

The Record

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CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

Geoffrey Stevens: Playing with fire in the SNC-Lavalin farce

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There are countries in this world that are trying to cope with genuine, history-altering issues. Venezuela has a despised president who will not leave. The United States has the political train wreck of Donald Trump. Britain has the inept Theresa May and her self-inflicted Brexit disaster. New Zealand, that most peaceable of countries, suddenly confronts the slaughter of Muslim citizens while they are at prayer.

Canada, for lack of genuine trauma, turns a molehill into a mountain. The government is in crisis and may be thrown out of office in October. Over what? Over – let us remember – over a disagreement as to whether the pressure brought to bear on the country's attorney general by her cabinet mates and political colleagues was "appropriate" or "inappropriate."

There was a genuine difference of opinion among them, a disagreement. Her colleagues thought the pressure was appropriate; she thought it inappropriate. But no one ordered the attorney general to do anything. Her original decision – to confirm the decision made by her director of public prosecutions to proceed with criminal prosecution of SNC-Lavalin – still stands. Yet the government has been under unrelenting siege for 47 days over a difference of opinion: at what point does "appropriate" become "inappropriate?"

To repeat, nothing happened. Why should anyone who is not suffering from oxygen-depletion in the Ottawa bubble care how many angels can dance on the head of this pin?

It is the stuff of political farce, a crisis inspired by a news media that cannot, or does not choose to, distinguish between a political disagreement and a political scandal, and embraced by opposition politicians shopping for weapons to bring down the Liberals.

Last week, the Conservatives went to the barricades, forcing the Commons into 31 hours of recorded voting on non-confidence budget amendments – all this, however improbably, to defend the honour of a former Liberal minister (and still Liberal MP) against slings and arrows from members of her own Liberal team.

Beneath the farce lies ambition. Years ago, when Jody Wilson-Raybould's father was introduced to Pierre Trudeau, he told the then prime minister that he had two young daughters who aspired to be PM. Jody Wilson-Raybould is not the only Liberal in Ottawa with that ambition. But at the expense of bringing down her own government and electing a Conservative government that would embrace few, if any, of her core values?

There has to be more to it than ambition. What began as a relatively routine disagreement within the government became intensely personal. JWR says she wants to be a Liberal. She could have crossed the floor to the Conservatives or New Democrats, but she didn't. She supports the goals and policies of the Liberal government. But she no longer accepts the leadership of Justin Trudeau.

Her former cabinet colleague (and still Liberal caucus mate), Jane Philpott, fanned the flames of speculation last week when she teased Maclean's magazine in an interview, claiming there was "much more" to be revealed about the SNC-Lavalin affair.

Whether either of them has revelations that would increase the height of the molehill remains to be seen.

I'm skeptical. I think the "scandal" is played out. It was a distraction not a historic event. There are many more important issues to be addressed and policies (both government and opposition varieties) to be weighed before the nation goes to the polls.

The Liberal caucus is growing impatient. Liberal MP Judy Sgro's call for Wilson-Raybould and Philpott to "put up or shut up" is being echoed by other MPs and some ministers.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Trudeau plays a waiting game – claiming to welcome a diversity of views in his administration while waiting for the next shoe to drop. His father, more ruthless than the son, would not have been so patient. He would have booted the arsonists before they burned their party to the ground.

But Justin waits. He must be hoping the caucus will give the two former ministers the boot for him.

Cambridge resident Geoffrey Stevens, an author and former Ottawa columnist and managing editor of the Globe and Mail, teaches political science at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph. His column appears Tuesdays. He welcomes comments at geoffstevens@sympatico.ca

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