

Cash-and-curry: Buying votes on the public dime ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada's minister of Employment and Social Development has had a photo-op with a bunch of government cheques.

The usual photo partners - starry-eyed children, carefully vetted students, or alleged constituents lovingly gazing at Poilievre handing out flyers - were nowhere to be seen. Instead, just cheques.

There he was, in all his obsequious glory, standing beside the massive press run of the expanded Universal Child Care Benefit outbound cash flow. It looked like a reprinting of the Oxford English Dictionary, so thick were the sheaves of cheques. One hundred and sixty bucks a month for kids under six - and a brand new \$60 a month for those 6 and over. Mind the fine print; the UCCB is taxable in the case of the lower income spouse. All is never quite what it seems to be in Harperland.

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Which takes us back to Pierre Poilievre, the minister of free money. Just reproduce your blended genetic material and your cheque will be in the mail. If you'd rather get a direct deposit into your bank account, no problem. And if you can prove you've produced a Tory baby, you will automatically receive a poster of the not-so- fabulous Pierre polishing the PM's shoes. Just kidding.

Can there be any doubt about the reason that Poilievre travelled to the Winnipeg Production Centre to tour the print room? He was taking ownership of the bribe. There was all that money headed to millions of voters, 3.8 million families so far, and there was its source - the minister of free money. The two things were supposed to be indelibly impressed upon your consciousness for that come-to-Jesus moment in the voting booth. Cash and Poilievre.

Of course, the source of that money is not the Conservative Party of Canada, Poilievre, or Stephen Harper for that matter. That unimaginable mountain of cash - all of it - comes from the same well that all desperate politicians go to; the poor, bedraggled taxpayer. When fully operational, this political equivalent of the Great Train Robbery will cost taxpayers about \$8 billion a year. BS subtracted, the government is simply using taxpayer's money to finance its re-election - on a massive scale. And it is doing it with a straight face.

Harper's scheming to use families to make taxpayer money work for the CPC began back in 2006. That's when he promised he would cancel all child-care agreements with the provinces and replace them with a system called the Universal Child Care Benefit.

Ottawa started to give the money directly to parents. In cutting out the provinces and their programs, credit for that cash payment would all go to the incumbent - you know who. It wasn't exactly cash for votes, but pretty close.

There was another major advantage of paying parents off in direct cash payments. Since there were no longer any provincial programs, there were no standards to meet before receiving the money. If you have kids under eighteen, you qualify.

That violates the cardinal rule of good public policy; no public cash without some kind of demonstrated need. Without such a test or threshold, the government can simply reward its friends on the public dime. In this case, it comes down to simply sending cash to anyone with kids who applies - including a lot of parents who don't need it. In other words, it is going to a significant portion of the Harper political base.

It follows exactly the same principle as the Harper income-splitting legislation, (opposed by the late Jim Flaherty when still finance minister), which clearly favours the wealthy and gives more money to those who need it least. In the wrong hands, public money becomes political money: the cash-for-kids caper is a good example.

Here is another one. The Harper government has spent nearly a billion public dollars in party advertising thinly disguised as public service announcements. It is a scandal much bigger than Ad Sponsorship, and includes the obscene costs associated with the PM's nauseating photo-ops. That's where the already-announced gets announced again and again, and then re-announced by lesser mortals at smaller PR events across the country.

But there is something particularly galling about the minister of free money posing with UCCB cheques when a federal election is less than

fourteen weeks away. Worse, the first payments that will roll out in July will be enhanced because they will include retroactive payment for the first six months of the year.

Do you get it dude? Your vote, bought and paid for just in time. Hush money to forget the lying, cheating, and corruption of this government. To forget C-51 and C-377, violating the Senate's independence, misleading parliament, muzzling everything with a tongue, and the stampede of rats jumping ship. Cold cash you can count on - provided you show gratitude to Harper and Co.

This brazen abuse of the public purse has received the full attention of Harper's political adversaries. Both the NDP and the Liberals realize bribes sometimes work and they must be careful. There is no amnesia like money-induced amnesia.

That's why Thomas Mulcair is saying that he will keep the enhanced UCCB, and make good on his promise to create a national daycare program. In other words, voting for the NDP will not cost Canadians the new jingle in their jeans.

Justin Trudeau says he will keep a version of the program, but give more to those who actually need it, rather than handing out the same amount to everyone. For a guy who allegedly isn't ready, that's sounds pretty sensible to me.

Still, as efficient as bribery can be, especially in a society where politics is conducted along the lines of a crooked poker game, it is not without its dangers for Stephen Harper.

There was a time when Harper would have raised the roof if a progressive party suggested giving away \$8 billion a year to everyone who had kid 18 or younger, including parents who didn't need it. Now he is bidding up the NDP and the Liberals in a contest of public spending his base will surely struggle with.

Whatever these enhanced UCCB payments are, it is definitely not Conservative values.

What will the base say about billions going out to people who don't need it, when people who do - like veterans and seniors - remember Harper's cuts to veterans centres and the Old Age Supplement? Where is the principle in that? How will the base feel about Harper's monumental contradiction: boasting about balancing the budget, while blowing the fiscal doors off with campaign spending he would reflexively denounce in the other parties?

The biggest risk of all? What if Canadians don't like being bribed because they are not quite as cynical and selfish as the minister of free money and the Great Navigator imagine?

What if they vote as though a country, not a government cheque, is at stake?

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