

## Guest Column

# Canada's show trial whimpers to an end

*by Jim Duff, Editor, The Suburban*  
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The harder Paul Martin struggles to distance himself from the sponsorship scandal, the more Canadians lean toward thinking he played a key role in its making.

Last Thursday's Institute for Research on Public Policy/SES/CPAC survey indicated that over four in 10 Canadians (43 percent) believe Martin and former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien should both take responsibility for activities uncovered by the Gomery Commission. Another 29 percent said Martin alone should take responsibility, while only 16 percent said Chrétien should take the blame by himself.

Quebec voters were more likely to believe that former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien should take responsibility for the sponsorship scandal, while among Canadians outside of Quebec, this opinion flips. Canadians from outside of Quebec are more likely to believe that Martin should take responsibility when compared to Chrétien.

"The impact of the Gomery inquiry on the public perception of Martin should give political leaders pause," said SES President Nikita Nanos. "It appears that the best motives and a proactive, open approach are no guarantee of gaining public confidence."

So one wonders why Martin keeps hammering away at that message, as he did at last week's Liberal Party fundraiser at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. Martin repeated for the umpteenth time the message that the sponsorship issue --it's clearly Liberal policy to avoid referring to it as a scandal--was dealt with on his watch. The PM hit all the buzzwords "unacceptable...money badly used and badly spent...putting our house in order" and this golden oldie: "I am determined to get to the bottom of this. That is why our government established the Gomery Commission."

As Judge John Gomery settles down to write his report--all by himself, he assures us--inquiry junkies are of the general opinion that the report's conclusions will concentrate on how the process must be scandal proofed, rather than who did what, and who got the money.

Some things, like the role of Public Works Minister Alfonso Gagliano, were obvious from Day One. Gagliano was a loyal soldier who did what the PMO told him to do, whose only response to Chrétien's orders was "yes, boss." The idea of Gagliano setting up a rogue fundraising operation starring Beryl Wajsman and Joe Morselli out of sight of the Liberal Party of Canada's Quebec wing, is laughable to anyone who knows him and who has followed the testimony.

The corollary is true of Jean Brault, so sympathetically portrayed in the Quebec media as a whistleblower driven by repentance. Those of us who watched this carefully choreographed and beautifully scripted show trial unfold were struck early on by the impression that Brault was being allowed to make viciously libellous claims about some of the players under the inquiry's shield of privilege without the slightest attempt to test the evidence.

It's not our mandate to cross-examine the witnesses, the Gomery prosecutorial staff insisted time and again.

In the end, much of Brault's claims lay in tatters, contradicted by subsequent testimony. But little of that made the popular press in Quebec.

What also became obvious was the care taken by Gomery's inquisitors to ensure that nothing led directly to Chrétien, or to the Federal Liberal Agency for Canada. When Corbeil suggested that whenever the party's Quebec wing was running in the red, someone would pick up the phone and call John Rae --officially the special assistant to the office of the chairman of Power Corp., Gomery didn't go there. When Françoise Patry, the wife of MP Dr. Bernard Patry and personal secretary to Paul Desmarais and his wife, was asked who she was secretary to, the question was deftly batted aside.

In other words, noting was allowed to touch the inner ring, which surrounded--and continues to surround--the PMO.

What also became obvious as the show went on was how many people--including Martin's Quebec lieutenant Jean Lapierre--spoke freely of how the fate of Gomery's three co-accused, admen Brault and Paul Coffin and former deputy minister Chuck Guité, had already been decided. There was little suprise last week when Coffin pleaded guilty to a dozen charges that could conceivably earn him 10 years in jail; everybody knows he won't do 10 months. The fix was in.

I thought the true nature of the Gomery probe emerged during the last day, when Sylvain Lussier, the lawyer for the attorney-general, pressed Gagliano about some of the sponsorship deals he was personally involved in. For the first time in close to two years, Gagliano lost his temper, accusing Lussier of insulting the entire Italian-Canadian community. It was entirely uncharacteristic of the usually taciturn former minister and ambassador, but it was a reminder that when this is all over, most of the villains will be Canadians whose last names end in vowels.

That's why Canadians should have no sympathy for Martin or his vain struggle to free himself from the Adscam Tar Baby. The inquiry he mandated never had a mandate to come up with the truth.

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