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## **Talking About Ottawa: Fiscal Accountability**

**Elizabeth May**

**W**ith the current shut down of Parliament, the cry of 'accountability' is once again abroad in the land. This time it is directed at arguably the most unaccountable prime minister in Canadian history.

Six years ago, that untried Conservative Party leader led a fledgling party (created by the merger of Progressive Conservatives and Alliance party) into an election. In that 2004 election campaign a tenuous minority government went to the Liberal Party.

But within 18 months, that same Conservative leader took his party to government with a well-focused, disciplined campaign with one core message: 'demand accountability.' Stephen Harper's election in 2006 owed much to the surfacing of the Liberal sponsorship scandal.

Ironically, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin's reaction to the sponsorship scandal—anger at former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien on whose watch it had taken place—contributed to his defeat. Had he shrugged the scandal off he might have survived the election. But Martin was so outraged at the discovery that hundreds of thousands of dollars had been diverted to Liberal ad agencies and kick-back schemes under Jean Chretien that he established an investigation headed by John Gomery, focusing the nation's attention.

### **Accountability Since 2006**

Those who had hoped for real accountability—reduced access to lobbyists and a real commitment to meet electoral promises—have been gravely disillusioned.

The *Federal Accountability Act* was passed in Parliament, but omitted about 30 key measures that had been in the Prime Minister Harper's 2006 campaign pledge. In fact, the bill, once passed, actually removed the 'duty to act honestly' which had previously been in place for senior bureaucrats and Cabinet members.

Accountability has been since been ducked by ignoring bills passed by Parliament which the government never wanted (the bill to demand climate action) or which the government initially wanted and then found to be inconvenient (the fixed election date law).

### **Why Prorogation Again?**

The most recent prorogation of Parliament has been linked by many to the government's wish to shut down the hearings into allegations of torture of Afghan detainees.

Richard Colvin, that singularly decent federal civil servant, appeared on a subpoena to the committee. As a trusted and high-ranking member of Canada's foreign service in Washington, he hardly fits the 'whistle-blower' profile. He told the Parliamentary committee that those handed over by Canadian military to Afghan authorities were not necessarily combatants. They were taxi drivers, farmers, men at the wrong place at the wrong time. He testified it was a virtual certainty they would be tortured and that he passed this information to Ottawa. Last week his lawyer accused the government of seeking reprisals by refusing to pay his legal bills.

The full truth is even stranger and more Machiavellian. It turns out that when Colvin was first subpoenaed, a Justice Department lawyer offered to be his counsel. Knowing that his personal legal interests and those of the government might diverge, he immediately refused the offer.

Subsequently, justice lawyers claimed that, since he was once a client, all communications with Colvin going back to when he sent emails warning of torture were 'privileged.' So the production of the documents to prove Colvin was telling the truth is being blocked by the bogus claim that it would violate his solicitor-client privilege.

### **Still Using Taxpayer Money To Promote Political Parties**

Let's return to the kind of scandal where government mispends taxpayers' dollars to boost their electoral fortunes. This is an area where Stephen Harper's tactics make the Sponsorship Scandal look like a Sunday school picnic.

The abuse of MP householders, mailings paid for by the taxpayer, is being used to bombard voters with partisan propaganda. Giving up at getting some veto over the Conservative use of these fliers, the federal Liberals are now doing it too.

Millions upon millions of federal dollars were also spent last fall to urge voters not to allow the government's stimulus programme to be slowed—as if an election would do that. There

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has been zero accountability of the amount of money spent on advertizing.

The level at which accountability is currently being evaded would shock traditional conservatives. Demands to know the amount of money being spent to advertize the wonders of the stimulus programme fall on deaf ears. Martha Hall-Findley, Liberal MP, charged that the spending to orchestrate the last stimulus package update in September was one million dollars for one day alone. No government member rejected the claim.

### **Stimulus Creating Structural Deficit**

Last week I met with Kevin Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer. He has, quite rightly, pointed out that Canada faces a serious structural deficit. The Harper government denies it despite the fact that it is undeniable.

Nonetheless, the government stimulus package is being rolled out without any mechanism to trace if money is being spent on its intended goals.

Meanwhile, in the US, President Obama created web sites for the citizenry to trace every single project. When asked how Canada was tracing the flow of the billions, Transport Minister John Baird rejected calls for accountability. Incredibly, he stated that it was not the role of 'big government' to trace how the money was spent. How can it not be the role of government to make sure taxpayers' dollars are spent appropriately? Yet, relying on message over sense, he demonized the call for government accountability as 'big government' intrusiveness.

This is something of the tip of the iceberg. No doubt there have been other politicians whose actions in office would have earned their contempt when they were in Opposition. But Stephen Harper's cynical rejection of accountability has taken such hypocrisy to new heights.

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