

Wordwide corruption is no conspiracy theory

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People love a juicy conspiracy theory.

From the assassination of JFK and the moon landings to Elvis, people cling to their beliefs.

In some instances, much of it has to do with a lack of faith in government. It's a matter of trust, or lack thereof.

In Canada, we're quite lucky in many regards. Genuine stories of government corruption are not commonplace. I wouldn't say they're rare, but legitimate, large-scale incidents are few and far between.

Our media and citizen watchdogs are quite good at digging up the dirt and exposing minor and major incidents of corruption.

But on the whole, I believe that Canada is a fairly decent country, run by well meaning (although overpaid) civil servants.

But again, a lack of faith in the system breeds suspicion.

They're all corrupt and on the take, you know. How often have you overheard that comment at the coffee shop or while waiting in line at your favourite fast-food restaurant?

In my line of work, I've been covering politics at the local, regional, provincial and federal levels for more than 30 years. In all those years, I've only come across a handful of corruption cases. But that's still too many, as far as taxpayers are concerned.

I still regularly receive calls and emails about alleged wrongdoings or what's perceived as misconduct. I think when residents run into a hurdle or stumbling block in their dealings with any level of government, they often jump to conclusions and feel as they've been wronged. That leads them to believe there's some sort of collusion or conspiracy taking place.

Others point to a lack of accountability or transparency, common catch phrases used by everyone these days. All governments, all elected officials and all civil servants are accountable. There are mechanisms in place to make it so.

Sure, there may be some areas that are inefficient and some processes and job descriptions may be duplicated, leading to waste and, unfortunately, mistakes. Some believe certain civil servants or government employees have too much autonomy, too much power and control of the purse strings.

Again, the internal structure of any government entity is what it is.

That doesn't mean the public can't ask questions and demand answers.

Accessibility to municipal staff is key in this day and age.

I recall a time when it was easy to waltz into the CAO's office and share a coffee with the second in command, simply to shoot the breeze or ask questions.

I could also pay a visit to any elementary school without notice, to take photos or interview staff and students.

Today, it's a whole different ball game. Fear, apprehension and legalities have made such visits impossible.

So, in an attempt to safeguard our young, accessibility has been curtailed.

While it can be justified at the school level, it should not be extended to branches of the government that answer to the taxpaying public.

Canadian politicians and civil servants are painted with a very large brush and unfortunately, they're guilty by association. Their counterparts in other parts of the globe, are downright crooked.

More than one person in two thinks corruption has worsened in the last two years, according to the world's largest public opinion survey on corruption from Transparency International. Survey participants also firmly believe they can make a difference and have the will to take action against graft.

The Global Corruption Barometer 2013 is a survey of 114,000 people in 107 countries and it shows corruption is widespread. In all, 27% of respondents have paid a bribe when accessing public services and institutions in the last 12 months, revealing no improvement from previous surveys.

Still, nearly 9 out of 10 people surveyed said they would act against corruption and two-thirds of those who were asked to pay a bribe had refused, suggesting that governments, civil society and the business sector need to do more to engage people in thwarting corruption.

Bribe paying levels remain very high worldwide, but people believe they have the power to stop corruption and the number of those willing to combat the abuse of power, secret dealings and bribery is significant, said Huguette Labelle, the chair of Transparency International.

The Global Corruption Barometer 2013 also found that in too many countries the institutions people rely on to fight corruption and other crime are themselves not trusted. The report found that 36 countries view police as the most corrupt, and in those countries an average of 53% of people had been asked to pay a bribe to the police. And 20 countries view the judiciary as the most corrupt, and in those countries an average of 30% of the people who had come in contact with the judicial systems had been asked to pay a bribe. Governments need to take this cry against corruption from their citizenry seriously and respond with concrete action to elevate transparency and accountability, Labelle said. Strong leadership is needed from the G20 governments in particular. In the 17 countries surveyed in the G20, 59% of respondents said their government is not doing a good job at fighting corruption.

In 51 countries around the world political parties are seen as the most corrupt institution; 55 per cent of respondents think government is run by special interests.

By comparison, this neck of the woods is paradise!

But I'm not suggesting we let our guard down, or stop snooping. Quite the contrary. A strong media, sharp citizenry and watchdog groups are all necessary to keep our system in check.