

Take a Deep Breath

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All of us know, and most will appreciate, there are times in one's life when very little of our world makes a whole lot of sense. This is one of those times! The Royal family is in a tizzy! The Europeans are having a difficult time coping with the euro red tape that binds them together. The Russians are being more centralist than we would have hoped for by now. India and China are threatening the very existence of most of the North American manufacturing sector. We Canadians have an inept prime minister heading a minority government that is determined to spend its way into the history books, and the Gomery Commission to remind us that corruption reigns in the halls of political power!

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

I was raised in a small town in the back woods of the province of Quebec. My father frequently reminded us that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Many such cases have come to light in the corporate world since the stock market met its maker in 2000. A rather large assembly of senior executives are now facing time in jail. None are as well off as they once thought they were, and their reputations are tarnished for life. Some of our politicians will inevitably be made to walk the plank when the Gomery Commission Report is published. Nonetheless, before we all go off half-cocked, may I suggest we take a deep breath. History is a wise teacher. We need to gather our thoughts before we jump to too many conclusions.

While you are at it, you might consider the idea that the Gomery Commission lays bare the culture of the shrug, of a people too lazy to question how things are done, because everyone does it, and because everyone has always done it that way. Come to that, it is difficult to take seriously the opposition parties' outrage at discovering the Liberals were using public money to pay for their election campaigns, as that is precisely what all parties are now doing – legally, to be sure, but on the public take nonetheless. To draw the line at criminality is to excuse everything short of that. Furthermore, we are all complicit to the extent that we, with rare exception, chose to look the other way rather than acknowledge what was staring us straight in the face. If Jean Chrétien and his buddies thought they could get away with it, they had many reasons to believe so!

The publication ban first imposed on the provocative testimony by Jean Brault did serious harm to freedom of expression in Canada. That disservice may be temporary or it may be lasting, particularly if it affects the longevity of the minority federal Liberal government. News by definition is new; once it is stale it may not make the same mark on

the thinking of the electorate, but even temporary harm is to be deeply regretted in a democracy. The absurdity of the publication ban was perhaps best expressed by the testimony of the inquiry being posted for all to peruse on U.S.-based web sites, causing the power balance to suddenly shift, Paul Martin now willing to do almost anything to discourage the opposition parties from calling a snap election.

Here are my thoughts as they pertain to the important matters that should concern all Canadians.

CANADA'S HISTORY IS FRAUGHT WITH SCANDAL

Greased palms and pumped-up party coffers are nothing new. Rot runs to the very roots of Confederation. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, was exiled to the opposition benches in 1873 only to be returned by the voters in 1878, where he stayed until his death in 1891. Mackenzie King, Canada's longest serving prime minister and the man chiefly remembered for his expertise in dodging controversy, was toppled in 1925 only to be re-elected in 1935, the start of twenty-two years of uninterrupted Liberal rule. Though the indiscretion of an individual minister, no matter how startling the circumstances, has never brought down a government, mounting revelations about cash-for-nothing contracts gave Paul Martin great political momentum in his ultimately successful bid to push "da little guy from Shawinigan" out of the PMO.

If what is being said at the Gomery Commission is true, there is appalling evidence of the public trust being systematically breached. It marks the point at which anecdotes of patronage have crossed into the realm of corruption. It raises questions of where the line of enrichment of party cronies and agencies stopped, and who ultimately controlled it. While the opposition parties and the press are predictably painting the testimony as a "bombshell" with the capacity to bring down the government, the public is likely to reserve its decision until Justice John Gomery has stitched all the pieces together and weighed conflicting accounts. Even assuming the worse has occurred, there remains the question of whether it was the work of a rogue element within the Liberal Party or had the backing from higher up. At this point in time neither Paul Martin nor members of his inner circle have been implicated, though Liberals with ties to them have, as has his government.

If the Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois are spurred by private polls to seize on recent disclosures as an excuse to trigger an election, they will be substituting opportunism for level-headedness. As I see it, there is no sensible rationale to do so, and every reason not to rush to judgment. Whatever the outcome, there is absolutely no excuse for former prime minister Jean Chrétien's disgraceful lack of respect for this very serious and thorough investigation. He may in the end have no choice but to swallow his damn golf balls! After all, almost half a million dollars in payoffs supposedly went to his close friends and political associates, including one of his brothers.

