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BALDREY: Accountability is not a dirty word to be avoided

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View from
THE LEDGE
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Eventually, in the life of a government, arrogance and cynicism seem to inevitably find their way into the core of its existence.

After 15 years in power, we may be witnessing that with the B.C. Liberal government, which has snagged itself on two hooks, neither of which they are demonstrating much of an ability to wriggle free from.

One of those hooks is the festering sore that is the mysterious firings of more than a half-dozen health ministry drug researchers back in 2012. The other is the mounting evidence of a wanton disregard for keeping records and making them public when requested.

Both of these issues share a common theme: a lack of accountability. In both instances, we see a government intent on skirting the truth, of being evasive, and on hiding things, no matter how mundane some of those things may be.

The health firings continue to be one of the more astonishing episodes in B.C. political history. Seven people had their lives altered (one committed suicide) and the government essentially lied about what happened.

The latest revelation — that there was no RCMP probe after all, despite the government claiming there was one, in the apparent hope that a police investigation would lend credence that something bad had indeed been committed by those fired — is truly breathtaking in how it put to the lie a key part of the government's narrative.

Government officials (Premier Christy Clark being the latest) keep apologizing for this tawdry tale, but no one can say who, exactly, pulled the pin on these firings and who authorized the phony RCMP story. The whole sorry episode is starting to resemble a Nixon-like coverup.

There is, apparently, nothing on the written record when it comes to government records. No one wrote anything down, a sign I suppose that those involved in this outrageous behaviour fundamentally knew that what was being done was wrong, and they didn't want their names attached to anything near it.

This aversion to record-keeping is not an isolated example. For years, a culture has been building within the B.C. government (and likely other provincial governments as well) that avoids putting things on the record, preferring to practice what Freedom of Information and Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham has called an “oral government.”

And so we have the latest allegation from a former political staffer in the B.C. Liberal government. Tim Duncan claims when he resisted deleting emails that related to a freedom of information request that had come to his ministerial office, a senior staffer grabbed his keyboard and deleted the dozen emails himself.

If true (Denham is investigating) this incident speaks to an almost cheerful disregard for the law, or at least the spirit of it. When routine freedom of information requests come back with absolutely no records relating to the issue at hand — a recurring event, it appears — you know something bad is going on.

Firing employees for false reasons, refusing to create a public record and then destroying it if it's requested — these are the actions of a government that appears ready to go rogue if that's what it thinks is required.

The B.C. government can continue to talk about building an LNG industry, or about saying “yes” to industrial projects, or about how its budget is balanced year after year.

But arrogance and cynicism can wash away all the good that may flow from those accomplishments. If the public sees enough of it over time, it may start to resemble moral rot, which can be fatal for any government.

The B.C. Liberals best take heed, and show that accountability is not a dirty word to be avoided, but is in fact an attribute that a truly transparent government would want to embrace.

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