

OUR VIEWS

Finally a shred of dignity

Canada's veterans won another victory Tuesday — they shamed the nation's squabbling political leaders into declaring a truce so they can all attend VE Day celebrations in Holland.

IN BRIEF:

Only a last-minute agreement saved Canada's political leaders from delivering an unforgivable snub to the nation's veterans.

It had earlier looked as though no senior Canadian politicians would attend the 60th anniversary event because of the election hysteria sweeping Parliament Hill — leaving Gov.-Gen. Adrienne Clarkson to carry the flag for Canada in Holland, which Canadian troops liberated from the Nazis in 1945.

However, stung by the justifiable criticism of Canada's vets, Prime Minister Paul Martin won agreement from opposition leaders Stephen Harper, Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe that they should all go to honour Canada's heroes.

It means a temporary ceasefire to the petty politicking of recent days that saw Martin, External Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew and Defence Minister Bill Graham all cancel trips and Veterans Affairs Minister Albina Guarnieri rush back to Ottawa from Holland because of fears the Opposition Conservatives might try to trigger an election in their absence.

Canadian Legion chief spokesman Bob Butt said veterans blamed all of the leaders for the apparent snub, which "doesn't go down well" with those who fought for free and open government and left friends buried overseas.

While Tory leader Harper's vow to bring down Martin's Liberal government over the sponsorship scandal triggered this mess, he isn't the only one to blame. The prime minister should have shown leadership from the start by sticking to his plan to go to Holland with his senior colleagues. Harper, Layton and Duceppe might want the Liberals out, but trying to time it while Canada's heroes were being honoured would have outraged the nation. On Tuesday, the politicians blinked and saved themselves a shred of dignity.

Over a million Canadians served in the Second World War, with 45,000 killed and thousands of others wounded. While Dieppe, Juno Beach and other battles were important, the Dutch campaign was special. Around 237,000 Canadians served in the liberation of Holland, with more than 7,000 killed. The Dutch people have never forgotten this sacrifice for their freedom. Canada's sorry bunch of leaders, it seems, had... until the veterans spoke up.

Think safety first

Candace Carnahan knows what she's talking about when it comes to workplace safety.

Six years ago, while working as a summer student, Carnahan lost her left leg below the knee in a workplace accident. Carnahan, who works for Passport for Safety, a national not-for-profit safety awareness program, was in Regina Monday to help launch North American Occupational Safety and Health Week.

Carnahan believes her accident wouldn't have happened if she had been better informed about dangers in the workplace. And that ties in with the motto for awareness week "Equip. Educate. Empower." According to a recent Canadian Institute of Health Information study, of all job-related accidents across Canada, 13 per cent involved workers under 24.

Occupational health and safety should have a special emphasis in Saskatchewan, which has one of the worst job-safety records in Canada.

As Carnahan said, bringing the percentage of accidents down isn't enough, "One per cent is still someone's son."

Growing success

The awards just keep coming for Regina businessman Murad Al-Katib.

The latest came Tuesday when Al-Katib, president of Saskcan Pulse Trading Inc., was named to Canada's Top 40 Under 40. The program was founded 10 years ago by The Caldwell Partners, an executive search firm, to honour young Canadians who achieve a significant level of success while still under 40. Recipients are selected by an advisory board composed of industry and community leaders. The honour isn't restricted to entrepreneurs and corporate leaders. Researchers, doctors, aid workers and founders of charities have all been named to the list.

In just four years since launching Saskcan Pulse in 2001, Al-Katib has seen the company become the largest processor and exporter of red lentils in the Western hemisphere. He has also picked up Abex awards as business of the year in 2004 and new venture in 2003, the Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership award as exporter of the year and Ernst & Young Prairie region emerging entrepreneur award.

Congratulations to a growing Saskatchewan success story.



SASKATCHEWAN POLITICS

Meadow Lake pulp mill a giant money pit

So, what has really been the biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history?

What has been the biggest stinker? The most ill-conceived, most costly mess that has cost taxpayers the most dollars with the least hope of return?

Not the nationalization of the potash mines in the 1970s or, for that matter, the privatization of those same potash mines a decade later.

