

Canada: WE scandal shows government's true character

The WE controversy appears to be more of the same juvenilism, tokenism and narcissism we've seen from this government.

by Conrad Black



Political scandals involving money have to be fairly rancid before I am much scandalized by them. Persevering readers will recall that I was underwhelmed by the SNC-Lavalin controversy, because I don't think it is Canada's business to regulate commercial practices in foreign countries, and I don't take seriously United Nations guidelines on these matters, given that organization's profound corruption. If the corporation had bribed Canadian officials, that would be a very serious matter, but I believe that the prime minister made the correct decision in declining a criminal prosecution when a settlement with a financial payment and change of corporate policy was an option, and he was right to try to retain the thousands of jobs in Quebec.

The WE controversy doesn't quite make it as bribery, or even as patronage of the kind that grossly affronts the public good as Adscam did. But it is a shabby, sloppy and thoroughly distasteful business. As anyone who has followed it knows, the government agreed to hand a fee of over \$40 million (probably much more from what I can deduce) to a huckster-booster operation run by the prime minister's chums who had paid his family \$300,000, in order to pay \$10 an hour to many thousands of young volunteers who are unable to obtain ordinary work in the COVID-distressed economy. The idea of providing employment in community work for unemployed young people is a good one but there is absolutely no excuse for providing such a huge profit to an organization that juggles charitable and commercial activities in an apparently casual manner, and has got a long way on its political connections. I would absolve the Trudeau family and Finance Minister Bill Morneau of taking bribes, but they all should have known better than to get anywhere near this malodorous bouillabaisse of backscratching, log-rolling and questionable book-keeping. A lot of money is involved but it is a simple task of organization and the idea that only the Kielburgers could do it is bunk.

The Trudeau and Morneau families are both well-to-do and I think Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Bill Morneau are financially honest men, and I don't have any objection to governments giving business to their friends if there is no loss to the taxpayers. As Quebec's longest-serving premier, Maurice Duplessis, famously said to the leader of the Opposition (Georges-Émile Lapalme), "Who do you expect us to give it to, our enemies?" When asked by Lapalme with great moral outrage why the number of special sequential automobile licence plates had been extended from 2,000 to 4,000 (Duplessis' personal limousines were numbers 1 and 2), he nonchalantly replied: "The people have renewed their confidence in us with such constancy and for so long, we have succeeded in doubling the number of our official friends." He ran an efficient government, lowered taxes, balanced the

budget and presided over great prosperity. His methods were high-handed but he was competent, successful and neither sanctimonious nor hypocritical.

What is irritating in the WE controversy is the extravagance of giving an exorbitant commission to the regime's friends at the taxpayers expense without any pretense of looking at alternative methods of administering the workfare plan. It all has the appearance of a Trudeau-Morneau family affair and a very expensive celebration of the ethos of young frolicsome people exuberantly celebrating their jolly progressivism for the benefit of the Kielburgers, Canada's most energetic hustlers, who affect material disinterest but cheerfully trouser over \$40 million for their uncomplicated services. It may not be a legal or even strictly speaking an ethical problem, but it is no way to run the government of a serious country, particularly in severe times that have brought hardship to millions of homes.

It emphasizes this government's greatest problem: an unserious approach to the magnificent challenge of making the absolute most out of this providentially well endowed and advantageously located country. Whatever his other limitations, former prime minister Jean Chrétien grasped and, in his way, expressed the grandeur of Canada: the incomparable St. Lawrence, the aptly named Great Lakes including the engineering marvel of the Seaway, the vast proverbially fruited plain of the Prairies, the mighty Rocky Mountains and the grand Pacific Ocean. Virtually every bounty of precious and non-precious metals, energy and forest products of every kind and every form of agriculture apart from tropical fruit spread generously over a splendid landscape; this would be a mouth-watering patrimony to all but a very few other nationalities in the world that are comparably blessed. And Canadians, too sensible and naturally reserved to be among the world's more exciting nationalities, are relatively peaceable, tolerant, educated and diligent. It is the duty of any

government of Canada to marshal all the strengths and assets of this nation and its people, to make this country a laboratory for intelligent legislation and governmental innovation, and to concentrate the attention of the whole nation on achieving the immense potential that every Canadian since Samuel de Champlain (and even Jacques Cartier nearly 500 years ago, despite his reference to the Lower St. Lawrence as "the land God gave to Cain) has recognized.

Champlain saw and managed to sell even to the cynical Cardinal Richelieu a great French realm in Canada. Carleton (Lord Dorchester) saw and managed after four years of lobbying to sell to King George III and his ministers a great bicultural realm in Canada. Robert Baldwin, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, John A. Macdonald, George-Etienne Cartier and George Brown saw and sold to skeptical British statesman including Lord Palmerston, Benjamin Disraeli, William Ewart Gladstone and a more receptive Queen Victoria the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary confederation in the history of the world. Compared to other countries, it has functioned well these 153 years. Macdonald bound the country together with a railway that was one of the wonders of the world. Wilfrid Laurier and Clifford Sifton induced astounding levels of immigration that kept pace with the vertiginous growth of the United States and produced the population for nine contiguous provinces from coast to coast. Robert Borden and Mackenzie King presided over world war efforts that raised Canada up to be one of the important countries in the whole world. Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney all made important contributions to the steady advance of Canadian importance in the world. John Diefenbaker, Chrétien, Stephen Harper and others have all had their moments. A little grandeur and some panache go a long way in national leadership.

This government has distracted the country with nonsensical preoccupations with alarmist theories of climate and absurd

pandering over gender issues, has made a shambles of native policy, legalized marijuana on a basis that is not competitive with the illegal providers, has not been innovative in responding to the coronavirus and is in arrears of most other advanced countries in rehabilitating the economy.

In all of the circumstances, the WE controversy appears to be more of the same juvenilism, tokenism and narcissism. I doubt if it is a crime, but it won't do.

First published in the