

Government for Sale

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Confucius said it 2500 years ago in China, but his words resonate in Canada, 2002. Government requires three things: weapons, food and trust. If one can't achieve all three, he argued, then one ought to give up weapons first and food second; but trust should be defended at all costs.

The Canadian military still has some weapons, and there is certainly no shortage of food in the country. Sadly, however, trust in the integrity of government seems now in rather short supply. Some may think that "crisis of confidence" is too strong to describe what's happening; but, when polls indicate that 70 per cent of Canadians describe our government(s) as "corrupt", well, Confucius would be worried for us.

Here's a partial explanation of how the problem has arisen. Democratic politics has become an expensive business. TV adverts cost a bundle. In consequence, those running for high public office are required to raise large sums of money. Political donations frequently come from powerful corporations that have (or hope to have) dealings with the government. When our political leaders make themselves beholden to business by accepting large donations, strong suspicion is generated in the public mind that government is "for sale" to the highest bidder. This, in turn, leads to widespread cynicism and a massive loss of public trust in the integrity of government.

The problem is by no means unique to Canada. The Bush administration in the USA has been badly tainted by its intimate relationship with huge corporate donors, most especially Enron. Comparable scandals have afflicted Tony Blair's Labour government in Britain. Interestingly, the Bush, Blair and Chretien governments- despite being heavily tarred with the sleaze brush - all retain, at least for the moment, a large lead in the polls.

Jean Chretien has liked to boast about the moral rectitude of his government. He takes great satisfaction, apparently, from the fact that none of his ministers has (yet) been imprisoned for corruption. Something that could not be said for the much-despised Mulroney Government. Even at the height of "Shawinigate", when Chretien's own conduct appeared in a shabby light, he covered himself in the mantle of virtue. Since he was virtuous, and his ministers likewise, there was no need for remedial measures, such as appointing an independent Ethics Commissioner answerable to Parliament.

It must be admitted that, e.g., favouritism towards advertising firms that donate large sums to the governing party is not a new phenomenon in Canadian history. Thus, each new government can say to itself "Well, they (our predecessors) did it when they were in office, so why shouldn't we?" That's the way the world works, say the hard-nosed political operators.

Since a contract for office furniture or printer ink is comparatively easy to regulate, such purchases are put out to tender and seldom generate ethical controversy. By contrast, contracts for political advertising involve discretionary judgement – which agency's proposal is the most creative? – and this opens the door to favouritism. Similarly, it's not easy to detect conflicts of interest in the hiring of consultants. For this reason, former Defence Minister Art Eggleton expected that he could get away with hiring his former lover to a DoD contract.

Sadly, there appears to have developed a Canadian political tradition according to which you first denounce your predecessors for patronage and cronyism and then, once in office, you reproduce their behaviour. Mr. Chretien and Mr. Boudria are merely the latest in a long line of politicians for whom such hypocrisy has become commonplace. Recall Mulroney's denunciation of Turner.

What generally tends to keep governments honest is fear - that when the odour of corruption becomes too strong, the public will respond with a cry of "throw the rascals out". When governments forget that their first duty is to serve the public interest, they run a high risk that the electorate will duly punish their arrogant and self-serving conduct.

There's the rub. With no widely acceptable alternative government waiting in the wings, the Liberals have until now had few fears about re-election. Compare what happened in the recent French presidential election, where many voters literally put clothes pegs on their noses as they voted for the discredited Jacques Chirac, in order to keep out the fascist Le Pen. The Liberal Party has confidently assumed that it would be saved from retribution by hanging on to its role as "the lesser of evils".

What needs to be explained, I suppose, is why the Prime Minister of Canada has finally found it necessary to sack and demote ministers, and promise reforms. His proposed reforms may seem, as critics allege, belated and half-assed, but they are dramatic in comparison with his government's past practice

Opinion polls continue to show the Liberals to be far ahead of any opposition party; but these same polls indicate that public disquiet, has reached the danger zone. Many seats might be lost at the next election. Is this the fear that motivated Chretien finally to act? Perhaps. On a more personal level, Chretien may worry that acute public disillusion could permanently taint his "legacy". For a prime minister contemplating retirement, that might be a serious concern, although it is far from clear that "the little guy from Shawinigan" worries at night about his legacy. If he did, he would already have quit while he was ahead of the game.

Whatever the motivation of our political leaders, for the rest of us there *is* cause for serious concern. If the process of political de-legitimation spreads widely then vital community institutions that depend upon government support, from Medicare to universities, will suffer. When governments betray public trust, the ordinary citizen sees nothing wrong in becoming a tax cheat. "They're all crooks, anyway, so why should I send my hard earned dollars to Ottawa for them to waste it on their cronies". The case of

modern-day Italy, where much of the economy is “underground” and paying taxes seems optional, proves that this is not a phantom worry.

. Canada is a long way, ethically speaking, from Nigeria or Russia, where political corruption is blatant and widespread. But, as scandals multiply daily, prime ministerial complacency threatens to discredit all politicians, all parties and the entire political process. The corrosive effect of public cynicism should not be underestimated. Once we cease to expect integrity from our politicians, the very fabric of democratic citizenship is undermined. Thank goodness that Canadians still react with anger when confronted with abuses of public trust. Public outrage is the best antidote for cynicism. However, since our party political system floats on a sea of corporate donations, reform of the way in which we finance elections is obviously going to be of key importance. The provinces of Manitoba and Quebec have already shown the way. It’s past time for others to follow. If the rot is not stopped soon, public trust may be forfeit. Trust, once lost, will be frightfully difficult to restore.

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