

Paid Pipers

Back then, in the fifties I think it was, a statistic I read caused me shock and awe: In nine out of ten contests for elected office the candidate who spends the most dollars wins. This, sad to say, in Canada.

Sometime later, I was seriously impacted when a campaigning Mike Pearson was forced by an irate citizen to answer the question: "Where does your campaign money come from?" Pearson mumbled a refusal to divulge the source of his campaign money. "I want to know because I will vote", the citizen angrily said. Visibly upset by the irreverence of that "ordinary Canadian", Pearson refused to name names, but divulged that his campaign money "came from the same sources as that of the other party". If it was intended to put worries to rest, Pearson's remark had the opposite effect, at least on me. Since Mike Pearson was one of our best in living memory, think of the others...

Lloyd Axworthy dropped out of the Liberal leadership race, the one won by Chretien, I believe it was, because mega-business did not like his stance on Free Trade and starved his campaign. Thereafter several leadership campaign dropouts cited lack of campaign funds as the cause for their withdrawal, a recent one being Mr. John Manley. How many good Canadians have shunned party leadership races because mega-business would not sponsor them? Must we be governed by persons who have no qualms compromising their integrity and who bow their heads to receive the mega-business blessing?

The leadership campaign of Paul Martin was grossly over-financed by mega-business. So much so, that Winston Churchill himself was he running on Sheila Copps' budget would likely have lost to Paul Martin. As a result of mega-business partiality for Paul Martin, we may never learn whether Sheila would have made a good Prime Minister.

No, the extent of sponsorship does not measure the value of a candidate, certainly not the value to society. Mega-business does not allocate money with the best interest of the society at heart, such concerns are alien to mega-business - if it ever happens, it is purely coincidental. In any case, were we to find for mega-business benevolence, we should still abhor the practice, for we are proud people, determined to govern ourselves. We want democracy, we abhor paternalism.

We are cleverly lead to believe that those who pour money into political campaigns do it for their love of democracy. We are also told that politicians are not influenced by those who pay their way to power. Politicians urge us to be happy, to trust them and to never worry. When caught giving lucrative government contracts to their campaign contributors, the politicians explain it as an anomaly in an otherwise perfectly working democratic system. If people refuse to believe the explanation and continue complaining, the matter is referred to some ethics lapdog who will reassure us of the integrity of the offending politicians and of the system. On the rare occasion that the impropriety defies burial, the sloppy-mannered politician is publicly sacrificed on the altar of politicians' virtue.

When Paul Martin was challenged to divulge the source of the millions that poured into his long leadership campaign, he refused. Upon being pressured further he said he would divulge his sources after the campaign ends. The reason he gave was that the corporations who financed his campaign, wanted to remain sheltered from the ire of then Prime Minister Jean Chretien who was displeased by Martin's mutiny. Must we then assume that Martin was paranoid, that he was unaware of the "reality" of the matter, that financing politicians' careers, does not influences politicians? Would he retaliate against whoever contributed to financing Copps' leadership bid? Since politicians are above being influenced by contributions, since he would not retaliate himself, how could he conceivably suspect Chretien of being revengeful? If Chretien could punish Martin's contributors, could not Martin reward them?

Paying high prices for government purchases. Paying high prices for reports that they are never written, or which, if written, are not worth the paper the government consultants printed them on. Handing out grants, giving loans, guaranteeing loans, paying out subsidies, bailing out companies... the array is lengthy. Some of them are due to irresponsible management , some are due to ineptitude and these I recognize would always happen, one may say they are inadvertent, however, not all improper spending is thus explainable. A great deal of government spending contains a component, a chunk of money, that is pay-back to politicians' sponsors for past contributions and enticement for future campaign financing. Politicians strive to ensure that come election time, satisfied sponsors will come up again with campaign money.

What does this cost the society? How much money do the politicians pilfer from the public purse to pay back their financial sponsors? One

may only guess as to the amount, but large as it may be it is but a small component of the overall cost society incurs because of the existence of that infamous influence bazaar politicians unabashedly conduct inside the Temple of Democracy.

