

Gerald Butts's master class in taking down an adversary

[By Konrad Yakabuski, columnist, *Globe and Mail*, March 6, 2019](#)

There are different ways to take down your enemies. One is to go low with a character assassination so vicious that you persuade no one else but those who are already on your side. This is the Donald Trump way, and it amounts to a declaration of war.

Then there is the Mark Antony approach, as evidenced in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. His famous eulogy in Act III of the play offers a master class in how to demolish your adversaries, all while praising them as "honourable" people. This, of course, is the more effective of the two approaches.

It is also the approach Gerald Butts adopted in his testimony Wednesday before the House of Commons justice committee, which had accepted his request to appear before it to provide his side of the story in the SNC-Lavalin affair that cost him his job as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's principal secretary. For someone who was forced to sacrifice his life's dream to save his boss, Mr. Butts was remarkably magnanimous toward the woman who almost single-handedly brought him down.

"I believe that this is a story of two people who hold high office, the Prime Minister and the former attorney-general [Jody Wilson-Raybould], both of whom did their jobs to the best of their abilities, as did their respective staff," Mr. Butts calmly told the committee in his opening statement. "There was no malice directed toward anyone personally or professionally."

From there, Mr. Butts proceeded to deliberately build his case that Ms. Wilson-Raybould acted out of spite in accusing Mr. Trudeau, Mr. Butts, Clerk of the Privy Council Michael Wernick and political staff in the Prime Minister's Office of putting "consistent and sustained pressure" on her to overturn a decision by the director of public prosecutions to take SNC-Lavalin to trial on fraud charges.

As far as Mr. Butts was concerned, the former justice minister and attorney-general gave no indication that she felt there was anything inappropriate about conversations she had with all of the above individuals regarding SNC-Lavalin until she learned she was being moved out of her "dream job" in January. She then turned on Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Butts, with whom she had shared a leisurely two-hour-plus dinner at the Château Laurier Hotel only a month earlier, like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*. She charged she was being demoted for refusing to intervene on the SNC-Lavalin file.

"I was deeply concerned by what [Ms. Wilson-Raybould] was saying," Mr. Butts insisted. "It was all a great and sad surprise to me that she could draw those sorts of conclusions about her colleagues, including myself. I tried to counter her misapprehensions with repeated, honest efforts. In the end, I was unable to do so. And here we are today."

He might have well said, “hell hath no fury like a female minister scorned.” But that would have been too Trump-like for the brain behind Mr. Trudeau’s feminist foreign policy. The effect is the same. Mr. Butts painted Ms. Wilson-Raybould as a self-centred diva.

Ms. Wilson-Raybould, Mr. Butts said, refused to accept an offer to become Indigenous Services minister, arguing that, as an Indigenous woman who had spent her life fighting the Indian Act, she could hardly act to uphold it. Mr. Butts said he understood her position but that, in his two decades in politics, he had also “never seen a minister turn down a ministry.”

“My advice was that the Prime Minister should not set the precedent that a cabinet minister could refuse a new position, and effectively remain in one position for the life of the government,” Mr. Butts added, implying that Ms. Wilson-Raybould lost the Justice portfolio for that reason alone.

Mr. Butts presented himself as only a tangential actor in the whole SNC-Lavalin saga. That is hard to believe, given the pivotal role he played in every major decision taken by this government until his Feb. 18 resignation. It is even harder to believe that his staff in the PMO were not acting on his explicit direction in making pleas to Ms. Wilson-Raybould, even invoking, according to her testimony, the electoral consequences in Quebec of failing to offer SNC-Lavalin a deal to avoid prosecution on fraud and corruption charges involving its Libyan operations.

Mr. Butts more than once described protecting the 9,000 Canadian jobs at SNC-Lavalin as “a public-policy problem of the highest order.” Yet, we are supposed to believe that the Prime Minister’s top adviser, one with his hands in every other file, barely played a role in this one?

Throughout his testimony, Mr. Butts was unfailing polite, helpful and good-humoured, even cracking jokes and buttering up Conservative MP Lisa Raitt by referring to their shared Cape Breton roots.

His modus operandi was apparent, however, in one line he repeated even as he sought to demolish Ms. Wilson-Raybould’s credibility. “I am not here,” Mr. Butts insisted, “to call anybody names.” Mark Antony could not have said it better.