

Rough sailing for Paul Martin

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Shipping tycoon and "practising coal baron" Paul Martin may (or may not) be on solid ethical ground in refusing to sell his shipping empire, but he is sailing toward political trouble.

Big trouble. Recent revelations about his not-so-blind management arrangement for Canada Steamship Lines created rare unity in the Commons this week: the New Democrats (authors of the coal-baron slur), the Canadian Alliance and the Tories all agree that the Martin deal stinks. Of course, they can be expected to believe the worse -- Martin, for different reasons, is all their worst nightmares. Still, there is more than political opportunism in their charges and little reassurance in Martin's belated, unconvincing and unbending response. No, he says, he won't sell his family shipping company, nor should he have to.

Technically, he is within his rights: There is no law, or tradition, that says a prime minister cannot own a \$50-million multinational business concern. Martin claims a foolproof blind trust can be structured on his behalf and policed by an independent ethics commissioner answerable to Parliament; that, he says, will head off potential conflicts. What is certain is that Martin has gone beyond what is required, both in 1988 when he was first elected, and in 1994 when he became a cabinet minister, and voluntarily disclosed his extensive holdings. He also, as finance minister, routinely excused himself from discussions involving taxes, or other matters, that might touch on his shipping empire. Good.

But not good enough -- not for a prime minister. Tory leader Joe Clark makes an obvious point: The prime minister can't absent himself from cabinet decisions, because he has ultimate responsibility for everything. "To where does the prime minister step aside? He can't."

NDP leader Jack Layton makes a provocative point: How will Martin have any credibility on environmental issues, like the Kyoto Protocol, when his private shipping company is ferrying polluting coal to an Indonesian power plant (in a deal involving the infamous Suharto family)? The link may seem tenuous within the protective media and political culture that cossets Martin in Ottawa; it won't seem so outlandish to many other Canadians. And, even if subsequent CSL-related charges are unfounded, or alleged connections specious, refuting them could consume too much of Prime Minister Martin's time. For practical reasons, alone, he would be wise to start looking for a buyer.

He is refusing to do so, perhaps from sentimentality, stubbornness or self-interest, and offering only a weak defence. If he is forced to divest, he says, it will discourage entrepreneurs, people who have "built something," from entering politics. Nonsense. It didn't discourage him. Politics does impose financial sacrifice on some -- all the corporate lawyers now sitting in the Commons, for example -- but it is a sacrifice they make willingly. Public life, for all its drawbacks, offers intellectual variety, visibility and an opportunity to contribute, and being prime minister especially so. Do we want a leader who refuses to convert his wealth into stocks, or into some inert investment, in order that he can do the job properly?

Martin's proposal for a blind trust is unsatisfying, too, particularly in light of revelations that the existing arrangement allows him regular updates on company business. Maybe it's legal, but it isn't what most of us mean by "blind." As for asking Howard Wilson, the ethics counsellor, to design a new regime: bad, bad idea. In fact, the most scandalous aspect of this affair may be that Wilson warned Martin last year "as a courtesy" that CSL was about to be charged with illegally dumping oil near Halifax harbour. Why is the so-called "ethics" counsellor passing on public-relations advice to a minister? His job isn't to protect politicians from embarrassment; it is to protect the public interest. Isn't it?

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As for Martin, if his stately progress toward promotion is rudely interrupted, he has no one but himself to blame. Every time he is challenged, he makes matters worse by, first, hiding, and then by offering nervous and incomplete excuses. As well, he has created an opening for opposition and media mischief by offering so little substance, so few policy ideas. And he continues to refuse to fully divulge the names of his campaign donors, making the bogus and insulting claim that a Chrétien-led government might punish Martin supporters by withholding contracts.

The question of the mystery donors raises real, as opposed to hypothetical, potential for conflict. Is Martin beholden to the oil patch? Has he accepted money from tobacco companies? And, didn't he say he believes in full disclosure?

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