Official corruption is a crime against hope

By Akaash Maharaj | Nov 24, 2012 5:30 am | 2 Comments

During our ten-hour flight, my seatmate told me that he was travelling to Brasilia on a pilgrimage to meet the faith healer ‘John of God’, hoping for a cure for his daughter’s Parkinson’s disease. I replied that I was travelling to address the International Anti-Corruption Conference, hoping to build consensus amongst parliamentarians and NGOs to use international law to fight political corruption.

My seatmate looked at me with an air of sympathy and scepticism. To him, I was obviously the one chasing a miracle.

We live in an age of dire cynicism about corruption in politics. Nearly three-quarters of Canadians surveyed for Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer judged the government’s efforts against corruption to be “ineffective”. By this measure, Canadians have a lower opinion of their own government’s commitment to public integrity than do Pakistanis, Iraqis and Nigerians.

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Since then, ongoing revelations by Quebec’s Charbonneau Commission about an orgy of bribery, influence peddling and organised crime in the corridors of power have done little to improve the standing of Canada’s governing class.

Globally, the consequences of political corruption almost defy understanding.

The World Bank estimates that more than $1 trillion is paid in
bribes every year, the largest of which are to obtain state contracts and monopolies. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that multinational criminality moves $2.1 trillion per year across borders, enabled by the active collusion or passive inattention of regulators. The Tax Justice Network estimates that governments lose $3.1 trillion per year because of tax evasion — something practised disproportionately by those with the resources to sway policy makers or public servants.

By comparison, meeting the Millennium Development Goals – eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, establishing universal primary education, reducing child mortality by two-thirds, reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters, halting the spread of HIV and malaria, halving the share of the population without access to clean water and sanitation, and promoting gender equality in schools and the workforce – would cost no more than $481 billion in development.

What the world loses to corruption in a single year would be enough to end the worst forms of human misery and transform human civilisation, at least a dozen times over.

Political corruption robs us of our resources, our fundamental rights and our very identities as members of a free and equal society. It makes the weak prey to the strong and delivers control of society into the hands of the unjust. It debilitates the nation, undermines the rule of law and rots public confidence in democracy. It is a crime against hope itself.

Corruption takes many forms: the theft of public resources, the sale of political influence, the betrayal of the public trust. In all cases, however, corruption thrives when political power is able to operate in the shadows, and it withers before the glare of public scrutiny.

The solution to corruption is extraordinarily simple to describe, though fiendishly difficult to achieve: a vigilant, relentless, and fearless community of citizens and parliamentarians, standing together between our leaders and the levers of power.

Parliamentarians are the watchdogs of democracy, and it is tragic that so many citizens of so many nations perceive our watchdogs as having muted their bark and muzzled their bite — neutered by the very powers they were meant to hold at bay. It is a perception that is too often justified, but it is a perception that is just as often desperately unfair.

There are parliamentarians around the world who risk their lives every day to speak for those who would otherwise have no voice. There are parliamentarians who tilt at the powerful for no better reason than to shield others. There are still parliamentarians who understand that election to office is not a licence to rule, but a contract to serve.

Civic organisations, parliamentarians and global institutions came together earlier this month in Brasilia at the International Anti-Corruption Conference, in an effort to join forces in the fight against corruption. It was the single largest anti-corruption gathering in history.
We saw a parade of Nobel laureates and village volunteers. We wrestled with strategies that spoke of vision and of folly. We heard cries of optimism and howls of impotent rage.

But ultimately, the success of such gatherings lies in their potential to inspire cynical citizens to believe that the political process can be part of the solution, not only part of the problem; to stir courage in timorous legislators to stare down those who know no restraint; and to convince both groups that together, we can win the victory over corruption that none of us can achieve alone.

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Is Akaash going to run for the federal Liberal Party leadership? He’d get my vote.

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"together we can achieve victory over corruption that none of can achieve on our own.". Wonderful statement.
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