

Bait and Switch

by Charles J. Sykes

Try to imagine this:

You negotiate a price for a new car, including its price, interest rates and various bells and whistles. The deal is signed and sealed, you write out a big check, and the car is delivered as promised . . . except, the dealer informs you, for a few last minute changes.

Your new car will actually cost twice as much as promised and you won't be getting the GPS system, the CD player, or the all-wheel-drive you ordered. And instead of a BMW, you'll be getting a Saturn. Painted yellow.

Enjoy.

This is, of course, a ridiculous fable, because no car dealer would ever behave like state government.

In the private sectors a promise is sealed with a contract, enforceable under law and there are rules about promising one thing and doing another. It's called bait and switch.

In politics, though, it has become so common as to barely cause a ripple of outrage from voters who took the bait. From the first President Bush's "read my lips" tax pledge (quickly broken) to Bill Clinton's promise of a middle class tax cut (even more quickly dropped); the public has grown understandably cynical about pre-election love letters discarded the morning after.

Pols feast on that cynicism, which helps explain the increasing brazenness with which officials are abandoning promises before they are even cold or taken down from YouTube. Consider:

- Governor Jim Doyle, his 2003 State of the State Address, said: "Going forward, my mind will be open to every solution – except one. We should not – we must not – and I will not – raise taxes." Safely re-elected, he is proposing not merely to raise taxes, but to jack them up by \$1.74 billion. The property tax freeze? You must be joking.
- During his re-election campaign, Doyle also signed a tough new law calling for GPS tracking of dangerous sex offenders. Doyle was so proud of the law that during his campaign he touted it in television commercials. Two months after being safely re-elected to a four-year term, Doyle gutted the same measure, by proposing to monitor a third fewer offenders than he had promised voters just months earlier.
- In Milwaukee, city officials told members of the Common Council and the public that rebuilding and extending Canal Street would cost about \$20 million. It actually cost taxpayers \$53 million – more than two-and-half

times the public estimate. A new audit found that officials knew the original estimate for the project was bogus, but concealed the project's actual cost until it had been approved and work too far advanced to do anything about it. In other words, the \$53 million price tag was not a cost overrun – it was simply the real cost that officials covered up from the folks who would have to pay the bill.

- And last week, state officials admitted that the cost of cleaning up the damage done by printing taxpayers' social security numbers on tax forms would be more than double what officials had predicted just two months ago. When the screw-up was on the front pages, officials with the Department of Revenue low-balled the cost of providing credit monitoring to affected residents by predicting that only 8 percent of those affected would actually sign up for credit monitoring. By last week, 15 percent had signed on, with more sure to line up before the March 31 deadline.

In each case the story that was told when the cameras were on and the decision was still pending was radically changed when the cameras went dark and the deal was sealed.

That's a lesson worth keeping in mind as costly and shiny new plans and proposals make their way through the Capitol this Spring: Don't assume the politicians are as trustworthy as car salesmen.