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Commentary: B.C. Politics

Fudge-it finance minister teaching ethical leadership?!

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VICTORIA — In campaign literature for her 1996 re-election bid for the Victoria riding of Oak Bay-Gordon Head, then-finance minister Elizabeth Cull boasted of her achievements, including: "eliminating the provincial debt [sic] and bringing in two balanced budgets in a row."

(By "provincial debt," I presume she meant "provincial deficit." But that's a subtlety that a mere finance minister shouldn't be expected to comprehend.)

As we now know, Cull's election claim was simply false. After nine years in power, the NDP is still a long way from balancing the budget, and the debt is now at more than \$34 billion.

As we also now know, Cull and then-premier Glen Clark engaged in some less-than-straightforward games to make the 1996-97 budget appear balanced when it wasn't, including plotting to steal \$435 million from Forest Renewal B.C. — something the NDP had repeatedly promised it would never do.

In his February, 1999 report on the budget scandal, then-auditor general George Morfitt noted that Cull was initially uncomfortable with the level of "revenue optimism" required to balance the 1996-97 budget.

But when told of, in her words, "possible additions to the revenue stream" — including raiding FRBC — Cull "became comfortable enough" with inflating the government's income projections so that there would be no deficit.

Then there's the little matter of Cull's contract with the Capital Health Region.

In 1997, Capital Health hired her for \$1,000 a day to develop a communications strategy. She eventually produced a 2,100-word report at a cost to taxpayers of \$70,000.

B.C.'s conflict-of-interest law is very clear: ministers cannot work for the government for two years after leaving the cabinet. However, the restriction applies only to contracts handed out by the central government.

Though it's funded almost entirely by the province, Capital Health isn't part of the government itself. So technically, Cull was off the hook.

But to many, Cull's contract had the definite appearance of violating the spirit of the



law. After all, the law is designed to stop ministers from using their inside knowledge for personal gain.

When Royal Roads University held its first classes on July 8, 1996, one of the three degree courses available was a master of arts in leadership and training.

Among the "outcomes" expected of leadership students: "Understand leadership as a complex activity requiring personal direction, integrity"

As well, graduates are expected to "demonstrate an ability to apply values and ethics play in the exercise of leadership é including é an ability to make ethical decisions, both from a personal and organizational perspective."

Fine. So what's Cull doing on Royal Roads' roster of adjunct professors, teaching in the leadership program?

In fact, she was there within months of losing her Oak Bay-Gordon Head seat to Liberal Ida Chong, and has been there ever since.

For someone used to getting \$1,000 per day, the money isn't vast: Royal Roads financial statements show that she was paid \$20,100 in the year ending March 31, 1998. The next year, she was paid \$19,700.

According to the Royal Roads catalog, Cull is a "keynote speaker, workshop presenter and core faculty member."

"Elizabeth is particularly interested in how the public interest is reflected in public sector decision-making processes, and the interface between bureaucratic, community and political value systems."

I'm sure she is.

Victoria consultant Mike Geoghegan competes with Cull for lobbying work, and isn't a big fan.

"Her attitude with respect to the members' conflict-of-interest act was essentially: 'it's only illegal if you can prove it,'" he says.

Geoghegan notes that his associate, former cabinet minister Bill Barlee, deliberately waited out the full two years before hanging out his shingle.

Says Geoghegan: "If she's teaching ethics, it should be on the basis of, 'Don't do what I do.'"