

## Ottawa's hopeless incompetence

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This is a column born in near-despair.

The government of Canada is hopelessly incompetent and the majority of Canadian voters, who show every sign of continuing to support it, are a flock of hapless turkeys.

Last week's Auditor-General's revelations about the ballooning net cost of the Canadian gun registry -- more than 400 times original estimates and rising -- and the systematic misleading of Parliament by the Department of Justice of Canada ought surely to be the last straw of evidence anyone needs.

This is nothing like the penny-ante stretching of rules that did in dim-bulb Cabinet ministers such as Art Eggleton and Lawrence MacAulay. This is systematic, massive, deliberate overspending and deception, aimed at implementing a program of dubious value that a handful of ideologues convinced the Liberal Cabinet and caucus to support in the teeth of opposition concerns that have proven thoroughly valid.

Should someone resign over the gun control fiasco? In a real Parliamentary system, run by men and women with a real sense of honour and accountability, the responsible Ministers of Justice -- Allan Rock, Anne McLellan and Martin Cauchon -- would all resign. A real House of Commons, filled by men and women of real conscience and integrity, would seriously consider withdrawing confidence in a Prime Minister and Cabinet responsible for such wild squandering of public money -- in other words, this is the kind of issue that in a self-respecting country would cause the government to fall.

But of course it is not a real Parliament run by real people: Ottawa is a surreal place, in which a billion dollars hardly matters, accountability by elected officials is a joke and cynical spin doctors make their living by counselling the government and the media about the stupidity of the voters. Having proven its complete incapacity to make a registry of a few million firearms, the Liberal government now proposes to replan the whole Canadian economy to serve the Kyoto protocols and to reorganize the whole Canadian health care system to serve the Romanow report. Does anyone in their right mind, from the PM down to the newest page on Parliament Hill, really believe Ottawa has the capacity to handle these files intelligently and prudently?

Until recently, I had thought that the Chrétien government was one of the more mediocre regimes of the past few decades of Canadian history. The events of the past few months convince me that it is much worse, touching rock bottom in multiple areas. This Liberal government has presided over a deterioration in Canadian-American relations unprecedented since the Diefenbaker era; a degree of cynical political corruption rivalling the scandals of the Pearson and Mulroney years; waste and incompetence in public administration not seen since the last years of Trudeau era excess; and a decline in the military, and our concomitant ability to preserve our sovereignty, that would have appalled Macdonald, Laurier and Mackenzie King. It is also heading towards a breakdown in federal-provincial relations. Practically all of the Cabinet ministers are second- or third-rate, and the Prime Minister of Canada, who ought to have retired several years ago, is simply pathetic.

Much worse: There is no sign that Canadian voters are ready to do anything serious about this situation. Instead, they dream foolishly of two unworkable panaceas.

The first panacea is the idea of Paul Martin as political saviour. As finance minister from 1993 until last summer, Mr. Martin has been thoroughly complicit in every major policy fiasco of the Chrétien

governments, and until he was fired from Cabinet uttered not a syllable of public protest or disagreement. When Mr. Martin becomes Liberal leader, he will inherit all of the sordid baggage of the Chrétien years, all of the government's non-policies and all of the opportunists and starry-eyed dreamers who form the heart and soul of the Liberal Party of Canada. The best the country can hope for, Mr. Martin's record and following seem to suggest, is that his ambition and lack of fixed conviction may lead him to ditch some of the dumber ideas and practices that have passed for governance during the Chrétien years. Some improvement that will be: one gang of morally challenged Liberal manipulators replaced by another.

The second panacea, so fervently hoped for by Canadians who give lip service to concerns about our one-party state, is some kind of reunion of conservatives, a real alliance between the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party. All the evidence we have, however, is that this isn't going to happen: The rump of the PCs would much rather see endless Liberal government than give up their party heritage, no matter how thread bare and debt-ridden it becomes. Politicians and commentators and voters who try to keep the unite-the-right pot boiling are utterly deluded. These waters are stone cold. All that the unity people -- such as self-aggrandizing former Ontario premier Mike Harris -- are succeeding in doing is muddying them.

If you want to see a real change of government in Canada in your lifetime, you're going to have to screw up your courage, swallow your reservations and vote for the Alliance in the next election. If you're not ready to do that, then you might as well stop gobbling and grumbling as the Liberals carve up you, your family and your country. You are getting and will get the government you deserve.

But it's a very sad era for Canada, which in my view is now so badly governed that it's beginning to lose its coherence as a real country. In the short term, until we get a change of government, it's only going to get worse.

Our fallback position as Canadians is always to make jokes, to laugh about our country rather than weep for it. Eventually, though, you pay a huge price if you can't think of anything better than to keep on sending in the clowns

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