Under this system we are governed by politicians whose tenure in power and/or to the public trough depends on managing the society on behalf of their sponsors. Experienced politicians know that they can hire clever mind spinners and unleash them on the people to bury the memory of their scandals, to hide their incompetence, to smear their opponents, to impress voters with tales of achievements and to lure others with empty promises. They all know that although they cannot fool all the people all of the time they can fool enough people for as long as it takes to fling them over the election wire.

It is not only the party in government who are thus afflicted - Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition are equally faithful to their past and potential sources of campaign financing. If anything, as the saying goes, being other than first, they try harder for sponsorship money. This closes the circle, it leaves no politician beyond the control of mega-business. Of course in the case of the NDP it is mega-labour who pay the contributions, however the net result is the same, transfer of power from the people to special interest groups.

Some people look at this dirty political scene and see opportunities for themselves. They plunge into it and eventually secure their place at the public trough, attach themselves to it, and sometimes feed there for life. They see nothing wrong in being sustained at the trough by special interest groups, they justify accepting sponsorship money by observing that if they did not, somebody else would grab it and use to it to dislodge them from the trough. They are parasites attached to the ship of state like barnacles attach to seafaring ships. Their presence costs us all dearly, not only because they repay their sponsors, but mainly because they displace people who would enhance the quality of life in the society.

Some others look at the political scene and recognize the obvious, that it is badly in need of reform. They feel that someone must do it, and they decide to take the plunge. They are the majority of people entering politics, I would venture to guess. They believe that they can make a difference, they believe that they can prevail over the political establishment so as to make society a better place for the people to live in.

They quickly learn that they cannot get elected unless they join one of the political parties, for the system does not tolerate "independents" in any sense of the word. They decide to submit themselves, some of them dreaming of changing the party so the party may change the way the society is governed. They swallow their pride, they store their idealism in the closet, temporarily they think, till they get inside the party in their personal wooden horse. Once they get in, they will don their idealism and fight the battles of the people, they dream. Like Hercules did to Augean stables, they will flush the dirt out of politics, for democracy to reign supreme thereafter. Alas, sincere as they are they fail, for before they know it, they are sucked into the stomach of the party.

At the other end of the prospective leaders spectrum are those who manage to recognize the system's immense resistance to change. They recognize that the system is well defended, its skin is impermeable. They observe the party's hostility to new ideas, the aversion to dissent and the intolerance to challenge. They may be unwilling to submit their integrity to Party discipline, they refuse to prostitute themselves to those who have no qualms corrupting the government of the society. They see it all and repelled by it they reject politics to the great loss of society.

The practice of politicians raiding the public purse to satisfy those who bribed them and who will bribe them again, is costly to society, yet substantial as it may be, it is the smallest the system generates. Enslaving politicians and making them govern the society to the benefit of the Establishment is a much bigger cost we endure through that practice. The loss of talent is enormous, the talent of those who stayed away, the talent of those who took the plunge only to be digested in the bowels of the system.

The whole political system turns about satisfying mega-business. Even the NDP is being brought around to it and have already been flirting with mega-business to the dismay of mega-labour. The result of politicians performing while under the influence is legislation different than it would be if political contributors had not corrupted the system, if politicians were free of that mega-business stranglehold on their careers. Political Scientists, being trained to serve the system as they are, have not informed society about the extent of this privatization of the electoral system, and its immense cost to the society.

Reforming the way votes translate into ballots, cannot be but of marginal benefit to society if of any benefit, if the stranglehold of mega-business on the system continues. No matter which , no matter how many aspects of the electoral system are made right, the bribing of politicians with election and re-election funds will result in politicians with strings attached, the strings leading to mega-business, Politicians whose loyalty is not to the society, as much as it is to their sponsors. And that is no democracy.

But this is not all. Please read the next installment, coming your way soon.