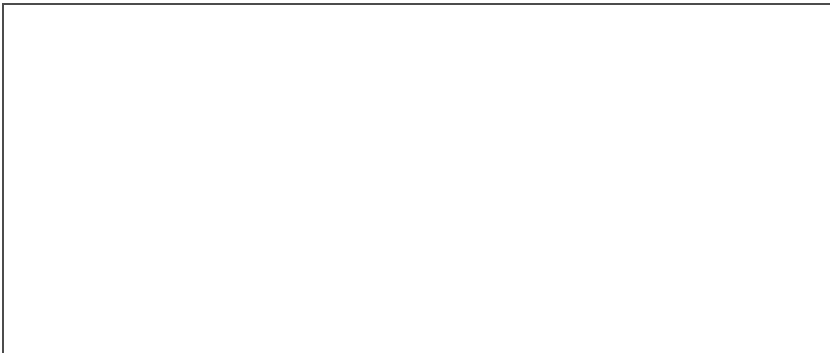


CANADA

What lies beneath Quebec's scandals

COYNE: The factors behind the province's penchant for money politics

By Andrew Coyne
September 24, 2010



JONATHAN HAYWARD/ JACQUES DESCHENES/CP

No, Quebec is not the only province where political scandal sometimes erupts. Governments and business have been corrupting each other across this country since pre-Confederation days. But in no other province does it feel quite so... inevitable. British Columbia has thrown up the odd chiselling premier, Atlantic Canada is famously steeped in patronage, but there is no comparison to the kind of octopussal industry-union-mob-party configuration lurking just below the surface of politics in Quebec. Toronto may have been scandalized by the cronyism of the Mel Lastman era, but only in Montreal would a candidate for mayor publicly confess to being afraid for his life. When a senior adviser to Ontario premier David Peterson was forced to resign after it was revealed he had accepted a refrigerator from a party donor with ties to a developer, puzzled Montrealers phoned their friends in Toronto, asking, 'What was in the fridge?' "

The roots of corruption run deep in the province. Scrounging for funds to

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King saw fit to put Jacques Bureau in charge of the customs department, with comically debauched results: the scandal that ultimately led to the King-Byng affair.

Fighting corruption has often proved the best opportunity for it. The young Maurice Duplessis made his name denouncing the venality of Louis-Alexandre Taschereau's government (Taschereau was eventually forced from office on charges of abusing public funds, the third Quebec premier to suffer this indignity), much as Brian Mulroney rose to fame for his work on the Cliche commission—and just as Jean Chrétien came to power promising to clean up the mess left by Mulroney. Sponsorships, Shawinigate, the ghostly voters of the Gaspésie, Airbus: there's a pattern here, and it's useless to deny it.

What explains Quebec's unusual susceptibility to money politics? Deeply entrenched deference to authority? A worldly Catholic tolerance of official vice? There is no grand unified theory: at different times and in different situations, different forces have come into play. Nevertheless, a few broad factors emerge:

Power corrupts, but so does impotence. Healthy political cultures are marked by contestability: results are unpredictable, success is incremental, and neither victory nor defeat are ever far from view. But the tendency, in federal politics, for Quebecers to throw their support to one party or another *en bloc*—and the province's outsized importance, therefore, in deciding elections—has given rise to a peculiar set of pathologies.

On the one hand, the Liberal party's decades-long dominance in Quebec contributed to the usual habits of abuse that accompany too much familiarity with power. On the other, the Tories' equally long history of futility in the province made them all too willing to do almost anything to break through—and made them vulnerable, when they finally did, to every main-chancer that walked through their doors.

People do the worst things for the best reasons. In healthy political cultures, politics is at least tangentially about ideological differences. Then again, it's still only politics: it's not war. But in the last five decades, what Quebecers call “the national question” has more or less shoved normal ideological debates off the table, whether at the federal, provincial or even municipal level.

With the very survival of the country—or the birth of a new one—at stake, politics in Quebec took on, even more than usual, a wartime mentality: it became all too easy to justify to oneself, or to others, practices that might othe

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The scandal is what's legal. Outright corruption, as Michael Kinsley's aphorism suggests, is only the tip of the ethical iceberg. People in politics are given to seeking refuge behind the law: so long as you do not actually commit a crime, you haven't done anything wrong. Mere patronage or pork-barrelling is excused, so long as you don't actually pocket the money.

In any case, it's a false distinction. Once you get in the habit of spending the public's money as if it were your own, it's all too easy to forget whose money it really is. And, ethical standards having been so easily breached, you may find the guard rail of legality incapable of braking your momentum.

This is all the more likely if politicians are operating in a general climate of public acceptance of such activities. The long "bidding war," as Brian Crowley has called it, for Quebecers' affections—federalists versus separatists, Ottawa versus Quebec City—educated Quebec voters, already used to Duplessis-style bossism, to expect such "booty," even to demand it.

Moreover, the distended role of the state in the economy under the Quebec Inc. model, its heavy use of subsidies and other tools of intervention, created a strong incentive to win the favour of those in power, by fair means or foul. Indeed, the state is not the only example of centralized power in Quebec: big government, big business, big labour—the enormous megaprojects of which all three are inordinately fond—all maximize the potential for improper collusion and blurring of lines. Even the crime syndicates seem more concentrated.

