



OPEN GOVERNMENT

A national branding program for dummies and our national collective memory loss on the ads scandal

By KEN RUBIN

Repressing memories about Canadian government advertising and sponsorship campaigns seems to be a disease affecting many in Ottawa, including the national media.

It had been fairly common knowledge that government advertising money was largely spent in lucrative media placements, including to large payments to Liberal-friendly ad agencies. The \$100-million to third-party agents in the \$250-million sponsorship program from 1997 to 2001 was just a small amount of the money dished out over the years, and part of a much larger-scale system of political and bureaucratic patronage.

Yet it's taken the Auditor-General — after the events reports, and journalistic and access to information diggings — to refresh faded memories of recent sponsorship activities. There have also been selective leaks of information along with people coming out of the woodwork claiming they tried to stop rampant patronage.

Beyond the revealing glimpses of corruption, what's also becoming clear is the bitter internal Liberal Party war between the Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien camps.

But don't expect some of the key foot soldiers to tell much. That's apparent from former public works minis-

ter Gagliano's testimony before the Commons Public Accounts Committee last week.

The best that can be expected is they'll point the finger at others or in other directions. Take Chuck Guité, the former director of the sponsorship/ad program branch, who is supposed to be due back before the Public Accounts Committee.

One recent media story has him complaining back in 1995 to the PCO/PMO (including as well to CTV) that the then finance minister Paul Martin had hired as his department's communications firm, Earncliffe, without a valid competition. Somehow, though, it's hard to see Mr. Guité as the boy scout whistleblower telling his bosses that it was someone else who broke the rules.

And the media are hardly innocent bystanders since much of the funds ended up within their own coffers for ad placements. Buried, for instance, in early 1998, among the sponsorship money, and something I discovered under access to information and which was reported, was a rushed, over-the-telephone \$4.5-million dollar contract award that permitted Groupaction to place federal commercials on the CBC during the Nagano, Japan, Winter Olympics.

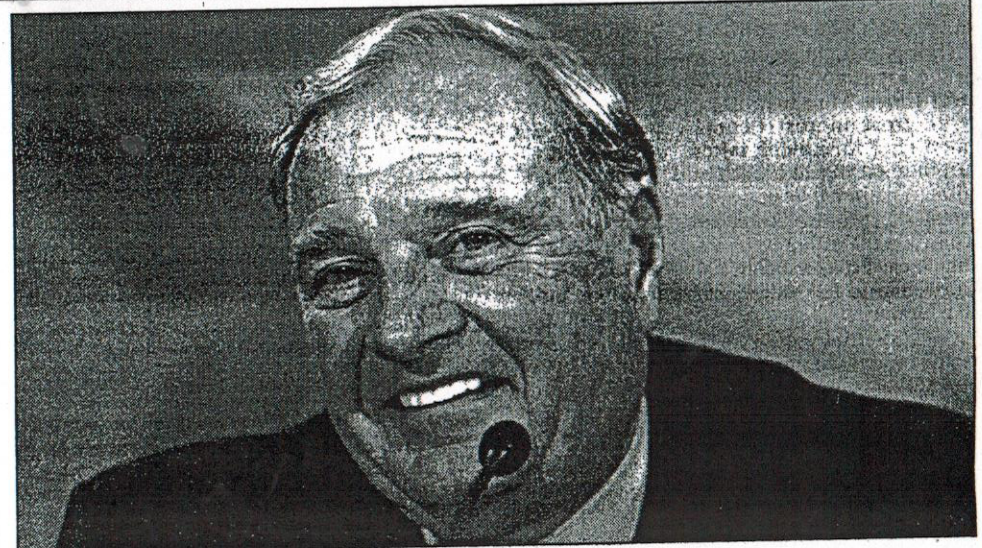
The pitch for placing the ads originated with the CBC. But it was

Groupaction and Media IDA Vision who made \$504,000 and \$126,000, respectively, in commissions to do the CBC placement job which the government could have done directly.

The sponsorship system worked right under the noses of journalists, but passed the smell test. For instance, as found under access, and mentioned in an alternate publication, in May, 2001, Compass Communications got the go-ahead for a mere \$5,000 commission to arrange for a federal government profile at the annual Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ) conference held that month in St. John's, Nfld. The deal included verbal and written recognition by CAJ of the federal sponsorship.

Compass's one-and-a-half page post-mortem report claimed they had succeeded in raising the profile of the Canadian government at the CAJ conference. That's because somehow this contributed to the conference's objective to "deliver this important service (furthering quality journalism) to over 250 participants."

Both the public inquiry and the Commons Public Accounts Committee are up against a code of silence and selectivity. Similarly, trying to get at the truth through access requests at the time back in the eighties and the nineties on the ad and polling contracts



Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

A HYPER SELL: PRIME MINISTER PAUL MARTIN IS HAVING A HARD TIME CONVINCING CANADIANS THAT HIS OR ANY GOVERNMENT CAN OR WILL OPERATE CRONY-FREE.

and about the workings of the Canadian Unity Office and Public Works, Communications Coordination Services Branch was mostly met with many delays and exemption claims.

Follow-up calls resulted in terse and mainly unfriendly or hostile utterances from some of those now named. There were indications even then that not many records existed as much as was done orally and away from prying eyes.

More recently, in getting some sponsorship data and attempting to get a closer look at the now defunct Communications Canada, I was not exactly met with open disclosure, either. While some documentation did result in a series of sto-

ries, much is still being withheld. For instance, the time verification audits done on third-party agent's "work" are still secret.

What makes the ad/sponsorship scandal so compelling is that it drags down icons from the likes of the foundation on the Bluenose Ship, to VIA Rail, to the NHL. And despite his best efforts, Prime Minister Paul Martin is having a hard time convincing Canadians his or any government can or will operate crony-free.

The now-discredited program was all about hyper-branding Canada and rewarding political friends. But what is especially a downer is it ends up not making those sup-

pose to be vigilant on such matters look especially good.

It might then be wishful thinking to expect that this Canadian government will really want to have its communications housed in an agency called Accountable Canada. It would be a responsive agency that remembers Canadians want just the straight facts promptly available, backed up by better services, without the enhanced pork-barrelling, thank you very much.

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