

Senate's still worth preserving

In his 2005 book, *The Secret Mulroney Tapes*, author Peter C. Newman cites CBC reporter Christopher Walmsley's "unusual take" on then prime minister Brian Mulroney's problems with many members of the Ottawa Press Gallery, including your humble correspondent.

"How many reporters were in the press gallery in the 1980s who got sucked up by Mulroney into the system?" asks Walmsley. "Anybody who was the least bit friendly all of a sudden got offered a huge job ... Mulroney decimated the people who were legitimately friendly to him, and cut his own throat."

"And who did he leave out there? He should have made Claire Hoy a senator. Dalton Camp once said that there was at one point serious consideration to make Pamela Wallin a senator just to get her off the air."

For the record, I wasn't offered a Senate seat and wouldn't have taken it if I had been. As for Wallin - who, as you see from the above quote, was a tough-minded journalist at the time - she ultimately left the business to become a diplomat and eventually accepted a Senate seat when offered one by current Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The rest, as the say, is history.

During the course of my journalism career, of course, I came to know both Wallin and Mike Duffy - the other journalist-turned-Senator in the eye of the spending storm - and can say without reservation that I had considerable respect for both as journalists. What's more, I liked them. I wouldn't have expected either to turn what is already a lucrative sinecure - some call the Senate a "taskless thanks" - into their personal piggy banks, but that appears to be the case. So what happened?

I think that sometimes when people reach positions of power where they are surrounded by sycophants who tend to bow and scrape in their presence, there is a danger of losing perspective, of coming to believe that you are more important than you are, that you can do what you want, when you want and how you want to do it because, after all, you are an important person.

This is not unusual in politics - or for that matter in sports, entertainment or big business either - but it is something that truly moral people tend to rise above.

The fact of the matter is that whatever you think of the Senate - and having written a book on the subject, I can tell you they perform a lot more work than they ever get credit for - the current expense scandal involving Wallin, Duffy, Patrick Brazeau and Mac Harb has brought shame on the entire institution, even though there is no evidence that any of the other 101 Senators are abusing their position of public trust.

What's more, the total money involved in the Senate scandal - even if the four bad apples are guilty as charged - amounts to way less than a million dollars, a mere pittance compared to the tab of up to one billion dollars in the Ontario Liberal government's gas-plants-for-ridings exchange.

It is true the provincial Liberals are getting some flack for their outrageous abuse of public funds - although Premier Kathleen Wynne is being let off easily, having been a senior minister and deputy campaign director when these election decisions were made. But people can better understand a senator double dipping, or claiming a house where he or she doesn't live, or charging for a speech she didn't give. Wrapping your head around hundreds of millions of dollars is a lot tougher than understanding somebody billing for a couple of thousand bucks to an event that didn't happen.

The opposition in Ottawa, as you'd expect, are trying to hang the Senate scandal on Harper, but that's really a bogus charge. Sure, Harper appointed three of the senators involved, but the Prime Minister's Office - indeed, the Commons itself - doesn't have authority or control over the day-to-day doings of the Senate.

The scandal has also encouraged those who claim the Senate is worthless - it isn't, but most people don't know what it does since the media never covers the Senate unless there is a scandal - to push for its' abolition. That too is a pipe dream given the constitutional realities in this country.

So what we're left with is four greedy senators abusing the public trust. It's disappointing - although on the plus side, it has spurred the auditor-general into auditing every senator's expenses (he should include all MPs as well).

As for myself, I would have expected better from both Duffy and Wallin.

Pity.

