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Export date: Sat Feb 14 17:40:41 2026 / +0000 GMT

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Open Government

Open Government: Yes, Minister, we fooled them again
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?Our Open Government initiative will help create the transparent, accessible government the people of Ontario deserve. This is part of our vision for One Ontario, where every voice counts." - Kathleen Wynne, Premier of Ontario.

As I read the Premier's announcement about how she intended to "open up" government and make the workings of government more transparent, I couldn't help but wonder: How often can the people of this province be fooled?
Within the previous 48 hours, my staff had been refused access to a number of documents by the Ministry of Transportation, forcing us to file the cumbersome Freedom of Information Requests that would not only delay access but would ensure that once we got the documents, most of the important information would be blacked out for so-called privacy reasons.
This same Premier who is promising Open Government, presides over an administration that deliberately withheld government emails and documents on the billion dollar cancellation costs of two gas-fired power plants and repeatedly obstructed access to information during the hearings into the Ornge air ambulance scandal.
For months, this same Premier had been refusing the demands of both opposition parties that she disclose the financial commitments related to the upcoming Pan Am Games scheduled for 2015.
Exorbitant salaries and bonuses for provincially-appointed executives, an out-of-control budget and a minister who had to admit that even he doesn't know what these games will ultimately cost Ontario taxpayers, all point to yet another emerging scandal.

Question Period, Not Answer Period
And anyone even remotely familiar with the exchanges during the daily Question Period at Queen's Park will know that the Premier and her ministers refuse to answer even the most basic of questions put to them by members of the opposition parties.
When I read the Premier's Open Government announcement, I was reminded of the first episode of the BBC's Yes Minister series. In that inaugural political satire, the party that had just been elected to form the government had in its platform, a White Paper entitled "Open Government".
The newly minted minister, Jim Hacker, was anxious to make his mark. He wasted no time in informing his deputy minister, Sir Humphrey, that his priority project would be to get on with implementing this cornerstone of the new government's manifesto.

The Law of Inverse Relevance
What was the deputy minister's response? He wasted no time indoctrinating the naive new minister in the law of inverse relevance which in the halls of government is as basic as the law of gravity. It goes something like this: "The less you intend to do about something, the more you have to keep talking about it."
The minister was given the not-so-subtle message that there was never any intent to actually implement the 'open government' manifesto. Just talking about it would be enough to get elected and then more talk would convince the great unwashed electorate that it was actually being done.
That was the plot in the February 28, 1980 episode of Yes Minister. Fortunately, that was merely a political satire. Unfortunately, that same plot is played out at all levels of government every day.
As I watched the Premier make her Open Government announcement, I thought the script writers of that 1980 Yes Minister series must have found their way into the spin chamber of the Liberal government.
I thought about the 36 Advisory Panels the government had announced in the past nine months on everything from the minimum wage and mental health to transit funding and deficit reduction. Blue Ribbon panels and high profile experts were dispatched by the hundreds with great fanfare but not one bit of evidence that all their talk has led to any tangible action by the government.

The Definition of Insanity
Time will tell whether this latest attempt by the Premier to fool the public into believing that they will get what they are being promised will work. Perhaps a reminder of Albert Einstein's definition of insanity is in order as we head into 2014: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

There is no question that governments at all levels need a good dose of transparency and accountability. Who can be trusted to do more than talk about it?
Ontario voters will be bombarded with plenty of talk this year as we head into provincial by-elections in Thornhill and Niagara Falls, a potential provincial general election in the spring and municipal elections in the fall. Beware of the law of inverse relevance.

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