

Those Involved in the ArriveCan Fiasco Must Be Held to Account



by Conrad Black

Anyone who had any experience of ArriveCan knew what a disaster it was: In the interests of declared efficiency it harassed and beleaguered practically everyone who entered the country.

The proportions of the financial scandal that accompanied this brainwave of the Trudeau government were at first unsuspected. It came to light last month after a lengthy comedy of conflicting government and media reports that the federal comptroller general, Roch Huppé, had ordered an examination of all contracts concerned with ArriveCan's principal contractor, GC Strategies, and its precedent company Coredal. Mr. Huppé revealed that those companies received 118 contracts [worth over \\$107 million](#) in 12 years.

The parliamentary and media questions and this review were apparently prompted by the report of the auditor general, Karen Hogan, that revealed that the cost of the application used by ArriveCan had skyrocketed from an initial estimate of \$80,000 to apparently [more than \\$60 million](#). The auditor general concluded that there was a "glaring disregard (for) basic" principles of government procurement. She calculated that GC Strategies received [nearly \\$20 million](#) out of that \$60 million.

Ms. Hogan said she was unable to confer a precise amount because the official bookkeeping by the government for this project was the worst she had ever seen in her extensive professional career. GC Strategies is apparently a two-person company though it describes itself as an IT staffing firm. It is also came to light that the CEO of another related contractor on this account, David Yeo, [received millions of](#)

[dollars](#) in setting up ArriveCan and was a career public servant in the Department of National Defence until his suspension in late February.

The two-person GC strategies company, run by Kristian Firth and Darren Anthony, appears to have [received](#) over \$100 million in federal government contracts since 2011. Nothing should be prejudged, and there is intense curiosity for members of Parliament of all parties about who is responsible for this fiasco. The comptroller general said he was “deeply concerned” by the findings of the auditor general, and said he has ordered that all government heads of internal auditing review their rules to ensure that all appropriate controls are being enforced. He has given the departmental officials affected an inexplicably extended deadline of one year to report.

Both the comptroller general and the auditor general have concluded that regular procurement rules were not followed; neither has suggested that more or stricter rules are necessary. Mr. Huppé said “procurement is already complex enough.”

In hearings at the House of Commons public accounts committee, officials of the Treasury Board Secretariat were unable to say who had the duty to ensure that existing rules governing procurement and avoidance of conflict of interest had been followed. Liberal MP Iqra Khalid said that the two individuals at GC Strategies “were able to take \$100 million from our government starting in 2011 under the Harper government and then moved on to change their name and continue” to profit “from the procurement process. Either they were the most brilliant company in Canada and the world or something went wrong here.”

Emilio Franco, an executive of the Treasury Board Secretariat, explained to the skeptical committee that the way the process works is that the vendors to the government guarantee that in bidding for a contract they are not putting themselves in a real or perceived conflict of interest. This is the honour system. He allowed that in the case of Mr. Yeo, “Those measures may not have been followed.” Shortly after the hearing, the government’s procurement department announced

that it had suspended GC Strategies' security status. It had already, in November, [suspended the company](#) from participating in tenders by Public Service and Procurement Canada.

The suspect nature of these procurement arrangements is amplified by the fact that on several occasions the leader of the Official Opposition, Pierre Poilievre, asked the prime minister if he was going to investigate the ArriveCan application. Justin Trudeau said that he wished to find out what happened and promised that if there had been any wrongdoing it would be pursued. In furtherance of this, the Conservatives introduced a motion citing a number of questions that should be answered, and all of the other political parties carried the vote—against Liberal objections. This U-turn by the prime minister is not a confidence-builder, and since the NDP, the Bloc, and the Greens joined with the Conservatives on this issue, they do have the ability to elevate it into a confidence issue and defeat the government if it does not adhere to Trudeau's promise in Parliament to unearth the facts.

Again, it would be unjust to leap to conclusions, but if the bidding process was entirely appropriate and followed the allegedly exacting rules required, the burning question remains of why the program was such a failure. While it was in the works and after it was implemented, was impossible to find a single person who thought that ArriveCan was a good idea, and this investigation should not be allowed to be reduced to the persecution of a couple of people for failing to impose correct guidelines.

There are two distinct problems here: The country—the taxpayers—were bilked for an astonishing overrun to the original cost estimate. But more serious was the fact that the travelling public for an inexcusably long time had this fatuous and unspeakably annoying arrival process inflicted on them. The program was misconceived and the development of it was deeply flawed and hideously expensive. But even if it did come in on price and on time, it was a disaster, and the

country should find out who was responsible for it.

There is a long history of public accounts committees playing an important and sometimes politically decisive role when they bring to light improprieties and extravagances. In 1936, the 39-year rule of the Quebec Liberal Party was brought to an end when the leader of the opposition and founder of the [Union Nationale](#), Maurice Duplessis, grilled a series of ministers and senior public officials before the public accounts committee and deduced that the minister responsible for rural development workfare projects had charged the government \$10 for a pair of short pants which he wore when on inspection tours. The amount was not germane, but Duplessis turned it into a matter of such public ridicule that it was extremely damaging to the government.

And Duplessis administered the coup de grace when, on examining the clerk of the Legislative Assembly who was the brother of the long-serving Liberal premier of Quebec, [Louis-Alexandre Taschereau](#), he discovered that the premier's brother was in the habit of depositing to his own account and retaining all interest accrued to the Legislative Assembly and several agencies and ministries of the provincial government. He painstakingly extracted this fact and concluded with the question: "M. Taschereau, you have just said to this committee on your second appearance under oath the opposite of what you said in your first appearance under oath, and you have denied under oath that you ever said under oath what you said at your first appearance here. You are swearing that you did not swear what you did swear and you are swearing the reverse of what you have already sworn. Are you aware or unaware of your original testimony?"

Four Taschereau terms came to an abrupt end and the first of five Duplessis terms began. There is no reason to expect anything so dramatic to occur here, but over \$100 million to a two-person firm and substantial amounts to a serving senior federal government employee—apparently to set up programs that didn't work and inconvenienced huge numbers of people—deserve a much more serious analysis than the government seems happy to give it. It also smacks of the government's relations with WE Charity and the Kielburgers.

The public interest requires that the ArriveCan debacle be pursued to its conclusion and not whitewashed and forgotten.

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