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Abstract (summary)

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Full Text

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PRESTON'S PERKS Reform's culture of concealment

When the party treated Leader Preston Manning and his wife Sandra to new clothes and a trip to Hawaii, it was breaking its own rules.

Saturday, September 28, 1996

Calgary -- ONE of the Reform Party's achievements has been to direct public attention to the indefensible perks and pensions of politicians. As a result, some of the perks have been trimmed back, and there is now more transparency in politicians' remuneration than there used to be. Unfortunately, this achievement is jeopardized by recent revelations about Reform Leader Preston Manning's personal expenses.

Since 1994, Reform has been spending more than \$40,000 a year on Mr. Manning and his family -- on clothing, personal travel, holidays and other items. Most recently, in June, there was a trip to Hawaii for the leader and his wife Sandra. Mr. Manning was on party business to the Far East; Mrs. Manning was not. The party provided \$847 for her ticket, another \$1,600 for clothes and shoes for her and \$1,365 for the couple's meals and accommodation while they were in Hawaii. Revenue Canada regards payment of such personal expenses as comparable to income, so the party also pays the Mannings' income tax for those perks.

Readers with good memories will recall a similar episode in the spring of 1994, when it was disclosed that the party had set up two nonreceiptable expense accounts for the Mannings: \$31,000 for Preston and \$12,000 for Sandra. After much criticism and public disagreement with caucus members, Mrs. Manning, who works as a real-estate agent, renounced her expense account altogether, and Mr. Manning said he would start submitting receipts. But the recent revelations show that nothing of substance has changed since 1994, except that their arrangements with the party have burrowed deeper underground.

It is not unprecedented for parties to give money to their leaders. The Conservatives pay Jean Charest a cabinet minister's salary of \$46,000 in addition to what he earns as a Member of Parliament, about \$110,000 including allowances. As long as he declares the income and pays tax on it, such an arrangement is probably legal.

However, in Reform, payments of this type violate the party's own constitution. Section 9(d) allows the party to remunerate the leader and the chairman of the executive council "so long as they are not Members of Parliament." Mr. Manning should have gone off the party's payroll once he was elected to the House of Commons. The payments he is receiving are, to all intents and purposes, an income supplement, as shown by Revenue Canada's decision to tax them. Calling them personal expenses is just a device to circumvent the party's constitution.

Of course, as leader, Mr. Manning incurs many political expenses, in such areas as research, travel and entertainment. But these are quite properly paid for by the Commons or the party, depending on the nature of the events. The issue is personal expenses, not political expenses.

As an MP and the leader of a recognized party in the House, Mr. Manning receives salaries and expense allowances with a pretax value of more than \$140,000 a year. He works hard for that money and no one should begrudge it to him. But it is not small change. He can afford to pay for his family's clothes and vacations.

The Reform Party is sustained by small donations. About 90 per cent of its annual funds come from contributions averaging about \$100. Anyone familiar with the party knows that most members, while self-supporting, are not affluent. Very few would have an income even close to \$140,000 a year.

At the Vancouver Assembly in June, a special appeal was made for donations to pay for Mr. Manning's trip to the Far East -- an entirely legitimate political trip charged to the party, not the taxpayer. Delegates to the meeting responded by chipping in an additional \$1,500. Good for them. But how would they have responded if there had been a special appeal to buy new shoes for Mrs. Manning, or to pay for her Hawaiian holiday?

Who knows? Some members might have thought it was a good cause. But no one had a chance to make an informed decision because of the secrecy surrounding the personal-expense accounts. The executive council may have approved the payments, but the rank and file never learned of them until Norm Ovenden of The Edmonton Journal broke the story.

The party's response to that article and later media disclosures illustrates a culture of concealment that is out of place in *any* democratic political organization, let alone Reform. The party did not deny the truth of any reports; indeed, it aggressively defended the payments as legitimate and justified.

At the same time it denounced the stories, in the elegant words of party chairman Harry Myers, as "another one of those damned smear campaigns" and it announced that it would seek out and punish whoever gave the information to the media. "There is somebody who wants to get information out," said MP Deborah Grey, "and we have all our horses in line to find out who it was."

Superficially, the response was quite effective. It succeeded in introducing diversions, such as the question of how little time Mr. Manning has to spend with his family. (If the problem is shortage of time, the solution is to give him more time, not more money.) And it riveted media attention on one relatively inexpensive trip to Hawaii rather than on the much larger amounts being claimed every year for all sorts of personal expenses.

For a party with a notoriously poor record of crisis management, this was a bravura performance. It was even rewarded with a mawkish editorial in The Calgary Herald last Sunday arguing that "it's petty to begrudge Reform support for Preston and Sandra Manning's vacation."

Nonetheless, Reform's response begs question after question. If the payments are legitimate and justified, why is it a smear upon the leader to tell the public about them? Why didn't the party itself divulge the personal expense accounts? One Reform MP said she thought members "are going to be glad he's been able to have time with his family, and with Sandra, and that we've been able to help in some way." If that's true, why not publicize the payments as widely as possible, so Reformers will dig even deeper to help the Mannings in their time of need?

The most outrageous aspect of the whole affair is the lack of outrage expressed thus far. The media have uncritically repeated Reform's rationalizations without seeking to uncover the whole story. The other political parties, with their own skeletons to hide, have studiously ignored the issue.

The culture of concealment is a disease infecting Canada's political class. It is sad that Reform has caught the virus.

Tom Flanagan teaches political science at the University of Calgary. A Reform member and the party's director of research in 1991-92, he is the author of Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning.

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