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## Politics

April 11, 2005

### Are we scanded out?

**The latest Gomery shockers may not yield a spring election**

JOHN GEDDES

Just about everybody breathlessly described Jean Brault's testimony as explosive. Yet when Justice John Gomery partially lifted the publication ban that for several days prevented anyone reporting on what the former Montreal advertising executive told his inquiry, the boom last week on Parliament Hill was strangely muffled. What Brault described at the Montreal hearings was undeniably shocking: a pattern of kickbacks that saw his firm, Groupaction Marketing Inc., pay \$1.2 million to the Liberal party over five years, starting in 1997, in exchange for big federal contracts under the now-notorious sponsorship program (page 20). Even so, a cautious Stephen Harper said his Conservatives were not ready to force an election. Jack Layton said he needed time to listen to what Canadians were saying in coffee shops before deciding if his NDP favoured a spring campaign. Only Gilles Duceppe was primed to go to the polls, but his Bloc Québécois has been so buoyed by the Gomery effect in Quebec that it was ready to run long before Brault's sordid tale came out.

So Paul Martin's government seemed in no immediate danger. Minorities are supposed to be more vulnerable than this. Past ones have fallen over comparatively trivial matters, like the seemingly routine budget vote that felled Joe Clark's short-lived Tory regime in 1979. What's keeping Martin afloat now is largely the suspicion of many political strategists, particularly Conservatives, that Canadians have developed such thick skins when it comes to scandal that even the gross corruption described by Brault might bounce off. Airbus, Shawinigate, now the sponsorship affair -- who can keep track? And who's to say what's worth getting really angry over, and what is just dirty business as usual? "We've got the bar set so low, it's sad," said Manitoba MP Brian Pallister, reportedly among the Tories most willing to fight a snap election. "My fear is that the public will say, 'Well, this is just politics.' That hurts the honest politicians, including the honest politicians in the Liberal party."

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Sympathy for honest Liberals, though, was not being widely expressed by Conservatives. On the afternoon of April 7, when Gomery announced that he was allowing most of Brault's testimony to be reported, Harper was travelling in the same plane as Martin to Pope John Paul II's funeral. It was left to Tory Deputy Leader Peter MacKay to voice his party's predictable outrage -- but MacKay went a little beyond the predictable in his assault on the government. "There is a mountain of evidence," he said in the House, "that the Liberal government is involved in a criminal conspiracy of the like never seen in this country before." In the foyer of the Commons, Justice Minister Irwin Cotler denounced as "irresponsible" any attempt to draw broad conclusions about guilt from any piece of testimony before Gomery, who isn't scheduled to deliver his final report until late this year. "We cannot start engaging in collective indictments," Cotler fumed.

In fact, Liberals came close to doing a bit of collective indicting of their own. According to testimony at the inquiry, Groupaction had arranged for \$100,000 to be donated to the then governing Parti Québécois in 1997-98 to nail down a contract -- contrary to Quebec political financing laws. Martin didn't hesitate to gleefully allude to that in the House and try to drag the Bloc, allies of the separatist PQ, into the sponsorship mud. That thickening of the plot raised the prospect -- understandably offensive to many Quebecers -- that other Canadians might see this sort of scandal as somehow endemic to Quebec politics. Martin's Quebec lieutenant, Transport Minister Jean Lapierre, suggested the opposite theory -- that a very small circle is to blame. "Right now, for us, it looks like an isolated group of individuals who have abused the confidence of the rest of the party's base," Lapierre said.

With the question of election timing still very much up in the air, strategists for all the federal parties are making some delicate calculations. A guide to what the leaders have to consider:

**MARTIN:** The PM needs time to make his case -- over and over -- that this scandal unfolded on Jean Chrétien's watch, not his, and that he ordered the inquiry to clean it up. Gomery's final recommendations for how to prevent similar abuse in the future won't come until mid-December. The Liberals need to hold on until then. "How Paul Martin handles the findings of the inquiry will be more important than the findings themselves," says pollster Nik Nanos, president of SES Research. "He has to be prepared to hit the ground running, to act."



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**HARPER:** The Tory leader needs voters in Ontario, where he must make a breakthrough, to catch a bit of their Quebec neighbours' sponsorship outrage. But a veteran Ontario Tory organizer said that might not happen unless Martin, or figures close to him, are shown to have known about the skulduggery. "As long as there isn't a direct link to the Prime Minister, Ontario voters are probably willing to overlook it," he said. If Martin remains insulated, Harper's best hope might be to pull the election trigger in early November, when Gomery is slated to deliver his findings. Waiting until December, when Gomery is scheduled to make his final recommendations, would give Martin's Liberals a chance to score points by enacting whatever reforms the judge wants.

**DUCEPPE:** The Bloc leader is in perhaps the best, and yet most frustrating, position of all. Tacticians in all parties agree he would add to his current 54 seats in Quebec if an election was held anytime soon. But that's exactly why Harper is unlikely to co-operate by voting with the Bloc to bring down the Liberals. Still, minorities don't last forever, and disgust over the scandal is deep enough that Duceppe is likely to win big even if an election is delayed until, say, the spring of 2006. After that, many Quebec observers believe he might aspire to jump to Quebec City as the next Parti Québécois leader.

**LAYTON:** With just 19 MPs, the NDP leader is in the awkward position of lacking the votes in the House to wield much power in manoeuvring over election timing. His best hope is for sponsorship outrage to spread sufficiently to drive left-Liberal support to him. His worst fear: that the same outrage puts the Tories in position to form a government, pushing those vacillating left-tilting voters back to the Liberal fold out of fear of a Harper win, as happened in the dying days of last year's campaign.

Understanding how bad the sponsorship scandal was got a lot easier last week. But with the four party leaders pondering such different strategic considerations, guessing the date of the next election did not. One thing the Brault testimony changed: the shadow cast by the Gomery inquiry is now unlikely to lift during the life of this minority, no matter how long it lasts.

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