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Waiting for Mr. Clean

Paul Martin, thank goodness, is promising that the bad old days of Liberal waste and corruption are over. He says he will cut taxes and spending, and deliver value for money. He will somehow make the West feel better about Ottawa. He will reform Parliament, and close the "democratic deficit."

Let's hope so. Consider these news stories from the past week or so.

There was the case of Charles Boyer, former assistant to Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, who burned through \$28,000 in two years by eating out three or four times a day on the public tab. Far from being fired, he is now a lobbyist who makes a living connecting paying clients with his former boss.

Then we learned about Pierre Theberge, director of the national art gallery. In the five years since Chretien appointed him, he has racked up personal expenses of \$600,000. Among his more notable achievements was a \$1-million art show he funded in the prime minister's riding of Shawinigan this summer. (This is in addition to the \$1.8 million Ottawa spent on some sort of equestrian multimedia spectacle in Shawinigan this month.)

As well, we have the ongoing scandal of Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson spending \$1 million touring northern Europe with 60 left-liberal friends for no evident reason except that they can and want to.

We learned last week that the new deputy minister of Public

Works, David Marshall, has formally warned his employees to clean up their act. In July the department was forced to re-tender a \$1-billion contract it had awarded to Royal LePage. An internal fraud investigation concluded there had been a potential conflict of interest serious enough that they cancelled the whole thing.

Also in July, a Public Works payroll specialist working at RCMP headquarters was charged with 10 counts each of fraud and theft for allegedly paying himself \$250,000 illegally. Meanwhile, RCMP are investigating two other employees and several companies for paying for reports that were never written. Last week we learned that the RCMP are also investigating the federal Liberal Party's Quebec wing.

(And let's not forget Auditor-General Sheila Fraser's scathing indictment of Public Works officials last spring for breaking "nearly every rule in the book" in the awarding of culture and recreation grants, especially in Quebec.)

This Tuesday we learned that Liberals, Tories, NDP and Bloc MPs (but not the Alliance) support a \$30-million plan to give each MP \$100,000 in pocket-change to hand out to constituency groups (amateur hockey clubs, environmental initiatives, women's shelters, etc.). Why? Because this is how they do things in Quebec provincially. If Martin lets the idea go ahead, it's how we'll do things nationally as well.

But now we're to believe this is all in the past. Martin told reporters after his leadership ratification on

Monday, "This was a vote for different ways of doing things. It's very, very important to understand just what a fundamental shift in the way the government is going to operate is really going to occur over the course of the months."

It would be very, very important if within this impenetrable bafflegab there is an actual plan to bring in a lot of new people and a new attitude. And maybe there is. But keep in mind that Martin has brought 90% of the old party along with him. Keep in mind as well that Martin himself was at the cabinet table when all these scandals, and dozens of others, were going on.

Not to be a pessimist, but I suspect that the public attitude which pervades Ontario and Quebec also pervades the Liberal Party. It's the complacent attitude that nothing is fundamentally wrong with the system.

I expect we'll hear some catchy new phrases and slogans for a while, but the ship will continue on its previous course. Despite the brave talk, as long as Ontario and Quebec remain loyally Liberal, Paul Martin has no need and no mandate to change anything.

- Link Byfield

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