which are vital to our future economic and social prosperity.

The natural environment is our life-support system and preserving healthy functional ecosystems is the only assurance that our water supplies will continue to be clean and abundant. Our country's magnificent biodiversity depends intimately on nature's provision of water; protecting species and their habitats is an element of water protection.

Given the current economic situation, there is an opportunity for the federal government to serve two policy objectives: stimulating the economy; and catching up with overdue public investments in major construction projects for municipal water wastewater facilities and distribution systems. The recent federal budget suggests some of this greatly needed funding may soon be on its way. But at the same time as improving our aging water infrastructure, governments at all levels should make long-term commitments to water efficiency to avoid unnecessary capital expenditures.

Putting together a national water strategy and ensuring water is considered as part of all public policy requires access to relevant scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, that capacity within government has been systematically reduced over the past several years. As a result, programs of research and data collection on freshwater resources have been diminished and emphasis on regulatory safeguards and formal oversight has decreased. In order to develop sound policy, this trend will need to be reversed and our politicians and scientists must learn to communicate better with each other and also listen to the people most affected by water issues.

Public confidence in our politicians has taken a hit in recent weeks. Calls for less partisanship and a renewed focus on meaningful policy development are increasing from all quarters. Canadians also expect our federal government to reach out to the provinces and municipalities. They too have a key role in our fragmented water jurisdictions.

What better way for our Members of Parliament to demonstrate that they have received this message of cooperation than by using this new parliamentary session to forge a consensus on implementing a national freshwater strategy.

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Photo: Courtesy of the Canadian Forces Image Gallery

Watery world: A Canadian Air Force CC-138 Twin Otter and Canadian Navy ship HMCS Toronto patrol Frobisher Bay near Iqaluit in August 2008. Without a national water strategy, the government is in no position to deliver a comprehensive energy policy or a climate change adaptation plan, both of which are vital to our future economic and social prosperity.