

Premier Harris and Walkerton: Does ignorance excuse?

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I was ignorant, so I'm not to blame, says Ontario's Premier. You were ignorant, so you *are* to blame, reply his critics. Who's right?

Those accused of moral responsibility for a harmful outcome frequently plead, as an excuse, that they were ignorant. During the Somalia inquiry, for example, the Chief of Canadian Defence Staff, General Jean Boyle, claimed to have been unaware that troops under his command had been guilty of torture and murder in Somalia. Boyle also denied knowledge of document tampering and cover-up in connection with this scandal.

No one could prove that General Boyle actually knew of the crimes and the cover-up but, nevertheless, he lost his job. He lost his job because it was determined that even if he didn't know, he should have known. It is the responsibility of senior officials in any large organization, public or private, to ensure that they are well informed about crucial matters.

In his extraordinary testimony before the Walkerton Inquiry, Premier Harris claimed not to have known that there was "any risk" associated with such measures as his government's elimination of public water-testing laboratories or its elimination of inspections of closed waste dumps. Harris later contradicted himself on this point when he admitted that he did know of the risks, but considered them "manageable" (whatever that means) and therefore unsuitable for public disclosure.

So, was he ignorant or not? In an important sense, it doesn't really matter. If, despite the profusion of warnings from within and without his own government, Premier Harris managed somehow to preserve his ignorance of all dangers, then his ignorance was blameworthy because self-induced. To put the matter simply: if a leader seeks to plead ignorance as his defence, he must show not only that he did not know of the dangers but that *he could not reasonably have known*.

In his role as Premier, Mike Harris had a clear responsibility to ensure that he and his Cabinet were fully aware of the costs, human as well as financial, of government cut-backs. Testimony before the Inquiry, however, suggests that the culture of de-regulation-at-all-costs, which animated the government's so-called Red Tape Commission, was one which enthusiastically subordinated public safety to "the bottom line". Thus, if Mike Harris was truly ignorant, as he claims, of the serious dangers likely to ensue from his government's severe environmental-protection cuts, then his ignorance looks for all the world to be a culpable failure of foresight, a wilful blindness - perhaps, as some critics are suggesting, induced by ideological blinders.

. “If it [the existence of serious risks to human health] had been brought to my attention”, Harris told the Inquiry, “we would not have proceeded.” Could it be true, is it really possible, that no one in the Harris Government managed to alert anyone in the Cabinet of the terrible dangers associated with this phase of the “Common Sense Revolution”? It seems unlikely, but it could conceivably be true.

Government ministers who *desire* to be kept in a state of ignorance – so that when things go wrong they enjoy “plausible deniability”– can easily communicate to subordinates that the bringer of unwanted news will be shot at dawn. By a wink and a nod, they can ensure that top civil servants do not forcefully draw the Cabinet’s attention to embarrassing or politically inconvenient facts. So, any assessment of the Harris Government’s moral blameworthiness will have to consider whether their fatal lack of knowledge resulted from an attempt to screen themselves from awkward truths.

Premier Harris has earned the reputation of being a political leader who doesn’t do contrition. True to form, he has offered no apology either to the people of Ontario or, more particularly, to the grieving citizens of Walkerton. Some Ontarians may feel assuaged, however, by his acknowledgement that he is the person “ultimately accountable” if any of his government’s actions are to blame for the tragedy at Walkerton.

Readers with a long memory may recall that former Liberal Health Minister, Monique Begin, whose department’s multiple failures were causally implicated in the HIV-AIDS tainted blood scandal, earned much public praise when she affirmed that “public ethics requires that those at the top be accountable”. Begin then, and Harris now, seem willing to embrace their “ultimate accountability”, even as they deny that they or their top officials have done anything in the slightest degree blameworthy.

Ironically, then, officials who adamantly refuse to acknowledge their personal responsibility for great tragedy can sometimes win public applause by mouthing Harry Truman’s famous phrase “the buck stops here”, or words to that effect. Premier Harris still doesn’t see, or won’t admit, that the villainy or incompetence of the Koebel brothers might not have produced death in Walkerton if his government had assigned a higher priority to public health and safety. True accountability would require of the Premier that he explain openly and honestly to the people of Ontario how it was possible for a government which prides itself on common sense nevertheless to impose severe public health cut-backs which everyone but they could see were rash and dangerous. If he’s not willing or able to give a proper explanation, the ultimate accountability of his government to the citizenry may come in two year’s time. At the ballot box.

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