

Ontario government's first budget shows the true personality of right-wing premier Doug Ford

[By Martin Regg Cohn, columnist, *Toronto Star*, Apr 15, 2019](#)

Doug Ford's first budget bespeaks a populist manifesto.

It gets tough on some (mostly poor people and students). It lavishes love on others (tax breaks sprinkled here and there). Call it tough love — not to be confused with “tough luck” — from a premier who loves to be loved. By the right people.

No, it's not an especially right-wing budget: In its own seductively populist way, it purports to be all things to all people (not counting poor people, whose votes Ford can't count on).

A budget outlines a government's agenda, because numbers speak louder than words. But in an era of creative writing and accounting, budgets conceal as much as they reveal, playing down the bad while hyping up the good.

In that tradition, Ford's first budget deceptively heralds his munificence while it downplays the take-aways. He is spending more than any previous Liberal government, piling on bigger deficits than his immediate predecessor and projecting record debt levels. But his budget also confirms that high school students will be squeezed into more crowded classrooms (27 per cent bigger) as teachers' positions are reduced and online teaching is increased. Scheduled welfare increases are being scaled back, promised transit funding is being cut back, and legal aid that underpins our justice system is being undermined.

What makes Ford's tough love unique is that his budget claims to be “Protecting what matter most,” as the title page insists. A more candid description might be, “Cutting when no one's looking.”

Like all governments, Ford's Tories locked up journalists and opposition staff amid tight security to put their spin on a sneak peek, embargoed until Thursday's 4 p.m. budget speech. But all that lock-up security and suspense was misplaced, for the main budgetary elements were telegraphed in advance or trickled out in the aftermath.

Exhibit A for Ford's fiscal tomfoolery is his government's big transit rollout — before, during and after budget day:

On the eve of Thursday's budget unveiling, the premier convened a photo-op where [he mischievously proclaimed a \\$28.5 billion transit plan](#) to redraw Toronto's subway map. A perfectly populist pitch. A perfectly populist pitch. Except that the fine print showed him funding just 39 per cent of the price tag, allocating a mere \$11.2 billion of the total — while demanding other governments fill in the built-in gap. An unpopular footnote that went largely unnoticed.

The transit postscript is especially peculiar, for this government giveth with one hand and taketh with the other: Despite a solemn campaign commitment to maintain annual transit funding via the agreed municipal share of gas tax revenues, Ford went back on his word by redirecting hundreds of millions of dollars from Toronto transit operations and diverting them back to provincial coffers.

Promise made. Promise unmade.

The timing is especially awkward, given that Ford's "Government for the People" is in court this week arguing against a federal carbon tax at the pumps. While Ottawa is rebating the money directly to Ontario taxpayers, our tax-fighting premier is quietly pocketing the people's gas taxes for his own provincial purposes.

Ford's fetishization of alcohol continues apace, with his infamous buck-a-beer campaign promise — promoted on a false premise — meriting a shameless shout-out in the budget despite almost all brewers declaring it unsustainable. A more accurate accounting would be, "Promise made, promise fizzled."

Now our teetotalling premier and his equally abstemious finance minister, Vic Fedeli are both brimming with ways to boost booze availability in corner stores and parking lots. While they won't touch a drop themselves, they are making it easier for you to access just in time for breakfast, happy hour, or a nightcap, thanks to relaxed rules.

Yet the budget is strangely silent on the cost of Ford's campaign pledge to fire the so-called "Six Million Dollar Man" who helmed Hydro One, triggering knock-on fees that exceed \$130 million. As the utility's biggest owner, the province suffered a major hit to its own bottom line, but the true impact on taxpayers is buried out of sight.

Promise made. More money than promised.

A [previous column outlined](#) the budgetary sham of overstating the deficit only to dial it down again with accounting magic. As for Ford's wild prebudget predictions of a carbon recession, never mind — Fedeli's own budgetary projections show no such economic storm clouds.

We could go on enumerating the government's latest tricks and shticks, from tailgating to licence plating. But you get the idea.

The trouble with this budget is not unlike the problem with populism: It's hard to separate fiscal fidelity from fake figures in Fedeli's budget, just as it's difficult to discern fact from fiction in Ford's rhetoric.

Budgets come and go. But this Progressive Conservative government isn't going anywhere for years to come, because it is built on a populist foundation that will remain intact for as long as its premier stays popular.