Not the \$5-million loss in GigaText, about which the then-NDP Opposition used to cry bloody murder during the 1980s. Not the Grant Devine Progressive Conservative government's investments in the fertilizer plant at Belle Plaine, the Weyerhaeuser pulp and paper plant in Prince Albert or the upgraders in Lloydminster and Regina.

Not the NDP government's questionable investment in the 1990s in the Australian cable industry, which actually broke even. Not the mind-numbing investment by the Information Service Corp. into automated, computerized mapping technology that we wouldn't have been able to sell to anyone even if it had worked.

Not the disastrous \$35-million loss in Spudco, over which the NDP received us for six years. Not even the \$42-million loss-to-date on Navigata — the B.C. telecommunication company that Saskatchewan Party leader Brad Wall has recently proclaimed "the biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history."

Nope. Not any of the above. In fact, none of them are even close.

The biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history has a book value of \$78 million (although some argue that its value is really negative \$70 million) even though taxpayers are into the project for nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars.

It's an investment in which the Saskatchewan government has a 50-per-cent partnership with a private company, even though the government is responsible for 100 per cent of the company's debt and 100 per cent of the losses.

And under the absolute best-case scenario, the best thing the government can do is give away its half of the investment and write it off as a loss.

The biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history?

The Meadow Lake Pulp Mill. Yet, amazingly, you're not hearing the Opposition complain about it. In fact, when the NDP government does eventually unload this dog — likely to the Meadow Lake Tribal Council shortly before the next election — don't be surprised if Wall is the first one to slap Premier Lorne Calvert on the back for a job well done.

A cabinet order-in-council made public Monday saw a \$52-million loan from the General Revenue Fund granted to the Investment Saskatchewan Crown corporation to buy debentures for the Meadow Lake Pulp Mill Partnership.

And accompanying this latest transaction was the first thing vaguely resembling an honest admission from a Saskatchewan politician on the project in quite some time.

Industry and Resources Minister Eric Cline admitted Monday that Meadow Lake has never really been a very good investment for the province's taxpayers, that the government has now taken all the risk and that our best hope is that recent \$52-million loan might — just might — put the government in a position to dispense with its money-losing investment.

Yes, folks, on a day when Agriculture Minister Mark Wartman was telling us there would be no money for a special cash advance for spring seeding, we were throwing more good money after bad into the Meadow Lake Pulp Mill.

Yet the only thing the Opposition has to say about it is that it's "reserving judgment." Why would the Saskatchewan Party be so reluctant to say anything bad about what has been — hands down — the biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history?

Well, here's the history and the politics:

Meadow Lake started with all good intentions as a \$159-million investment by the Devine administration in the late 1980s — a 50-50 partnership between the government and Millar-Western Pulp that would provide needed jobs for Saskatchewan's northwest. In fairness, the venture has clearly done that. It's critical to the local economy... which has actually become the big part of the problem.

No payments have ever been made on that original \$159-million "participating debenture" and, at an 11.5 per-cent interest rate, it has now accrued \$482.6 million in interest owing as of Dec. 31, according to Investment Saskatchewan's 2004 annual report released last week. Add in a \$24.6-million "term loan", a \$16.9-million "contingency loan", a \$12-million "guaranteed advance", a \$15.2-million "cash flow loan", \$12.7 million in accrued interest plus operating losses and a few other transactions and it totals \$743.3 million.

As important as the mill is to Meadow Lake, can taxpayers really afford these losses?

Given that it inherited this mess from the Conservatives, why didn't the NDP pull the pin years ago? And given that the NDP has made the very bad decision to hang on, why hasn't the Saskatchewan Party — which opposes such government meddling in the economy — hammered the NDP on these on-going losses?

Well, evidently the rules are different when you are one seat away from power and the money-losing venture you have to criticize happens to be the biggest employer in the lynch-pin seat that will quite likely determine who forms the next government.

As long as Meadow Lake is the seat that gives the NDP its majority, it will keep pouring money into the pulp mill.

And as long as the Saskatchewan Party thinks it can win the seat, it won't be criticizing the decision — even if the Meadow Lake Pulp Mill is actually the biggest government-run business disaster in Saskatchewan history.

■ Mandryk is political columnist for the *Leader-Post*.

