

26 November 2010

There are few jobs on offer today that require absolutely no qualifications. There are two notable exceptions to this rule: prostitution and politics - and both professions involve trying to please large numbers of people, sequentially or collectively.

As well as this lack of quality control, politicians can't choose their colleagues. All through the 1990s, I worked quite closely with St Leonard Mayor Frank Zampino and Laval Mayor Gilles Vaillancourt: two politicians who are now not in particularly good odour.

Yes, corruption and politics have always gone hand-in-hand; but, just as we now cure once-incurable diseases, we need to stop shrugging our shoulders at political sleaze. How? Well, getting rid of political parties would be a good start, as they demand an allegiance to a party, not to the public.

Parties create a pack, them-against-us, mentality. Parties also need to be fed with lots of money, sometimes leading to important backs that subsequently develop itches.

Plus we now have the phenomenon of the career politician - someone who has never held a "real" job; someone has to hang onto a political post because there is nowhere else to go.

Most professions have governing bodies to ensure, or at least encourage, ethical behaviour - the Press Council, the College of Physicians, the Quebec Bar, and the Order of Engineers, come to mind. Politicians have nothing.

Mind you, local politicians could regulate themselves if the *Union des Municipalités du Québec* could be pressed into service. And at least the UMQ should be more careful as to who sits on its board of directors.

On November 13, I emailed Marc Gascon, president of the UMQ and mayor of St-Jerome. Gascon was under investigation as his house was rebuilt by a contractor who had contracts with the city. It's probably a case of questionable judgment, not ethics.

I wrote to Gascon: "You cannot carry out your responsibilities as president as long as a shadow of a doubt remains in this matter, especially in the current climate. It's the interests of the UMQ that must prevail: you are not just a UMQ mayor; you are its president. It's tough, but that's it."

The next day, in a predictable sort of tribal reaction, the UMQ board of directors rallied round their chief. So, in protest, I resigned from the board and the executive committee. Less than 24 hours after my resignation became public, Marc Gascon changed his mind and resigned.

I have yet to return to the UMQ, as I feel that the mayor of Laval should also step aside. After all, the government is asking him to quit the board of Hydro-Quebec.

Meanwhile, the good and useful get smeared with the bad. Former Police Chief Jacques Duchesneau, while busy trying to root out municipal corruption with Operation Hammer, upset a lot of people, one of whom trumped up some trivial charges against him. Duchesneau immediately stepped aside.

So principled people know what to do. Unlike prostitution, easy virtue in politics should not be taken lying down.