

Ready for more Adscam?

With the sponsorship scandal back in the news, the Tories are hoping Canadians haven't reached their saturation point just yet

Kady O'Malley, Macleans.ca | Apr 03, 2007 | 7:31 pm EST

OTTAWA - By **all appearances**, he's a long way from Canada. But whether he's aware of it or not, Jean Lafleur has sparked something of a sponsorship nostalgia trip back home.

The day after **news broke** that the former Quebec advertising executive had been charged with multiple counts of fraud for allegedly pocketing more than \$1-million in federal funds, the ghosts of Gomery reports past haunted the headlines. And from the Conservative government's perspective, that would appear to be a welcome development.

Responding to news of the warrant for Lafleur's arrest on Monday afternoon, Conservative MP Jason Kenney called it "regrettable" that no politicians had yet been "held accountable." And he stopped just short of linking the Liberal party to the \$40-million of "missing money" that Justice John Gomery had been unable to track down during his investigation.

"Mr. Justice Gomery concluded there's \$40-million, which he could not identify during his judicial inquiry into the sponsorship project," Kenney said. "Taxpayers are still wondering where that \$40-million went."

It wasn't the first time a Conservative has mused publicly about the possibility of pursuing legal action against the Liberals - or used the magic \$40-million number in doing so. Back in February, newly elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper assured reporters that his government "wasn't going to drop the matter."

In response to the debut speech from interim Liberal Leader Bill Graham, Harper complained that the Liberals had given "no indication as to when Canadians could expect to get back the tens of millions in taxpayer dollars that were "misappropriated."

Conservative MP Jeff Watson, meanwhile, wondered when Canadians could expect the Liberal party's cheque for \$40-million. And in May, **La Presse** reported that Harper had instructed government lawyers to start drafting a lawsuit against the Liberals for up to that amount.

Asked about the report, Harper refused to rule out such a move - saying only that his government would "review all legal avenues" to recover the money. And later, PMO spokesperson Dimitri Soudas **told** CanWest News that the government would "assume its responsibilities."

Rather anticlimactically, the government instead **added** two minor players to the complaint - neither of which were the Liberal party. And it added an additional \$7-million to the claim, bringing the total to just over \$62-million - which would include the \$40-million in unrecovered funds noted in the report.

Now, spurred on by the rather colourful tale of Lafleur - a wanted man who appears to have vanished without a trace from Canada and was last spotted in Costa Rica - the Tories may be regaining their zest for the issue. But before pressing it too far, they'll first have to determine whether there's any public appetite for it.

SES Research Chair and Maclean's 50 member Nik Nanos suggests we might have reached a saturation point. But it could still be useful to remind Canadians of how angry they were at the height of the scandal.

"There is a residual vulnerability for the Liberals," Nanos says. "Whenever something happens to remind Canadians, it brings up the question: How is the new Liberal leader and the party different from two years ago, when the sponsorship scandal broke loose?"

"It's not something that is top of mind for Canadians. But when it does come up, they think, 'Oh yeah, those are the guys who did that.' And the announcement [Monday] brings a sense of newness to the story, because the next question is whether there are any more announcements that are going to happen on this."

Still, Nanos thinks the Lafleur story alone won't be enough to revive it as an election issue. "The polling has shown that in the past, whenever there is a new twist in the story, it has a short-term negative impact - not a

long term sustainable hit," he says. "So to take advantage of that, the timing would have to be perfect. If this is the best they've got and the election isn't until this fall, it's not going to be enough."

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