
PREFACE

On February 10, 2004, I was asked to preside over the Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities of the Government of Canada. I really did not know what I was getting into. All I knew about the problems that were the subject of the Report of the Auditor General was what I had read in the newspapers and seen on television. Like other Canadians I had been shocked to read and to hear of such mismanagement of a government program and waste of public funds. One of the reasons I accepted the appointment was that I was curious “to get to the bottom” of the situation, and I believed that a Commission of Inquiry was an excellent method of learning the truth of what had happened.

The Report that follows chronicles a depressing story of multiple failures to plan a government program appropriately and to control waste—a story of greed, venality and misconduct both in government and advertising and communications agencies, all of which contributed to the loss and misuse of huge amounts of money at the expense of Canadian taxpayers. They are outraged and have valid reasons for their anger.

With the vital assistance of a talented and hard-working team of lawyers and forensic accountants, my role as Commissioner has been to investigate and report on the facts, and to attribute blame where the facts lead to that conclusion. It is not within my jurisdiction to make findings of civil or criminal responsibility, for the very good reason that the Commission's Inquiry was not a trial, even though it had many of the characteristics of a judicial process, using lawyers and rules of legal procedure. None of the persons and organizations which are criticized in the Report, directly or by implication, had the advantages that our legal system gives to a defendant in a civil or criminal trial, so no one should jump to the conclusion that someone has been found guilty of an infraction, or was civilly responsible for what was done.

One of the disadvantages of a public inquiry is that it may seem that justice has been done. This perception is misleading for the reason I have just given, and also for another reason: the dramatic revelations at public inquiries and the media attention given to them tend to distort reality and to make the misconduct that the inquiry uncovers appear to be more widespread than it really was. I fear that that has occurred in this case.

Because of the sensational nature of some of the evidence presented at the Commission's hearings, the publicity given to it, and the political context in which the Inquiry took place, the impression may have been created that in Canada the administration of public affairs by the federal government is generally careless, incompetent, and motivated by improper considerations. People may also be persuaded that the persons involved in Canadian political life are inspired by improper motives, and unscrupulous.

Let me suggest that the Inquiry proves the contrary. Without diminishing the importance of the findings of impropriety and wrongdoing in the Report, the evidence presented reveals that, in general, the administration of government programs by the federal bureaucracy is competent and praiseworthy, a conclusion that has been emphasized by the Auditor General herself.

Let me also suggest that a system of government that would impose upon itself a searching inquiry by an independent commissioner, armed with the authority to compel the production of incriminating documentation from

the public administration and able to subpoena witnesses from every level of society, with a far-reaching mandate to investigate and report on matters that could prove to be embarrassing to the Government itself, is proof that our democratic institutions are functioning well and objectively. There are very few countries in the world where an inquiry commissioner has the power to summon the sitting Prime Minister and his predecessor, to be examined under oath concerning their administration of public affairs and their involvement in what is publicly referred to as a scandalous affair. The fact that the Inquiry has been held demonstrates that in this country persons at even the highest levels of government are accountable for their actions, not only to Parliament but also to the citizenry.

There is no reason for the public's confidence in the integrity of our democratic institutions to be shaken. In the administration of the Sponsorship Program, certain government officials failed to meet the high standards of ethical behaviour that our laws and traditions expect, and political interference in the Program and in the advertising activities of the government resulted in deviations from acceptable standards. The persons responsible for these irregularities have been identified and reproached for their errors and misconduct. The procedure for uncovering wrongdoing is ponderous and expensive, but in the long run it works fairly well. Canadians should not forget that the vast majority of our public officials and politicians do their work honestly, diligently and effectively, and emerge from this Inquiry free of any blame.

On a personal note, I have attempted in the Report to use plain language, accessible to Canadians in all walks of life, and free from legalese and bureaucratic jargon. My intent has been to write using terms that anyone can understand, in the belief that the citizens whose interests were betrayed by the persons responsible for the "sponsorship scandal" are entitled to know and understand what occurred. Any attempt to summarize all the evidence that was presented would have resulted in a Report so long and detailed that it would be read by no one, so I have opted to report on what I consider to be the most important facts, and to leave the rest to scholars and the like, who are able, if they wish, to read all of the transcriptions and to examine the volumes of exhibits.

Since the use of acronyms in the government is very prevalent, I have had a table prepared of those acronyms and abbreviations that appear frequently in the Report. As well, there are two annexes. One is a table listing the names of each individual of importance who is mentioned in the Report, with a brief description of his or her position and role in the matters which are described in the Report. The other Annex is a chronology of events during the period under review. The Appendices include the most important documents that readers may wish to consult.