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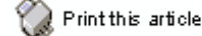
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Is this a PMO dagger we see before us?

By LAWRENCE MARTIN
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It's a vital question: Did the Prime Minister or his office lobby the Asper family to do the hit on Ottawa Citizen publisher Russell Mills, or did CanWest Global act totally independently?

Given my own experience with the Aspers, there's a cautionary tale I should tell. It might shed some light on the matter.

When I was a national columnist for Southam News -- this being the column that was replaced by the Aspers' national editorial -- I received warnings from my superiors in Ottawa.

I had been writing at the start of 2001 about the very stuff that got Mr. Mills fired: the Shawinigate affair. In March of that year, David Asper, the young member of the Winnipeg family, lashed out at journalists covering this subject, telling them to "put up or shut up."

He was roundly denounced for his outburst, and so I forged ahead on the file. Allegations about the PM's use of government moneys to prop up the value of properties in which he had an ongoing financial interest intrigued me. In researching my first book on Jean Chrétien, I found little evidence to equate him with any kind of corruption.

But then came a warning. One of my bosses told me that, every time I wrote something strongly negative about Mr. Chrétien, the Prime Minister's Office was on the phone to David Asper. Thinking this was all quite exaggerated, I was about to place it in my burgeoning b.s. file, when another superior told me the same thing.

Now, with anxiety beginning to grow, I laid off the heavy artillery for a while, focusing on aspects of the PM's performance I happened to admire. But apparently not enough.

In July of 2001, I was called in by Southam editor-in-chief Murdoch Davis. I wasn't too worried; I had received an earlier e-mail from him congratulating me on my "superlative" work. And he had followed that up with compliments to my Ottawa boss. But there had been an apparent change of mind. Mr. Davis told me I was finished. No reason was offered, but not the quality of work, he said.

Most people assumed then that the primary reason was my reporting on Shawinigate. Given what has happened to Mr. Mills, this seems even clearer now. And as for those warnings about the PMO's frequent communications with David Asper, they have more resonance than ever.

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It was the same Mr. Asper who took Mr. Mills aside and fired him after his Shawinigate editorial and four-page exposé on the file that went with it. It's hard not to conclude that the PM wanted a regime change at the Citizen and got one.

Hundred per cent proof ? No. You never have that. There are no Oval Office tapes in this land that we know of. And, of course, the PMO and the Aspers will furiously deny it.

But one need only look at what happens when anyone has got too close on the Shawinigate story. Conrad Black, the former owner of the National Post, paid the price; Mr. Chrétien shut down his bid for a peerage. The PM then threatened Joe Clark, who was hot on the file. Then Southam reporters got the "put up or shut up" edict. Why would David Asper go that far, bringing fierce criticism on himself, if he weren't under pressure in some way? Then there was my case, then the big one, Mr. Mills.

With David Asper, it appears there's an old syndrome at work. Little boys get toys. In his case, many big newspapers across the land. It's inherited power, inherited wealth. There's precious little experience in the business, no knowledge of its sensitivities and traditions. An increased vulnerability to lobbying from the highest office in the land.

Two days before the offending Citizen editorial appeared, an Asper family member co-chaired a Liberal Party fundraiser in Winnipeg at which Mr. Chrétien spoke. The day the editorial appeared, Izzy Asper and Mr. Chrétien were in Ottawa to attend the annual press gallery dinner. Two days after that, CanWest issued national editorials effectively overruling what the Citizen had written. In the House of Commons this week, Deputy Prime Minister John Manley dodged questions on whether Izzy Asper and Mr. Chrétien had recently met.



What did the PM or his representatives do and when did they do it? We can't be sure, but given the PM's hypersensitivity on Shawinigate, his relations with the Aspers, his power vis-à-vis media concentration and his bullying reputation, it becomes a very big stretch to believe that the PMO did not have a hand in the clampdown on freedom of expression in this country.

Lawrence Martin is writing the second volume of his biography of Jean Chrétien.

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