

## **So Now Who's Corrupt?**

North American corruption has of late been prominent in news coverage. In the United States, recent pertinent events have included the conviction of Congressman Randy 'Duke' Cunningham on corruption charges and the indictment of Senator Tom DeLay on money laundering and conspiracy charges. Hurricane Katrina exposed its own share of government ineptitude. In Canada, the election soon to come has been blamed on corruption.

If the sums of money mentioned at the Gomery Inquiry had been misappropriated in some 'developing' countries, the institutions concerned would have come to a perfect standstill. It is the beggars belief that this Country of Canada was humming along, business as usual, churning out another surplus when all this happened. The country did not even miss the money. I mean, hospitals were still stocked with medicine, the roads were still paved, and if you called 911, a fire engine promptly came (or two if you live in Peterborough).

Heavier coffers definitely help to obscure corruption. In 2004, Toronto had revenues of roughly CDN\$3 billion for a population of roughly 4.6 million people. Meanwhile, Kenya, a country of 30 million people, had to make do with revenues of US\$2.89 billion this fiscal year. There is much less to go round, let alone to spare for corrupt purposes. Poverty is therefore a major factor to consider. Powerful, poorly paid civil servants are in a position to demand bribes in exchange for essential services.

But that's the difference between rich and poor, someone will say, so quit whining. Fair enough.

British ambassador to Kenya, Sir Edward Clay, stung some powerful Kenyan ears when he accused Kenyan officials of "behaving like gluttons" and "vomiting on the shoes" of donor countries. Ambassadors from 'developed' countries have a penchant for swiftly denouncing corruption in the countries of their posting. However, when these wealthy countries misbehave, there is no one to rap them on the knuckles. Nobody will impose economic sanctions on the United States because they entered Iraq on flawed intelligence, or because of Richard Nixon's antics. Nobody will withhold badly needed development aid from Canada because money went missing on the Liberals' watch. Who ever did, and who now holds the rich nations accountable?

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In stopping corruption, it is far more important to have effective checks and balances, and strong, revered institutions. It is these institutions that 'developed' countries possess, and 'developing' countries lack. Where a political system has been imposed from without, where the leaders are not elected to do the declared will of citizens, there is always a risk that the corrupt shall be cozy.

In Africa, as Machiavelli advised in *The Prince*, colonial masters often collaborated with minorities and oppressed majority ethnic groups. The Belgians collaborated with the Tutsi against the Hutu in Rwanda, setting the stage for events we know all too well. Smarting from colonial folly, many fledgling nations viewed federal constitutions with suspicion. Arguments against federal governments in African countries have included the need to enhance national unity, and the expense, especially in smaller countries. In Africa, Nigeria, Comoros and Ethiopia are the exception to this rule. The ethnic fervour that a regional government might have channelled into development had therefore to find expression elsewhere.

While political loyalty in Western countries tends to pan out along left wing, right wing, or issue-based fault lines, tribal grouping in African countries is a big factor in deciding who gets voted in. Where political loyalties are based on ethnicity more than anything else, jostling for position has historically meant trying to capture the vote of a certain ethnic group. Doing that means winning over the ethnic figurehead. People want their 'son' elected to Parliament and made a Minister. This ensures his community is either favoured, or not overlooked, in the distribution of national resources. So if one politician is acknowledged as the undisputed leader of an ethnic group, that ethnic group will vote for him with unswerving loyalty, whichever party he may join. Such a leader wields enormous power. While tribalism is outwardly shunned as a vice, inwardly people are fiercely tribal. This creates fertile ground for corrupt dealings.

'Developed' countries have had the peace, quiet and geopolitical privacy to work things out, make their mistakes and learn from them. 'Developing' nations have had no such luxury. While many rich nations are quick to demand strong institutions in 'developing' countries, few are ready to acknowledge that maturing as a nation takes time. The English had to kill their King in 1649. The French had to storm the Bastille in 1789. The Americans had to fight a civil war in 1861. The Germans had to fight one, then two wars by 1945. Most African countries were not even independent by then.

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Right now we may be mired in corruption and poverty and ignorance and disease. But we will learn from these and emerge all the stronger for them. Have a care, rich nations, and come off the high horse. Once you were young nations too.

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