

## Sharing the booty - and the blame

**F**inally the focus of news media is turning to startling revelations that erode public confidence in democratically elected representatives and the host of officials who have traditionally served and advised them.

The management of finances we provide to oil the machinery of government has traditionally been regarded as an almost sacred responsibility for those of us who have been privileged to protect the public interest in years gone by.

It now appears that what was once viewed as a serious trust has become the basis for suspicion, a cause for alienation of great numbers of disenchanted citizens on whom the democratic process really depends if it is to survive. Little wonder that cynicism prevails, that government is currently labelled as 'shamocracy.'

One juicy scandal after another provides fodder for commentators. How sad!

Our most recent revelations relate to the crisis in eHealth, a provincial commission established to expedite the effective exploitation of technical advances in electronic communications.

Government hopes to strengthen the effectiveness of our health care system. The main purpose of this body was to plan computerization of medical records. Sensing pressure for fast results, key staff ignored proper safeguards. Carefully designated an 'arms length' agency, government lingo for don't blame me, their new CEO Kramer accepted a salary of \$380,000 annually, a \$114,000 bonus after 5 months on the job, followed by a \$317,000 severance package just last week.

Without tenders, she had hired one consultant for \$2,700 a day.

A further cohort of consultants came on board at high per diem rates, one even billing the government, apparently for consulting herself.

All in all, there were more than \$2 million in untendered contracts for associates. Approved expenses even covered \$2,500 for classes at Harvard for one colleague. What a travesty, when the Premier laments almost daily the lack of money to support small hospitals appropriately.

Do you recall other cases of breach of trust that go with elected office or public appointment? Reports tell us that only two out of 89 applications for funding services to the disabled have been approved, both requests for \$15 million.

Strangely both are in Conservative ridings. Yet parochial favoritism is denied by Jim Flaherty.

Another audit reveals cheques for some \$3 million issued in error by Canada Revenue. Are you that careless with your cash?

The Mulroneys fiasco, where a respected prime minister accepted some hundreds of thousands of dollars from an agent for an arms dealer really smacks of poor judgment.

Then there is the matter of another 'at arms length' board, the Toronto Port Authority. It has reportedly spent \$50,000 at an upscale steakhouse. The group also brushed aside governance rules as they paid an outside law firm for a legal opinion not shared with all board members. Where does such irresponsible behaviour end?

In Ontario, we read about Liquor Control Board staff who intercepted reward air miles from customer cards; about the new Hydro Smart Meter tactic that really covers a rate increase of about 30% for home owners; about Catholic school trustees who claimed illegal expenses for alcohol, vacations, toll charges and car washes in the amount of \$30,000.

Add to that the almost unbelievable ignorance of municipal councillors in Vaughan Township. Apparently some \$750,000 of tax revenue has been spent on audit and legal fees to defend against campaign spending accusations!

If the Toronto Star is accurate, the budget chief there used government funds to fix the roof on his home, to repair his vandalized car, to purchase a personal barbecue - and on the tale goes.

It reveals complete indifference to any legal and moral duty.

Be assured that even in Muskoka, there have been examples of questionable business procedures at a time when economic circumstances for those paying the property tax levy are truly challenging.

Perks and wage increases for elected representatives have been more than generous in recent budgets.

Increasing debt when low priority items are part of the budget scene has become accepted practice.

Releases for public consumption are seldom comprehensive or in straightforward language. Let there be no doubt that the disconnect between politicians and the electorate is growing daily.

We now know that when 37 MP's in Ottawa were approached, only four were prepared to reveal expense account data.

Why would 33 refuse to do so? Despite Harper's pledge to "lift up the veils of secrecy," and to foster "a culture of accountability," there is clearly a government in power that seems obsessed with secrecy and a desire to control the message.

His attitude has now infected governments at all levels.

I protested when local councils with a tradition of open information flow removed from meeting materials the list and purpose of cheques issued each month.

Why would such a simple process be cancelled?

For some reason final and complete summary reports on major multi-year budget items seldom appear for public scrutiny.

The unfortunate reliance on so many consultants seems mind-boggling when highly ranked staff members are hired at salaries most never dreamed of.

In the Solicitor General's ministry, 40 employees left their jobs and returned as consultants days later to do virtually the same job at twice the pay.

From 1998 to 2002, expenditures on consultants by government ministries went from \$271 million to \$662 million.

Can you imagine why?

There is enough blame in the current situation for us to share.

In too many cases, politicians claim entitlement, the right to free wheel with as many dollars as they can squeeze out of us.

Insecure officials with high wages won't risk the loss of their reputations, so they hire consultants.

Media reporters stretched to the limits usually fail to demand much more than a laundered statement from politicians.

Voters like you and me are becoming more and more irrelevant because of widespread disillusionment.

As elections at all levels of government will soon be upon us, perhaps we as citizens can once more become a meaningful part of a respectable democratic process.

It's really up to us.

Hope springs eternal!

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