

## Editorial

# The Callbeck Betrayal

## The Death-knell of accountability

By Sean McQuaid

*Editor's Note: The following is a revised version of a commentary I first produced for another publication this past summer. Sadly, its content remains all-too topical.*

I remember when this province had two political parties-- three if you count the NDP (and Lord knows most folks still don't). We had Liberals and Conservatives, and in my naive younger days I saw little difference between them or need for either of them. Same suits, different colour schemes. Elections, like turning seasons, were inevitable but of seemingly little significance, since the politicians all did more or less the same thing and sooner or later the runners-up would get their turn at bat and a chance to prove their predecessors wrong. It was a typical imperfect democracy, and like many folks I took it for granted.

Then, one day, the Conservatives disappeared. That in itself doesn't bother me that much, but their departure meant the provincial opposition disappeared with them. Therein lay a spooky truth. We had a government that could now feel secure in governing with impunity. The Ghiz Liberal government enjoyed a long and successful mandate, and when Ghiz resigned, his replacement (Catherine Callbeck) rode his government's popular momentum to an even more overwhelming victory in the last election. Since then, P.E.I. has had an opposition of one (PC leader Pat Mella), despite the Conservatives' winning a sizeable portion of the popular vote. The Liberals won by varying margins in every other riding, and it is here that our problems begin.

Even prior to the last election, the Liberals had become quite comfortable. They had little serious competition, a strong mandate to govern, and years of popular success under their belts. When the beloved Ghiz left, the Liberals hopped and agreed upon a successor with appropriate experience and profile-- Catherine Callbeck-- and more or less proclaimed her leader in a 'campaign' that featured little fuss, muss, or fanfare. Even Callbeck, typically, seemed unexcited. Still, not long afterward, Callbeck led her re-tread Liberal government to an incredible victory that has left them virtually unchallenged in their authority. Chalk it up to provincial apathy or fear of change or long-established Liberal popularity-- whatever the

reason, they are firmly entrenched as the only political power in the province, and with their federal counterparts now ruling the country there seems even less chance of the Liberal dynasty toppling.

Whether or not you support the Liberals or their record, it is undeniable that P.E.I. is a less democratic place than it once was. An effective, significant opposition is the key to an effective democracy so that the government, for good or ill, will be monitored and questioned regarding its activities, with an understanding that they can be opposed and eventually replaced if they have acted wrongly or contrary to the will of the people. With virtually no opposition left on P.E.I., though, the Liberals are showing an increasingly callous complacency. The province is theirs to do with as they will, or so they seem to believe.

This smugness is nowhere more apparent or appalling than in the government's 7.5% 'solution' (has the same comfortingly euphemistic ring as Hitler's "Final Solution," doesn't it?), an attempt at deficit reduction by slashing public servants' salaries (in violation of signed collective bargaining agreements) to the tune of 7.5%. While genocide and cost-cutting are far from comparable in and of themselves, Callbeck's approach resembles Hitler's insofar as they both legislated into effect an otherwise illegal action that discriminated against a select segment of the population during tough economic times. The difference, though thankfully major, is only in degree. Like Nazi

Germany's Jews, P.E.I.'s public servants are being made to shoulder the blame-- and the burden-- for the entire electorate's ills.

The government remains blissfully oblivious to the insanity of this initiative, but it is indeed irrational. If P.E.I.'s and Canada's economies are to ever fully recover, the key is in good jobs, the sustainable economic well-being of the general populace. Cutting the wages of a huge sector of the workforce takes money from consumers that would otherwise have fuelled the economy through purchasing.

Worse yet, cutting financing to the public sector and its employees hurts all citizens by inevitably eroding the services we rely on. Health care and education, for instance, are not expendable "luxuries"-- they are indispensable elements of our society. As these go, so go our standard of living and the

well-being and employability of our potential workforce.

Despite this, the Liberals' 7.5% "solution" shows a reckless disregard for the public service. Local health professionals, long tempted to greener pastures, have been given still more incentive to leave by a government policy that essentially devalues them. Our equally indispensable public school teachers have fared even worse. Prior to this they were already among the lowest-paid educators in the country, with the lowest education funding in the nation. The 7.5% salary slash, combined with education cutbacks, promises to set education on P.E.I. back by years. Teachers, for their part, are mad as hell at finding themselves more grossly undervalued (and

underpaid) than ever. They voted in favour of striking if need be, and joined other public servants in some of the largest and most bitter anti-government demonstrations in P.E.I. history. Speaking briefly before hundreds of angry protestors, Callbeck only went so far as to magnanimously recognize their right to protest while assuring them that the 7.5% solution was their only choice and the government was sticking with it. End of story.

Ours is a government so smugly self-assured that they brush aside public outrage without fear of consequences, to say nothing of considering the possibility of error in their reasoning. If the government has decided they can no longer afford the services of the public sector, which is in effect what they are saying through these cuts, one option suggested by some public servants would be to cut days from their work year rather than instigate a dangerous trend of devalued work and bargaining betrayal via salary cuts. Better still, it would be refreshingly courageous on the government's part if they were to attempt a solution to our society's economy which involved society as a whole and did not isolate specific groups as scapegoats. Minor tax increases across the board would be politically unpopular, but they'd be a heck of a lot more effective and fair than this craven 7.5% nonsense. Moreover, economics and fair play aside, the 7.5% "solution" is just plain wrong. It sets a shameful and ominous precedent for a government to break signed legal agreements with the labour force. Were anyone but the government to do this, it would be illegal. Regardless, it is a crime.

The 7.5% "solution" is a destructive initiative which will ultimately benefit no one, and the sooner the government owns up to that, the better it will be for all of us. Regardless, it seems absolute power has corrupted the Liberals absolutely, and we can only hope responsible political forces-- which can only come from a responsible electorate-- will arise to oppose or replace them. As voters, remember the Liberals' record and make them answer for it in the ballot box in the years to come. Therein lies the only hope for accountable government left to our province.

Sean McQuaid  
Editor



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