In the end, however, no government is without corruption. It comes with the territory. Money and sex cross party lines. Fiscal scandals hound governments of the Left; sexual scandals hound governments of the Right. Neither are immune to either. Replacing one set of swine with another is said to be the genius of democracy!

ARROGANCE DEFEATS GOVERNMENTS

Voters rarely defeat governments over issues of policy. They seldom do so because the leader lacks charisma. Only one thing can guarantee defeat, and that is arrogance! When

the voters perceive the reigning party to be old, tired, cocky, over-confident and arrogant, it punishes the politicians in charge. Canadian history abounds with such examples.

Brian Mulroney's Tories came to power in 1984 after years of growing disgust with the Grits under Pierre Trudeau. In 1993, Jean Chrétien's Liberals were swept into office because of deep-rooted discontent with the Conservatives. Now a dozen years later on there are mounting indications that a punitive Judgment Day may be fast approaching for his successor. The irony is that it was Prime Minister Paul Martin himself who started the political hurricane headed his way by launching the Gomery Commission to delve into the sponsorship scandal, uncovering evidence of disturbing practices conducted by the Liberals in Quebec during his predecessor's term in office. Even though he claims to have been an innocent bystander, only one question will matter come the next election: Have the voters decided that he and his party have become so arrogant that they must be replaced?

Were that to happen, and there is a good chance that it will, everything he tries to do to rescue his party's integrity will be seen as an act of desperation. Many of his rival's shortcomings will be overlooked by the media and the public. Once this perception sets in, there will be little that Paul Martin or the Liberals can do to avoid humiliation at the ballot box. Defeat the bums, throw the rascals out, it is time for change, will become the watchwords of the campaign. In the meantime, Stephen Harper and his Conservatives have much to do to position themselves to win a majority and not just a minority. They must never take anything for granted as voter sentiment can change on short notice and usually does. At the moment the East, the West, Quebec and Ontario each and all seem to have an axe to grind with the federal government.

Canadian politicians are capable of making strange bedfellows in more than one bed come election time. Though it is true the Liberal Party is rapidly losing its moral authority to govern the country, one should never count them as being down and out. They have, after all, formed the government for many more years than all the other political parties combined, and have a long history of bouncing right back when the subsequent election is called. So if the Conservatives ever hope to remain in power once elected, they must keep their hands firmly on the steering wheel and their eyes riveted on the road ahead!

ARE THE TORIES READY FOR PRIME TIME?

It is one thing to have Canada's natural ruling party on the ropes, it is another to deliver the knockout punch. Despite the revelations of the Gomery Commission, the real issue is not the few hundreds of million dollars diverted to pet causes and under-the-table payoffs, it is the nearly \$200 billion the federal government spends these days attempting to please voters and regulate our lives. Though the Liberal Party may be bereft of ideas and seems to lack any sense of identity, it would be foolish to assume that Canadians would switch to the Conservatives without knowing exactly what the party stands for and what it is dead against. Proposing but a modified version of the Liberal Red Book will never do. There needs to be forceful policies aimed at limiting the size and power of government, promoting lower taxes and higher productivity, and reduced welfare payments to those who choose not to carry their fair share of the load.

Generally speaking, Canadians want lower taxes and robust government spending. An opposition party unwilling to explain the contradiction in simple terms cannot offer a coherent parliamentary alternative or remain in power very long. Changing public opinion is no easy task. Stephen Harper has much to prove. If nothing else, he must persuade

central Canada of the virtues of devolution and decentralization, and convince the citizens of Ontario and Quebec that people from the West are not all rednecks. That said, were the Québécois to decide that their interests lay in allying themselves with the Conservatives in national politics, they may well do so without actually joining the party. Such would be par for their course!

As noted in my paper *Shift Happens*, Stephen Harper is one of the more unusual and interesting people in North American politics today. He is both a political strategist and a conservative intellectual. Though there may be others just like him, few have ever become the leader of a national political party. He has the potential to be one of the most creative politicians in Canadian history, not something we might ever get to say about Paul Martin! To do so, however, he must be brave and have the stamina and fortitude to push his party's ideas through the interminable committees that constitute modern government, and the presence of mind to convince Canadians that he and the Conservatives are on the right track. Gamesmanship must take a back seat to political policy. At the moment, both he and Paul Martin are less well connected to the voters than they were before the last election. A snap election would likely result in a record low turnout and another fractious minority, paralyzing the federal government threatened by the possibility of yet another non-confidence vote. So, until such time as Stephen Harper can gain the concurrence of mainstream Canadians from coast to coast, he would be wise to bide his time. At the moment, neither he nor his party appear to be ready for prime time.