“In Quotes”

“This is the type of thing we need more of, rather than this daily preoccupation with survival. He (Paul Martin) needs to give less impression of that and more impression of clear leadership.”

— David Anderson, the Liberal MP, was critical of Prime Minister Paul Martin's action during the squabble over whether to attend services in Holland to honour Canadian Second World War veterans.

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A VIEW FROM QUEBEC

Quebec lie exposed

MONTREAL — Bill 101, as I have written before, is a necessary evil that has helped not only to protect the French language, but also to preserve Canadian unity.

But one of the pernicious effects of nearly 30 years of generally accepted official discrimination in favour of French and francophones has been to make respectable here what would be considered racism elsewhere.

For example, we have a government body that is on record to the effect that there are too many anglophones in Quebec. The *Office quebecois de la langue française*, which administers the language legislation, says in its latest annual report it is “worried” that too many people are speaking English in the privacy of their own homes.

This expression of anglophobia was condemned by francophone commentators as well as anglophones after the report containing it was made public last November. But the Office remained unchastened.

Two months later, commenting on the controversy over French tests for nurses in so-called “English” hospitals, the Office's spokesperson made the sweeping and unsupported statement that “a lot of anglophones are not sensitive enough that French-speakers expect to be cared for in French.”

A more recent expression of anglophobia in Quebec was the publication of an article arguing in favour of maintaining the under-representation of anglophones in the National Assembly.

This was not an anonymous screed that surfaced far from the mainstream in a pamphlet or on the Web site of some extreme nationalist group. If it were, it wouldn't be worthy of note.

Rather, it was thoughtfully written and appeared on the ideas page of the daily *Le Devoir*, and was signed by five eminent members of the political class. They are Joseph Faal, a former Parti Quebecois cabinet minister; Jean-Claude Rivest, a current senator and former adviser to Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa; a constitutional expert, and two political scientists.

The article was critical of the Charest government's proposal to change the voting system by introducing an element of proportional representation. This would bring the distribution of seats in the Assembly more into line with the distribution of votes among the parties.

One of its effects would be to convert non-francophone votes now wasted on huge Liberal majorities in a small number of Montreal ridings into additional seats for the QLP.

The article contained some valid criticism of the proposal. One was that the present riding system has produced nothing but majority governments in Quebec, and usually stable ones. Another was that the proposal would keep the small left-wing parties out of the Assembly.

But one of its central arguments was that the proposal “would reduce the power of the francophone majority in a context in which Quebec is neither sovereign nor recognized as a distinct society within a Canada where it faces a centralizing federal power with over-abundant financial resources.”

And, “by increasing the value of an anglophone clientele historically loyal to the QLP but concentrated in a small number of ridings, (the proposal) risks making the QLP the permanent government party in Quebec, as are the federal Liberals, given the fragmentation of the opposition in Ottawa, in an unhealthy way for democratic values.”

It's surprising to see such knowledgeable people so exaggerate the potential political weight of such a small minority; at the 2001 census, only 10.5 per cent of Quebecers reported speaking English as their main language at home, and that proportion is declining.

What's almost as surprising is to see such respected people publicly expressing such concern for democratic values while rejecting the principle of one voter, one vote. Try to imagine the reaction if, say, five Americans of corresponding stature argued in favour of rigging their country's voting system to keep the fast-growing Hispanic minority from gaining too much influence.

But we can thank the article's authors for one thing. They have once again exposed as a lie the “Quebec nation” theory that everybody who lives here, regardless of language, forms one big, happy nation, entitled to equal civil rights.

On a related subject, namely the current rush to rehabilitate Jacques Parizeau after Benoit Corbeil, a former federal Liberal official, supposedly confirmed that Parizeau was right on referendum night about “money and ethnic votes,” let's not overlook an inconvenient fact.

By his own admission, to journalist Francine Pelletier for her excellent documentary *Public Enemy Number One*, Parizeau wasn't referring to instant federalist voters created by Liberal-appointed citizenship judges. Rather, as he told her, he meant to refer to “anglophone votes,” not ethnic ones.

■ Macpherson writes for the *Montreal Gazette*.

OPINION



DON MACPHERSON

QUOTABLE

“ Only 10.5 per cent of Quebecers reported speaking English as their main language at home. ”