

'Tis the season of scandal

We have just learned that the third Mayor in Quebec has resigned amidst allegations of corruption and fraud, and there is every indication that more may follow. In Ontario in the past two weeks we have had one mayor criminally charged and one mayor ordered from office stemming from a conflict of interest investigation, both without a Charbonneau Commission. This is a strange season indeed.

One common theme in many such scandals is a long running sense of entitlement on the part of those finally caught. From what they say it becomes clear that in their minds, the rules that apply to everyone else do not apply to them. When announcing his resignation as Mayor of Mascouche, Mr. Marcotte was reported in the Trait d'union to have said: "What was Mascouche 22 years ago? I was the mastermind of the city's development." Even if it is true that he raised Mascouche from nothingness singlehandedly, it is all too easy to rationalize away the alleged sins which led to his resignation

And then we have Toronto's Rob Ford. Leaving aside the most recent conflict of interest findings, I recall an earlier issue involving Mr. Ford's fund-raising techniques for "an arms-length" community foundation. It was reported in 2010 that he solicited donations from Toronto developers and lobbyists in exchange for his support while a public official. At the time Mr. Ford was quoted as stating "I do not understand why it would be inappropriate to solicit funds for an arms-length charitable cause using my regular employment letterhead." Other than a stern rebuke by the City of Toronto Ethics Commissioner, nothing came of it. Then, as now, many seemed ready to forgive his actions because the amount involved was inconsequential. But it is the purpose of such payments that matter, not their value.

A common theme to all of the latest scandals involving the aforementioned five Mayors has been an erosion of confidence in our elected officials and the proper administration of public affairs. This may lead to a feeling of disempowerment and alienation from a fundamental obligation to participate in the democratic process. We can thank members of the public, the media and law enforcement for taking action. But these same elected officials have each been in office for many, many years. It is rare that the event culminating in the resignation or a criminal charge of a public official is only an isolated incident. It is more commonly a final straw and their longevity in public office a consequence of public apathy and seemingly voter indifference when that sense of entitlement first exhibits itself. Canadians must be aware that corruption is something that happens everywhere, including Canada, and not just in less developed countries with weak governance structures and without the rule of law.

Peter Dent, Board Member, Transparency International Canada

Tom Marshall, Board Member, Transparency International Canada