Whereas I may be just one of many concerned citizens, I, like you and many others, would like to vote for something - not just against scandal, however appalling it may prove to be. Therefore, may I encourage the members of Parliament sitting on both sides of the House of Commons to get on with what truly needs to be done to re-establish Canada as a role model in both domestic and foreign affairs. At the moment it is, at best, just treading water. By many measures it has lost a great deal of ground in recent years which is costing us plenty in terms of our standard of living. Nobody gains when that happens!

THE POLITICAL LAY OF THE LAND

It can be said that Jean Chrétien spent much of his time in office moving the country from one-party rule to one-man rule and, in doing so, allowed his absolute power to corrupt absolutely. Paul Martin's most incomprehensible act to date was to stand before his caucus and cheer his predecessor's childish performance before the Gomery Commission. Stephen Harper's biggest misstep was to declare victory before the ballots were even cast in the most recent federal election. Notwithstanding, the real question is, what is going to happen in the next election, be it called tomorrow, a month or two, or a year from now?

The four Maritime provinces have long asked the federal government for money to tide them over, if you will excuse the pun. However, welfare is not the answer. Enterprise is. To illustrate my point, in 1971 Alberta's population was one quarter of their's. Now the reverse is true! So the federal Liberal government's move to allow Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to do as they wish with their new-found crude oil and natural gas royalties is a step in the right direction. As noted earlier on, it should be accompanied by a tightening of the welfare eligibility rules. I expect the Conservatives will do better here than in the past. They are now running neck and neck with the Liberals.

In Quebec, the much maligned sponsorship programme was a bust and is a disgrace. Only the Québécois will decide whether to vote for separation or not. A recent poll

concluded that 47 percent favoured sovereignty in partnership with Canada. Only 28 percent had the guts to want to go it alone. Despite claims by Paul Martin, it is a non-issue at this point in time. Rather, Premier Jean Charest's provincial Liberals are in deep trouble. So too is the federal Liberal Party. Stephen Harper is yet to make any significant inroads. I would expect both the Bloc Québécois and the Parti Québécois to gain seats, the former to align itself with the federal Conservatives, as opposed to the Liberals.

Ontario was the swing province in the past federal election. Had Stephen Harper not jumped the gun, he would have carried the election. Today the provincial Liberals are fighting an uphill battle as are the federal Liberals. Paul Martin's recent suggestion that he is prepared to sit down and talk turkey with Premier Dalton McGuinty is much like one drowning man offering his life jacket to another. It is a bit too late for both in my opinion. The Conservatives deserve to do better, and will.

Manitoba and Saskatchewan, I am sorry to say, do not register in my mind, but the way Paul Martin double-crossed Alberta in the last election does! As is the way he is going about implementing the very flawed Kyoto Accord. I think the federal Liberals have destroyed any chances they may have had in all four of the Western provinces, including British Columbia, where Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell is doing all the right things. By following Alberta's lead in cutting taxes, downsizing the civil service, and shrinking welfare rolls he has succeeded in turning the economy around, exactly the sort of thing that the Maritime provinces and others should be striving to do in order to remain competitive in today's increasingly global and ever more competitive marketplace. I expect him to be re-elected in the upcoming provincial election.

Assuming Stephen Harper pulls his message together and Paul Martin's party continues to be raked over the coals, I believe momentum favours the Conservatives and the polls are beginning to back me up. However, now is not the time to pull the plug on the government. It would be better to allow the stench from the Gomery Commission to do its thing before putting the country up to another election. Ideally, the Tories should wait until the Gomery Commission Report is available. To do otherwise smacks of gunslinging, and the opposition parties should shy away from any such perception as it had a very negative connotation in the last election, and may preclude a majority victory in the next.

IN SUMMARY

Canada's political parties are on tenterhooks waiting for the final witnesses to have their say at the Gomery Commission. Although our economy remains relatively robust thanks to its abundant wealth of natural resources, government policies are not what they should be to assure us all of a prosperous future. Both our political and business leaders have been somewhat listless in the past while. It is time for everyone to come clean, pull up their socks and set a fine example for our youth to follow in the years ahead.

Take a deep breath and get on with what needs to be done to recapture Canada's reputation as a world leader. Show a sense of humility. Never be arrogant. Such will get you absolutely nowhere!