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Martin's assets are big targets

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Opposition politicians may be missing the boat (pun intended) when they call for Liberal leadership front-runner Paul Martin to sell off Canada Steamship Lines and his many other private holdings because they could pose a potential conflict of interest if (or when) he becomes prime minister.

Clearly the conventional solution for most ministers of the Crown, putting their holdings in blind trusts managed at arm's length by trustees, does not work when applied to multimillionaire Martin. His assets, especially his inland and blue-water fleets of huge, self-unloading, bulk carriers cannot be camouflaged.

It is not like trading a few shares of a penny mining stock based on information about the latest assay results. CSL dominates a major, high-profile sector of international shipping; even if Mr. Martin had no direct contact with his trustees, he would still be aware of what is happening to his assets.

(As it turns out, Mr. Martin has had considerable contact with his trustees, the revelation of which prompted the latest flurry of protest.)

It would also be unfair to force Mr. Martin's trustees to sell off such visible assets at fire-sale prices. So the alternative is complete disclosure, all the time, and then hold the future prime minister (should that pr easures by his government that could benefit or impair the shipping industry, or any other ass

To his credit, Mr. Martin made a complete disclosure of his personal finances when he was first elected, revealing much more than the conflict rules required. (Too bad he hasn't followed a similar philosophy regarding his campaign contributors.)

One could argue that forcing Mr. Martin to sell his assets is actually letting him off the hook too easily.

Armed with the information that would flow from full disclosure, the opposition could use the extensive assets of Passage Holdings Inc. (the umbrella company for shipping and other transportation assets) to explore many areas of Canadian policy.

What are the policies in Canada that prompted Mr. Martin to have his offshore fleet built in Brazil and China? Why are so many of the ships flying flags of convenience, registered in Bermuda or Barbados? Is this the face of globalization?

Should we have the equivalent of the American Jones Act to require goods travelling from one part of Canada to another to be carried in Canadian-made ships? An exception for the Jones Act was one of the giveaways Canada was forced to make in the free-trade negotiations.

In another context, Environment Minister David Anderson has been strongly critical of the flags of convenience, especially of the risk posed by decrepit and uninspected tankers.

Mr. Martin's company does not own tankers, but his ships have caused other problems. The CSL Atlas was fined $125,000 last year in Halifax for an illegal discharge. Why do the Martin ships in the offshore fleet not have Canadian crews?

Then there is the bus company Mr. Martin owns that offers hourly service between Ottawa and Montreal. The bus industry has been very critical of the federal government because it believes grants to Via Rail are subsiding their opposition. Where would the prime minister come down on those?

He might use the rail-subsidy program to demonstrate he would put the common good ahead of his own financial interests.

NDP Leader Jack Layton's complaint that Martin ships had a contract to carry coal to an Indonesian generating plant was particularly specious. One may well question doing business in Indonesia. To suggest CSL ships should not carry coal because that coal might create pollution is akin to saying the Ford Motor Co. should cease making cars because some of their models may be used by criminals as getaway cars.

In short, the opposition should consider the size of Mr. Martin's assets an advantage because they would make such big targets.
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