

Who's paying for these steak dinners? Public service and private enrichment

Arthur Schafer

Poor Ernie Eves. To lose one cabinet minister on the fork of expense account indulgence might be thought a misfortune. To lose two looks like carelessness.

The Conservative mantra of individual responsibility and fiscal probity may now have to be given something of a rest, at least until public forgetfulness eases the painful memory of ministers and their families consuming vast quantities of (taxpayers') money, as they eat and drink their way through the steak houses of Toronto and the grand hotels of Europe.

Poor George Radwanski. Affairs in Ottawa seem little brighter than they do at Queen's Park. His courageous battle on behalf of the privacy rights of Canadians seems now to be quite overshadowed by that \$444 dinner (for two) at Le Panache restaurant, in Gatineau, Quebec. In Radwanski's defense it should be noted that French cuisine and a table with a good view don't come cheap.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Radwanski's taste in dining appears to be distinctly more sophisticated than that of Ontario Tourism Minister Mr. Cam Jackson, whose 46 visits to steakhouses in NY, Chicago and Toronto totaled a mere \$8600 – at less than \$200 a pop, that almost seems a bargain.

As for Ontario Environment Minister, Chris Stockwell, his misuse of taxpayers' money to take his wife and children to Europe is compounded by his demonstrably false claim that he "personally" paid for his family's expenses on their joint European holiday trip. To make matters worse, Mr. Stockwell's financial improprieties are aggravated by the fact that his family's expenses were heavily subsidized by Ontario Power Generation (public money, again) at a time when he was the government minister responsible for overseeing OPG. Thus, the Stockwell controversy is enveloped by the sour odour of conflict-of-interest.

Amazingly, the Premier of Ontario has announced that the twice-disgraced minister will soon be welcomed back into Cabinet, if the Integrity Commissioner finds that he has "broken no rules". Premier Eves sees no impropriety so long as the current rules are too slipshod to catch even flagrant abuses of public funds.

Public reaction to this spate of high-off-the-hog behaviour has been vitriolic. "Arrogant" and "greedy" seem to be the adjectives for which most people instinctively reach. Significantly, however, despite near-universal public condemnation, none of the officials involved – Jackson, Stockwell, Radwanski - seems able even to recognize that they've behaved badly. The public may see them as shameless parasites. They see themselves as more sinned against than sinning.

It's possible, of course, that their denials of impropriety are merely defensive posturing. More likely, however, they are genuinely sincere. The problem is: They just don't get it. This hypothesis immediately raises the obvious question: How can three smart guys exhibit such moral obtuseness?

Increasingly, public institutions seek to emulate the corporate model. Leaders of our major public institutions, from universities and hospitals to crown corporations, are exposed to the constant refrain that they should strive to be more "business-like". Conventional wisdom insists that governments should be run like businesses, with material incentives and competitive self-aggrandizement as major management tools. In this cultural climate, the spirit of public service inexorably gives way before the pressures of commercialization. This is especially true for high public officials, who tend to spend a good deal of their time dealing with top corporate executives. By ordinary standards, these government officials are handsomely paid; by corporate standards, however, they are like monkey's, working for peanuts.

Government officials know full well that their counterparts in the corporate world receive bonuses in the millions of dollars, and that they enjoy such perks as private jets to escort their families for dinner in Paris. Measured by multi-national corporate yardsticks, the Stockwells and Radwanskis of the public service might well see themselves as more akin to Buddhist monks than to Medici princes.

Most people, including most public servants, tend to live up or down to the ethics of the milieu in which they find themselves. Assign a rookie cop to a corrupt station and the chances are that it won't take long before that cop has assimilated the corrupt values of his work environment. Contrariwise, put that same rookie in a milieu in which respect and honour go to those who follow the rule of law, and the result is an officer whose virtue is likely to withstand the temptation to abuse the power of the badge and the gun. What is true for a rookie cop is true, also, doctors, teachers, accountants, and public servants, including high government officials.

I don't want to suggest that individual virtue or "character" isn't important. It is important. But if one wants to understand the broader picture one has to attend to what American social critic Randy Cohen calls "the moral ecology" of the prevailing culture. If most of us, most of the time, behave as well or as badly as our work culture and environment direct, then it becomes terribly important to ensure that the prevailing values are worthy ones. If we want government officials to behave as public servants rather than as minor royalty, we had better think about restoring a sense of pride and honour to that old-fashioned but still viable ideal of public service as a high calling.

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