

Martin fuss has no merit

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Paul Martin served with distinction as Canada's minister of finance from 1993 until his resignation last year.

During that time, other than the occasional needle from Frank magazine, there was hardly a peep about the fact that he was a wealthy and successful shipping magnate.

Nobody seriously suggested that Martin sell off his controlling interest in one of the biggest corporate empires in Canada, Montreal-based Canada Steam-ship Lines.

And yet, as minister of finance over a period of almost nine years, he clearly was in a position to influence the fortunes of Canadian corporations, on a daily basis.

Not that he ever used his position to help CSL. In fact, there's never been anything to indicate he acted improperly.

But that's not enough for the opposition, which has suddenly developed a keen interest in Martin's holdings.

The backbencher for LaSalle-Émard and next prime minister of Canada is now being told that rich and successful business entrepreneurs need not apply for the job of PM unless they unload their holdings first.

Otherwise, it is alleged, Martin will never be able to separate his personal interests from those of the country.

This position assumes that the vocation of prime minister is a calling akin to the Catholic priesthood. One must not let share ownership stand in the way of one's love of country, just as one must not let sex and marriage stand between the priest and the love of God.

But celibacy in the business world should not be a prerequisite for running the country. If it were, we'd get a lot of career politicians and back-room hacks seeking office, and we've got more than enough of those already.

True, it was once assumed that Martin's shipping interests were stowed safely away in a blind trust. We now know that he had a so-called "peekaboo" clause allowing him to be briefed on extraordinary corporate events that would materially affect his holdings.

It seems this clause has been given a pretty liberal interpretation, allowing Martin, for example, to be briefed in 1996 on a CSL business deal in Indonesia.

Again, however, there's nothing to suggest that he stepped over the line. Federal ethics counsellor Howard Wilson has said that Martin asked questions at the meeting but did not give direction to the executives and trustees of CSL.

So what's the fuss? According to pollster Darrel Bricker of Ipsos-Reid, Canadians don't seem to have a problem with this. They've figured out that it's unreasonable to ask an honourable public figure to unload the family business.

Martin himself has said he's prepared to see tougher rules on the operation of blind trusts, so let's take him up on the offer.

Yes, it's true that the U.S. requires senior cabinet officers to divest their business interests and shares. But look at the result: a lot of retiring business executives go into politics, such as U.S. Treasury Secretary John Snow and his predecessor, Paul O'Neill.

If we want to attract a younger and broader representation of Canadians to public life, we shouldn't expect them to sell everything they've worked for when they get to the top.

We should expect them to follow a clear set of ethical principles, and to act in good faith.

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