

## Character assassination. It's in their DNA

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The Harper Conservatives must have character assassination imbedded in their political DNA. Otherwise why, with a majority government, would they continue to use it against those who disagree with them?

Their most recent attack on Kevin Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO), is a disturbing example.

Yes, Page has been an embarrassing source of "truth and transparency" for the Conservatives ever since Parliament appointed him in 2008. But his job is to provide Parliament and the public with non-partisan, in-depth economic and budget analysis.

To his credit he has been doing that without fear or favour. Because many of Page's forecasts have proven more accurate and revealing than those of Harper & Co., the Conservatives have tried every means available to muzzle him.

They have reduced his budget. They have tried to discredit his economic forecasts. And they have managed to bury him in the office of the Parliamentary librarian.

Despite this concerted effort to sideline Page, he has endured. More than that. He has emerged as one of the countries leading economists. His analysis of federal budgets, major program estimates and economic forecasts are highly regarded and widely reported.

Instead of benefitting from Page's analysis and advice (after all the position was established by Harper in his 2006 Federal Accountability Act) the Conservatives are still trying to marginalize him. They have now resorted to blatant character assassination.

In a recent memo, Tory supporters were asked several character testing questions about Page's acceptance of an invitation to speak at a University of Vancouver event. The memo claimed that the event was organized by Young Liberals and says "Mr. Page needs to explain how he came to make such a major lapse in judgement ... he must be above partisan politics ... and accepting the invitation clearly falls below that standard."

When Page heard that the event was not sponsored by the university itself, as he had understood, he cancelled his participation. All his previous presentations have been restricted to events that were "sponsored by the university itself, and where there were no fees associated with audience participation."

You would think that this explanation would have ended the matter.

