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In Senate spending scandal, honest lies have been rechristened 'spin'

BY ANDREW COYNE, POSTMEDIA NEWS | OCTOBER 31, 2013

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Andrew Coyne is a national columnist for Postmedia News.
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To recap, the prime minister is not responsible. He is not responsible for appointing Mike Duffy and Pamela Wallin and Patrick Brazeau to the Senate. He is not responsible for appointing senators from provinces in which they were not resident, and he is not responsible for their subsequent activities shilling for the Tories across the country at public expense.

And he is most certainly not responsible for the clandestine campaign, involving officials in his office, the chairman of the Conservative Fund Canada and several leading Conservative senators, to repay Sen. Duffy's falsely claimed expenses on his behalf and conceal his misdeeds from the public. He is not responsible for his spokesman's statements, even after the plot had been exposed, praising Duffy for "doing the right thing" and vouching confidence in his chief of staff, Nigel Wright.

On the other hand, he *is* responsible, by his own account, for telling Duffy to repay his expenses, though he had for months denied having any involvement with the file, and he was briefly responsible for "dismissing" Wright, though he had earlier claimed he resigned, and though he now seems unwilling to say which version is operable.

But he is not responsible for the current campaign to suspend the three senators two years without pay for "gross negligence" — a made-up

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penalty for a made-up offence, meted out by a process that seems to change by the day. He is not responsible because, as everybody knows, the Senate is wholly independent of the prime minister — as independent as his own office.

He is not even responsible for answering questions about his responsibility in this affair. He does not answer questions from the media, and when called upon to answer questions in Parliament as often as not passes them off to his parliamentary secretary. Even when he does answer questions, he doesn't answer them.

The notion that Stephen Harper should bear any responsibility for the actions of his staff, or indeed his own, is one of those quaint relics of a bygone age, like outdoor showers or honesty. There was a time when public office holders were expected to take responsibility for these things, as a matter of personal honour if nothing else. But conventions last only as long as they are observed. Today, the prime minister clings to his position — I was the victim of a conspiracy involving everyone around me — as tightly as Sen. Duffy clings to his paycheck.

Indeed, the notion that conventions matter is itself a convention. In recent years they have been discarded by the dozen, and the faster they fall the less any of them are missed. A glance at the headlines is enough to see how little remains.

It used to be a convention that bills of differing purposes would be introduced and voted upon separately, not packed into a single omnibus bill. The first time this was attempted it was shocking. The second was tedious. The third, now before Parliament, is not even news.

That debate on the bill itself has been cut off — the government's entire fall agenda, pushed through in a matter of days — adds to the sense of vertigo. Once, invoking closure — or its politer form, time allocation — was the stuff of epic parliamentary battles. Now it is more the convention to shut off debate than to allow it. And it is the convention not to mind.

Wait, as Sen. Duffy might say: There's more. The minister of intergovernmental affairs, with responsibility for matters such as national unity, publicly repudiates the stated policy of the government in which he serves on the most important matter it is ever likely to face — namely, that a "clear majority," and not a mere 50 per cent plus one, in any referendum on secession is one of the conditions for any subsequent negotiations. He does so, what is more, not as a matter of idle speculation, but just as the government is in court to defend its position.

Once, it was a convention that members of the cabinet were bound to uphold the policies of the government, and to be accountable for them, and that if they could not support those policies, they could not serve in that government. That, too, has long since ceased to apply.

There does not seem to be much that does bind the government: not convention, not its own promises, not even basic facts. It issues deficit projections at the beginning of the fiscal year that bear no resemblance to the figures that go into the books at the end. It claims to be on track to meet its greenhouse gas targets even as its environment commissioner issues reports showing that it is not even half-way there. It continues to defend its costing of major defence purchases even after the auditor-general has found them to be fraudulent.

So the revelations of how far senior government officials were willing to go to lie and cover up in the matter of Sen. Duffy's expenses should be no more shocking to us than it apparently is to the prime minister. I don't want to say there was ever a convention that people in politics shouldn't lie, but there were once some limits of decency: You could lie, but you couldn't *lie*.



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But these days it seems the only expectation is that you should not actually break the law. What once were honest lies have been rechristened "spin," a term that is itself the best example of what it describes: Even the liars can't tell when they are lying any more. Should we be surprised that, in all this spinning about, they get a little giddy — that the closer they spin to the edges of legality, the greater the likelihood they will fall off?

But then, it is only a convention that we obey the law.

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