

'Culture of corruption' in Canada and U.S.

INSIDE MAINE



ESSENTIAL OBSERVATIONS

Karl Trautman

The roots of many families in the Lewiston-Auburn area can be traced back to Canada. Even though this historical link is one of the strongest in Maine, I suspect few people know much about our neighbor to the north. On Monday, there is a national election in which the opposition Conservative Party is expected to win. If that happens, it would end 12 years of Liberal rule. A similar fate could await congressional Republicans in the mid-term elections this November.

The Liberal Party has ruled

Canada since 1993 and has been increasingly preoccupied by scandals. The biggest one is the sponsorship scandal. This had its origins in 1996, a few months after Quebec came within 55,000 votes of approving a sovereignty referendum. The national government attempted to counteract sovereignty feelings by increasing the visibility of the federal government in Canada, especially in Quebec. This was done

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by advertising and displays at sporting, community and cultural events.

The scandal arose because of corruption and cronyism.

Last November, the results of an official inquiry were released and the news wasn't good for the Liberals. Agencies that received large contracts from the government regularly made donations and cash gifts that were used for political fundraising in Quebec. There were kickbacks, illegal political contributions and inflated production costs and commissions charged by the agencies that received the contracts. The inquiry concluded that there existed a "culture of entitlement" among bureaucrats and political officials. The Conservatives are proposing a Federal Accountability Act, designed to clean up Ottawa.

Does this sound familiar? It

should because the Canadian scandals are quite similar to the headlines that have been coming out of Washington recently. These involve Jack Abramoff, who used to be one of the Republican Party's best friends. Abramoff is the super lobbyist that recently pleaded guilty to conspiring to bribe public officials, fraud and tax evasion. Abramoff is now cooperating with the government, as the investigation starts to move closer to possible criminal charges against members of Congress, congressional aides, other lobbyists and executive branch officials.

Abramoff developed extensive contacts with the powerful in Washington. The most important relationship he had was with former House Majority Leader Tom Delay of Texas. Many former aides to Delay have been implicated so far, including Michael Scanlon.

Scanlon worked in the lobbying business after leaving Delay's office. Essentially, he

conned Indian tribes into giving him millions of dollars in order to protect their gambling interests from possible congressional regulation. Scanlon and Abramoff used fake phone banks to create the image of a powerful, grassroots effort by the Christian right to regulate tribal gambling. This would scare the tribes into giving them more money, and they split the money between themselves. In November, Scanlon pleaded guilty to conspiracy to bribe public officials.

Abramoff also developed a re-

lationship with business interests in the Northern Mariana Islands, a commonwealth in political union with the United States. These islands are between Hawaii and the Philippines. Part of the economy is the garment industry, where mostly immigrants work. U.S. minimum wage and labor laws do not apply there. It has been reported that some people worked 12 hour days behind barbed wire in shacks with no plumbing. In 2000, the U.S. Senate voted to extend U.S. labor and minimum wage laws

to the islands. However the House never even voted on the bill. Why? Tom Delay and Jack Abramoff.

Abramoff arranged a trip for Delay, his wife, daughter and staffers to go to the islands in early 1997. Paid for by the local Northern Marianas government, everyone had a great time on this trip. A former aide stated that there were many unreported perks such as fancy dinners, massages and charter-fishing boat trips. While staying at a beachfront hotel for free, Delay met with local government officials and factory owners. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that Abramoff's law firm was paid \$1.36 million by the local Northern Marianas government.

The Republicans have controlled the U.S. House since 1995. Both major parties are introducing reform proposals, designed to clean up Congress. Republicans want to show the public that they can police themselves. Democrats want to keep remind-

ing the people of the Republican "culture of corruption."

Election results are often interpreted as the outcome of clear ideological swings by voters. The winning party usually crows about how the people suddenly found their political ideals the most appealing. That is predictably simplistic and transparently self-serving.

There is often an even simpler explanation. The voters want to throw the bums out.

In Canada, that seems to be what is about to happen. That same dynamic could be beginning in U.S. national politics. While it is too early to make predictions, the early advantage seems to be with the Democrats.

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