It didn't satisfy the designated attack

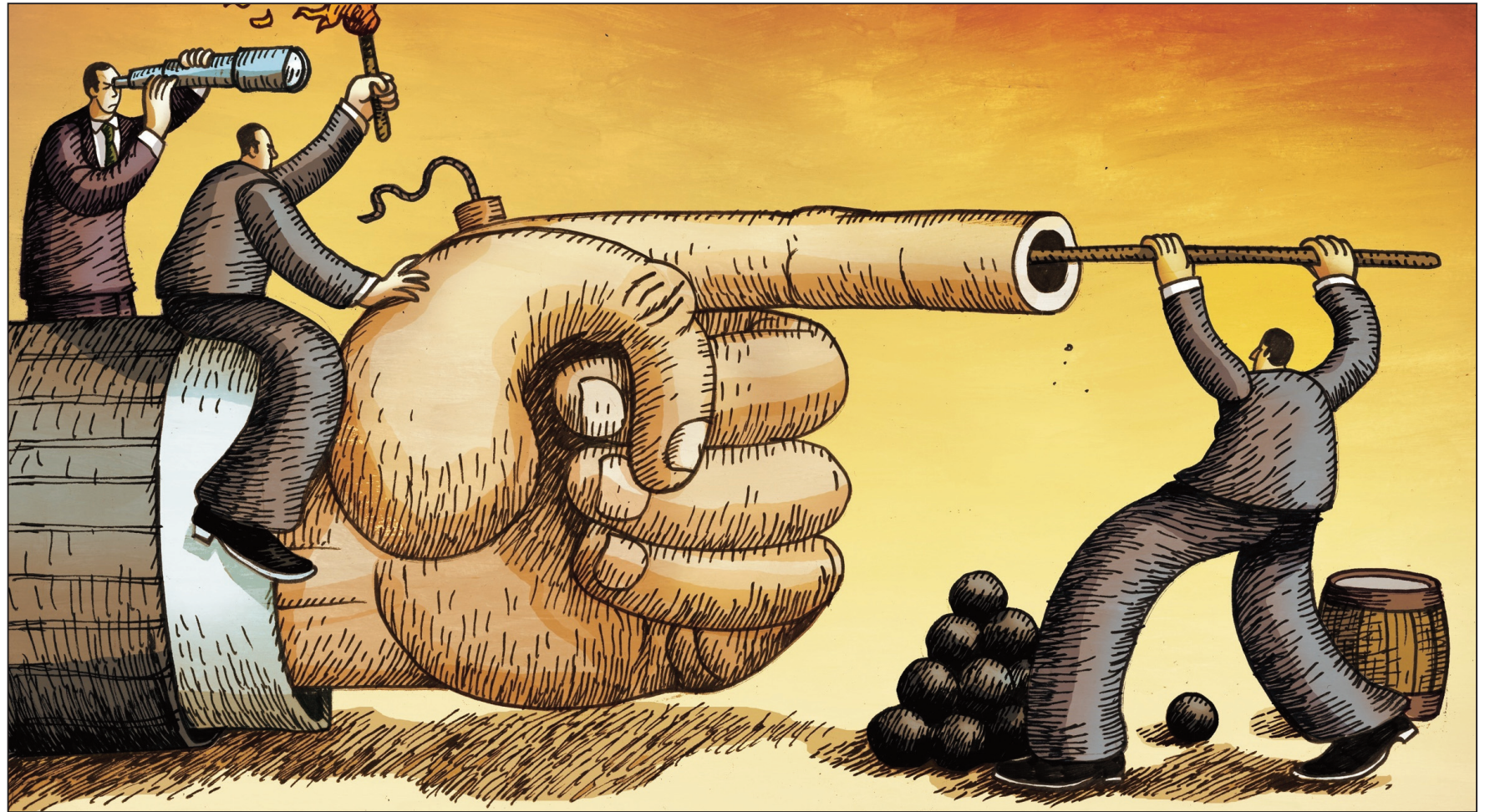


Illustration by Paul Lachine

dog, Dean Del Mastro, the prime minister's parliamentary secretary. He said that Page had "exercised very poor judgment. When you see him committing to speaking at a partisan fundraiser ... alarm bells go off here." Del Mastro completed his assassination assignment by criticizing Page's past economic forecasts as being "consistently wrong" and designed to "grab attention."

Some of Page's reports to Parliament have been headline grabbing. Not because they were wrong. But because his analysis has often been more accurate and transparent than that of Finance Minister Flaherty.

There are many examples. In his 2009 budget Flaherty promised that deficits would be held to \$64 billion over two years. Page forecasted a much larger deficit. The outcome? The government's operating deficit ballooned to \$57 billion in 2010 alone.

Before the last election Page questioned the Conservative promise that they could

eliminate the deficit by 2014-15. He disputed the claim that they could achieve \$6.8 billion in savings through attrition and staff cuts alone, over the same period.

This week, in his Fall Economic Update, Flaherty had to acknowledge that his string of deficits will have to run until 2016-17.

More important than this deficit duelling is Page's warning earlier this year that "Parliament is losing control" of its fiscal responsibilities. It is approving bills without knowing their full cost, and the government is withholding information from Parliament that it needs to properly review proposed spending plans and outcomes.

Again, instead of heeding Page's warning and considering ways to tighten Parliament's control over the spending of our tax dollars, Flaherty opted to shoot the messenger. He side-stepped the issue and attacked Page's credibility and integrity.

Since then Page has tried to partly remedy this spending oversight challenge.

The PBO has established a new web-based expenditure monitoring report ([www.parl.gc.ca/PBO](http://www.parl.gc.ca/PBO)). It provides Parliamentarians and the public with a quarterly analysis of government spending by department, compared to their budget estimates.

It is hard to believe. But this critical performance information was previously only available to federal legislators 15 to 20 months after they approved annual spending that now tops \$280 billion.

Recently Page warned that there is a "fiscal gap" of about \$46 billion being steadily built into federal and provincial budgets as a direct result of our aging population. This gap has to be filled from increased revenue or lower spending to make future government finances sustainable. Harper deflected this latest caution by insisting he is striking the right balance between stimulus spending and budget balancing.

It is one thing to try to undermine the

character of your political opponents. It's a well developed political skill-set. But politicians have the forums, means and ability to fight back. It is unacceptable to use these same tactics to silence officials appointed to advise Parliament.

If the Harper Conservatives are unhappy with their choice of Kevin Page they should stop defaming him and take their concerns to the Joint House and Senate Committee where they belong. They aren't doing that because they are afraid that the NDP and Liberals will press for greater independence for the PBO - backed by a public and media that have come to value Page's search for greater "truth" in federal budgeting.

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