What’s this tit for tat?

“Premier chides private sector and their Civil Service critics”. That was the headline on page four of Saturday’s Royal Gazette.

It really announced that the Premier has lifted a leaf from the book of Finance Minister the Hon. Clarence James and declared war on business.

Dr. James did it first. He was irked at opposition to the pensions he planned to shower on parliamentarians, much of which came from businessmen. He fought back with a rather juvenile tit for tat and announced that his Ministry would be poking about in private sector pensions. In other words: If you dare to criticise your Government, your Government will punish you. Clearly then Government is above the people and not of, by or for the people.

We doubt that Dr. James realised that he was placing a supposedly conservative government at odds with the very business community from which its support stems. However it was of no real importance because people simply do not take Dr. James very seriously.

But on Friday the situation changed because the Premier began on the floor of the House to sound like Dr. James.

First, he warned Bermudians about a “rose tinted” outlook on the economy. But there was no rose tinted outlook on the economy except on the part of Government. Concern about the future of the economy was precisely what caused people to complain about Dr. James inflating the Civil Service. Then the Premier asked for a “note of caution” on the economy. Until now Government has been saying that it sees no problem and is not anticipating a recession. In other words, Government had the rose tinted outlook. That has probably changed because Government has been shocked by recent tourist figures.

There seemed to be a suggestion by the Premier that those who criticised the Budget were against improved housing and health care. Quite the opposite was true. No one is opposed to necessary spending and this newspaper has advocated larger old age pensions instead of parliamentary pensions. Give the money to the people who deserve it.

In the House the Premier said: “The private sector has called for a public service investigation. I will make a deal with the private sector. If they will let the Civil Service go into their businesses and investigate, then I will let them go into the Civil Service.”

Later he said: “I would challenge them that we should set up two joint teams — one to go into Government and one into the private sector.” ... shades of Big Brother.

It’s extraordinary but with those statements the Premier makes it very clear that he is lacking in basic knowledge of what a government is.

The private sector must be responsible and responsive to its owners and shareholders. There is a very powerful check on the private sector which must survive competition and profit or fail.

Government has no such check. It operates on public money and should logically be responsible to the public which it serves. All too often Government is the master and not the servant. When Government is short of cash it raises taxes and it is never asked to show a profit. If it does show a profit, that is just a bonus.
There is absolutely no reason on earth why the private sector should not watch Government, criticise waste and inefficiency and call for audits and investigations. Indeed such scrutiny is the function of the Press.

Why are politicians insisting on taking criticism of Government personally? Is it because they know that all is not well?

We think that the business sector has begun to look on this Government as part of the problem. The Premier and the Minister of Finance have now increased the suspicion and it may take a long while to go away.

That is a shame.

John Swan rode to power with a vast majority and a very strong mandate to govern. There is still time to exercise the mandate, shuffle the Cabinet, reassure the public and get on with the job.

But that cannot be done if the Chamber of Commerce is turned into an enemy.