

Does politics mean never having to say you're sorry?



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Judy Sgro lost her job as Canada's immigration minister because she resigned to defend herself against scurrilous allegations of misconduct.

This week, Ms. Sgro was cleared, by her accuser and the Ethics Commissioner on the most serious charges against her. The scumbag, Harjit Singh, who fiddled and diddled Canada's refugee system for 15 years, then made false charges against Ms. Sgro, has returned to India after a deportation order was finally executed against him.

From there, through his lawyer, he responded this week as part of a negotiated settlement with Ms. Sgro: "I, Harjit Singh, wish to provide a full and complete apology and retraction . . . for statements made by me or attributed to me by the media." He then admitted to having lied. He never had a meeting with Ms. Sgro, let alone any conversation involving campaign contributions in exchange for help with his file. He made up the entire story of contributions for help in a desperate attempt to avoid deportation.

As for charges that Ms. Sgro allowed a Romanian stripper to stay in Canada in exchange for campaign help, the Ethics Commissioner said the minister didn't even know the woman. Some staff members did, but not the minister.

Has anybody apologized? Have the Conservative MPs, especially Diane Ablonczy and Rahim Jaffer, who flung charges in her face, said publicly that they are sorry for their words and glad that she acted honourably? Has Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, who demanded her resignation and then, when it happened, complained that it should have occurred earlier, appeared the slightest bit contrite? Have the newspapers that splashed the allegations against her across their front pages, and then editorialized censoriously, said, oops, we overdid things a tad?

Did the Prime Minister, apart from giving her a hug, display the political instincts of a real leader and make her minister without portfolio, rather than waiting until he and his aides could assess the media reaction. Just as he should have said: "I'm going to be with

the vets in Europe, see you later," so he should have said, "I'm not letting the Conservative hyenas destroy a minister, so Ms. Sgro is back in cabinet."

No, no, no and no. Politics is now so venomous in Canada that the nastiest things can be said without anybody apologizing when the words are proven wrong. And so apparently lacking in elementary decency are certain MPs, that even when their accusations are proven groundless, they are not man or woman enough to apologize.

Judy Sgro isn't some political demi-goddess. She was a municipal politician, a backbencher for five years who finally got her chance to be a minister. There are dozens of MPs in both parties much like her. She received one of the nightmare cabinet assignments in Ottawa, immigration.

Before these allegations of misconduct, Ms. Sgro struggled against all the usual obstacles to bring coherence to the country's refugee and immigration systems. Progress was a tough slog, because Liberals depend on multicultural votes, but she knew both systems needed to be made more efficient. Faster deportations. Fewer appeals. Less ministerial discretion.

She was harried daily, as all immigration ministers are, by special pleaders. Everywhere she travelled, people stuffed supplicants' files in her hands. MPs bombarded her with cases involving ministerial discretion. Cabinet ministers knew the refugee and immigration systems were broken. Her mandate letter from the Prime Minister instructed her to bring remedies to cabinet. She did, but the last election cut short any action.

So what do we learn from the Sgro case? First, that the media are unapologetic and remorseless, especially when the smell of blood is around. Second, that the Commons remains a cesspool. (People who think the Sgro case represents something new don't know their political history.)

Third, that the immigration and refugee systems remain unreformed, and perhaps unreformable, given the politics of the issues and impediments erected by Supreme Court decisions -- even though the Harjit Singh case surely illustrated the insulting absurdities of multilayered appeals.

Fourth, who would wish to enter politics, when a scumbag can derail your career, when the media and opposition are merciless, and when the whole atmosphere surrounding politics has become almost totally polluted?

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