One other factor must be mentioned. Every society has its critics: successful ones thrive on them. But constructive criticism in Quebec, given the francophone majority's perception of itself as an embattled minority, all too often leads to a closing of the ranks against what is invariably described as "Quebec-bashing." If from outside, it is put down to ignorance of Quebec's particularity; if from a non-francophone Quebecer, a failure to identify with the goals and values of the majority; if from a francophone, a traitorous readiness to advance on the backs of his fellows. One half expects to hear the same in this case.

CLARIFICATION: *The cover of last week's magazine, with the headline "The Most Corrupt Province in Canada," featured a photo-illustrated editorial cartoon depicting Bonhomme Carnaval carrying a briefcase stuffed with money. The cover has been criticized by representatives of the Carnaval de Québec, of which Bonhomme is a symbol.*

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Maclean's is a great supporter of both the Carnaval and of Quebec tourism. Our coverage of political issues in the province will do nothing to diminish that support.

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WORLD

Why sanctions over the Ukraine invasion won't stop Putin

Terry Glavin: Xi Jinping has the Russian leader's back as the two advance the authoritarian political model around the world

By Terry Glavin
February 26, 2022



Ukraine

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Europe aimed at the subjugation and takeover of a NATO-backed democracy, you might want to consider the findings of an exhaustive, data-driven study of the meteoric rise of police states—and the 16-year retreat of democracy worldwide—released this week.

The **Freedom House study** also helps explain why China's Xi Jinping, Putin's key ally in foreign relations and the United Nations Security Council, is going out of his way to give contradictory and seemingly ambivalent responses to Putin's belligerence in Ukraine, as though he were just hedging his bets: Yes to Ukraine's sovereignty, yes to Putin's invasion. But only three weeks ago, Xi unambiguously endorsed Putin's foreign "policies" and his professed grievances against NATO in a historic, 5,300-word manifesto the two autocrats jointly authored and published, setting out their vision for a new world order.

A non-partisan American institute that has been tracking these things since 1941, Freedom House concludes, in a nutshell, that the world is dividing in two, and the dictators are winning.

"The global order is nearing a tipping point," it says, "and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail."

In the Moscow-Beijing manifesto, published on the eve of Putin's hero's welcome at the Winter Olympics opening ceremonies in China, you could say Putin and Xi agree with the Freedom House analysis, and they're downright chipper about the authoritarian model they're advancing all over the world.

It has become commonplace to raise the spectre of the Cold War now that the "rules-based international order" is crumbling and the regimes of theocrats, kleptocrats and Dear Leader cults are in the ascendant from Tehran to Caracas and Minsk. It's an imperfect analogy—the apparatchiks of the Cold War weren't often welcome guests in the parlours of democracy's capitalist legislators. But Xi and Putin are content to double down on the analogy and take it further: what they've got going on between them, they say, is better than back in the days before the Berlin Wall came crashing down.

In this new world, "inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to [the] political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits," the manifesto boasts, adding, "there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." So, however robust the NATO capitals' new tranches of economic and targeted sanctions against Russia might appear, no dealings are "forbidden" to Xi

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dealings with Russian entities in the new sanctions of this past week, nothing is off limits to Beijing. This presents a particular awkward set of challenges to the NATO countries, especially for countries like Canada.

The sanctions Prime Minister Trudeau announced this past week are mostly cut and pasted from the American and British lists of the individuals, entities and corporate bodies that we're all now forbidden to have dealings with. But as just one example, CNPC, the main buyer in the new China-Russia oil and gas arrangement, holds about \$1 billion worth of Canadian oil properties through its various subsidiaries and spin-offs.

This is a bit awkward, and for Beijing, too. It should come as no surprise that, while Xi and Putin endorsed and affirmed one another's foreign policy benchmarks, Ukraine is not explicitly mentioned in their manifesto. Taiwan is—Russia agrees with the People's Republic of China's baseless claim that the thriving island democracy has no sovereignty of its own and is merely a possession of the Chinese Communist Party.

But Beijing is incessantly hectoring liberal democracies for noticing its brutal occupation of Tibet and its outrages in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, citing China's sovereignty in its routine outbursts. So Beijing has lately been saddled with the awkward propaganda challenge of squaring the circle of its recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty with its endorsement of Putin's right to do whatever he likes to Ukraine.



Putin and Xi meet on Feb. 4 for the start of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. They published their manifesto on the eve of the Games' opening ceremony. (Alexei Druzhinin/Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Meanwhile, the dictators' forces fan out around the globe, not just in the shabby fatigues of proxy armies and the crisp uniforms of military attachés. There are all those dapper-suited business executives from

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Russia's giant car-sharing service. Former Finnish prime minister Esko Aho has now resigned his directorship of Sherbank, Russia's largest bank. Former Austrian chancellor Christian Kern has just bolted from the Russian rail company RZD. Former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder appears to be sticking with Rosneft, however, and former French prime minister François Fillon appears to be keeping his seat on the Sibur petrochemicals conglomerate.

In these comfortable sinecures, awkward questions about torture chambers, mass murders and ethnic cleansings are not fit for polite company.

And that's just one way that full democracies and fledgling democracies have been backsliding so dramatically. Freedom House notes that 60 countries worldwide have suffered democratic declines just in the past year. "As of today, some 38 per cent of the global population live in Not Free countries," the Freedom House report found, "the highest proportion since 1997." Only about a fifth of the world's people now live in free countries.

"Democracy is in real danger all over the globe," says Freedom House president Michael Abramowitz. "Authoritarians are becoming bolder, while democracies are back on their heels. Democratic governments must rally to counter authoritarian abuses and support the brave human rights defenders fighting for freedom around the world."

And now those freedom fighters are facing Russian tanks in Ukraine.

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