

Considering the scandals plaguing multiple levels of government, it seems accountability as a virtue is on the wane

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Uncharitable mockery befell Conservative MP Joan Crockatt earlier this week when she welcomed the resignation of Stephen Harper's chief of staff Nigel Wright, plus the removal from caucus of senators Mike Duffy and Pamela Wallin, as "a clear demonstration of accountability."

The long-time Calgary journalist was chided for honouring the dishonoured, but she was at least technically correct. Accountability has varying degrees and meanings. It can be shown by open financial records, scheduled reports, transparent operations and frequent communications. An account is a story, or a reckoning, but it is also a place to store money, and a ledger of who owes what to whom. To be accountable is to serve any one of these definitions.

But at its most basic, accountability is pessimistic, like a vaccine. Ideally, it is theoretical, never called into action. It is the underbelly of duty, the ante of political poker. It is not a price, but a penalty, and less a virtue than a rule. To be accountable, at root, is to quit in service of the office, just like the Tory trio.

Now, however, with chiefs of staff falling before their political masters in Ottawa and Toronto, [U.S. tax officials taking the fifth on politically motivated audits](#), [Mike Duffy still a senator for P.E.I.](#), and [Anthony Weiner, whose racy self-portraiture made a further mockery of his already hilarious surname](#), currently a candidate for mayor of New York, there is a creeping suspicion that accountability as a virtue is on the wane.

"I think there is to a large extent in Canada a culture of impunity at the elite level that just drives ordinary people to distraction, and I can't say they are wrong," said Brian Lee Crowley, managing director of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, a non-partisan think-tank.

Part of this no doubt is mere frustration and impatience on the part of an electorate. Part is the pressure of collapsing news cycles, in which stories rise and fall within days if

<http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-politics/senate-scandal-shows-accountability-as-a-virtue-is-on-the-wane>

not hours, often without firm resolution. And part is the basic psychological desire for narratives to end tidily, rather than fade into ambiguity.

But part is also simple indignation that political accountability can seem to be little more than a set of policies drawn up in response to the latest scandal, or that accountability sometimes seems to be assigned to unelected subordinates, bureaucratic lap dogs who are willing to wear the office's shame in a pinch, no matter how valuable they might be otherwise.

Accountability as a word gets “thrown around a lot, and I’m always not sure if we all mean the same thing when we use it,” said Alison Loat, executive director of Samara Canada, a charity that promotes political understanding.

“That is my main concern,” she said. “There is a system of accountability. It’s hundreds of years old in its formation. I would argue it is not well understood and it may be insufficient for modern political times. But at minimum it is not well understood.”

The chain of accountability in representative democracies, from government to cabinet to members to voters, “is only as strong as its weakest link,” said Ms. Loat “It works in theory, it doesn’t work in practice.”

Samara Canada, for example, has conducted exit interviews with 79 former MPs, from single-term backbenchers to prime ministers. Of that number, all of whom were asked what it meant to be a member of Parliament, only two or three said their main job was to hold government to account, which is an MP’s primary purpose in the Westminster model.

“If MPs don’t actually at least articulate [accountability] as one of the central parts of their job, then it’s no wonder why the system isn’t working,” Ms. Loat said.

Samara Canada’s research also found a broad public dissatisfaction with democracy, which Ms. Loat said is at an all-time low, with barely a third of Canadians satisfied with how their MPs do their jobs, and frustration with the “blunt tool” of elections that rarely seem to serve the punitive, house-cleaning purpose.

At the same time, she said the urge to howl for blood at the first sign of trouble is damaging to a civic system, and could discourage good people from joining up. “It’s hard enough already,” she said.

“We tend to think right away about resignation, and falling on your sword, and doing the humble thing,” said Mr. Lee Crowley. “I think that’s terribly important and we don’t do enough of it, but I think there’s an intermediate step, which is the apology. I think we’ve completely lost the art of the apology.”

One reason, he said, is a “macho” distaste for the perceived weakness of contrition, and so instead the electorate gets what Mr. Lee Crowley calls “weasel” apologies, in which the audience is blamed for taking offence. Former prime minister Jean Chrétien was a good example of the macho stance, he said, by refusing to acknowledge any accountability for the sponsorship scandal.

Marjory LeBreton, the Conservative leader in the Senate, was similarly defiant in her response this week to the expenses scandal, saying that if the party had not shone a light on senators’ spending habits, there would be no “hyped-up media stories about spending abuses.”

“I am a Conservative and I know more than most that around this town populated by Liberal elites and their media lickspittles, tut-tutting about our government and yearning for the good old days, that we are never given the benefit of the doubt and are rarely given credit for all the good work that we do,” she said.

That is the rub, for the elected politician. Frustrating though it must be, accountability in its purest form is less about a pat on the back than a kick in the rear.