

Expulsions from Liberal Party Parliamentary caucus of former cabinet members Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott accomplish nothing but vindictiveness for vindictiveness's sake

By Andrew Coyne, columnist, *National Post*, April 2, 2019

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“Ultimately the choice that is before you,” Jody Wilson-Raybould pleaded with her caucus colleagues, in a letter written hours before they were to pass sentence on her, “is about what kind of party you want to be a part of, what values it will uphold, the vision that animates it, and indeed the type of people it will attract and make it up.”

But they made that choice long ago. They knew what kind of party they wanted to be a part of from the moment they accepted their nominations; indeed, were they not the type of person that party attracts they would not have been recruited for it. It is the kind of party, and person, that unquestioningly puts loyalty to party before principle — and mercilessly punishes those who do not. So on the question of whether to expel the former minister of justice and attorney general — along with the former Treasury Board president, Jane Philpott — for the crime of denouncing the attempt, by the prime minister and senior government officials, to interfere with a criminal prosecution, there could have been little doubt how they would vote.

Whether they chose to shoot the messengers so spontaneously, over Justin Trudeau’s objections, as some reports have claimed — they were “determined to take the matter into their own hands,” according to a Canadian Press story, as if MPs were so eager to prove their obedience to the leader as to be willing to defy him — or whether they did so under orders doesn’t much matter. The rotting of the soul is the same either way.

We can now see, if it were not already apparent, the moral compass by which the prime minister and his caucus steer. The scandal in the SNC-Lavalin affair is, by this reckoning, not the months-long campaign to subvert the independence of the attorney general and, through her, to force the independent director of public prosecutions to drop charges of fraud and corruption against a long-time Liberal party contributor, but the opposition to it.

Traditional political theory teaches that the executive branch of government is responsible to the legislative. It is now clearer than ever that the reverse more nearly applies: members of the Liberal caucus plainly see it as their role, not to hold the government to account, but rather their fellow MPs — on behalf of the government. When wrongdoing by those high in government is alleged by a pair of whistleblowers, their first thought is to root out the whistleblowers.

Even when presented with incontrovertible evidence, in the form of an audio recording, that the clerk of the privy council, Michael Wernick, threatened the former attorney general with dismissal if she did not bend to the PM’s will, and that she repeatedly and explicitly protested against this “political interference” — on both points contrary to his testimony before a

parliamentary committee — the prime minister and his camp followers profess themselves outraged, not at what the tape reveals, but that it exists.

No such outrage attended the release of a near-verbatim transcript of a later conversation between the former attorney general and the prime minister, based on notes taken by a person who was not even (so far as she was aware) privy to the call: the prime minister's former principal secretary, Gerald Butts. Why is a surreptitiously obtained transcript (which confirms, not confounds, her testimony) acceptable, while a surreptitiously obtained tape is not? The objection would appear to be that the latter is more accurate.

So the charge is a pretext. What has agitated Liberal MPs is not the former attorney general's recording of a conversation she correctly anticipated would be improper and could have guessed would be denied, or her failure to alert the prime minister at whose behest it had taken place (and who could not fail to have been informed of its contents), but rather that she has contradicted and embarrassed the leader.

Or rather no: I suspect what truly outrages them is the sight of a person of conscience, unwilling to sacrifice her principles so readily on the altar of partisanship. For those who can still remember what that was like, it must be deeply shaming. For the rest, there is only one principle — blind loyalty to the leader — in which cause they are prepared to sacrifice any number of colleagues.

We should understand, not only how noxious this is, but how unusual. Only in Canada can you be kicked out of the party for disobeying the leader — because only in Canada has the party been so wholly subsumed by the leader, to the point that it exists more or less as an extension of his persona. The prime minister of Great Britain has suffered multiple coup attempts, without any such purges. Because in Britain it is understood that the leader serves the party, rather than the other way around.

Yet it is exactly that sort of leader-dominated, centralized politics that created this mess. Only a leader who was effectively accountable to no one could have so lost sight of the relevant ethical boundaries as to attempt to shut down a prosecution — for any reason, let alone the nakedly partisan purposes alleged. Only a leader surrounded by sycophants could have imagined that the past seven weeks of denial, deflection and smears could succeed in rescuing his reputation.