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April 19, 2002

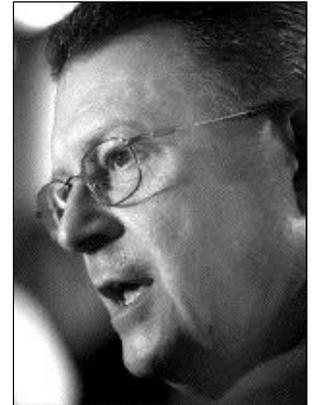
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High dudgeon

Ralph Goodale
National Post

In yesterday's National Post, Andrew Coyne sympathetically advanced the viewpoint of Canadian Alliance MP Keith Martin about a recent vote in the House of Commons on Mr. Martin's private member's bill. I'd like to present "the other side of the story."

Mr. Coyne suggested the Member of Parliament was so overwrought when a motion about his bill was amended that, in a fit of emotion, he seized the Mace from its place in the House of Commons and brandished it about while he made a little speech - all just to highlight his personal grievance.



Ralph Goodale

There is no doubt that this was a serious and premeditated violation of Parliamentary rules. Mr. Martin, Mr. Coyne and other various apologists readily admit that. What's at issue is whether Mr. Martin's grievance justified his publicity stunt. Was there substance behind the show?

In any democratic institution, motions are made and amended, votes are won and lost. There is nothing untoward about Mr. Martin's motion being subject to an amendment. Put the shoe on the other foot. Why is it OK for any Opposition MP to offer an amendment to any bill, but it's not OK for a Liberal MP to do so?

Now, what about the substance of the amendment?

The Martin bill proposed some degree of decriminalization with respect to marijuana. The specific motion Mr. Martin moved was to give the bill approval in principle and refer it to the House Standing Committee on Justice.

The amendment presented by a Liberal MP suggested that the subject matter of the bill ought to be referred instead to the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Non-Medical Use of Drugs. This is surely not unreasonable -- not an assault upon democracy as Mr. Coyne and others suggest.

The Special Committee on the Non-Medical Use of Drugs already exists. It has been duly authorized by the House to examine issues like those raised in Mr. Martin's bill. It was created on the suggestion of the Alliance Opposition. Its vice-chair is an Alliance MP (Randy White). It has an approved budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars. And it is already hard at work -- within a framework and a mandate given by Parliament to ensure full examination and consultation about all dimensions of the non-medical use of drugs.

And then, out of the blue, comes Mr. Martin with his own out-of-context, one-off proposition. He wants it dealt with all on its own, right away -- his way or the doorway -- without any reference to the special committee. He must believe that he's just smarter than everybody else (inside or outside the Alliance), and he should tolerate no contrary views.

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Mr. Martin's original motion would have infringed upon the very special committee that his party requested. Furthermore, if his motion had been adopted, the House could have faced the contradiction of different committees moving in conflicting directions on the same topic.

The amendment by a Liberal MP -- which was adopted and which triggered the Martin outburst -- actually salvaged the situation. It did not kill the subject matter. Instead, it provided for a rational, thoughtful analysis in a comprehensive and coherent policy framework by an existing and competent group of parliamentarians who are due to report to the House within a specified time-line later this year.

Before getting all lathered up in such a state of high dudgeon -- as Messrs. Martin, Coyne and some others have done -- it might be useful to do two things. First, don't just mindlessly mouth convenient allegations which may fit your conspiracy theories but have no basis in reality. Second, examine the substance of "the other side of the story" for its own merit, without assuming there is none.

Ralph Goodale is Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.



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