

OPINION

Corruption: Is Trudeau like Blair?

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Canada has been hit by a political crisis in which allegations of improper pressure were put on former Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould to help construction firm SNC-Lavalin Group Inc avoid a criminal trial

(Keystone / Adrian Wyld)

The political scandal currently gripping Canada and the British Aerospace case under Tony Blair both show money's corrupting influence, writes Swiss anti-bribery expert Mark Pieth.

Point of view

On February 27, the former Canadian Minister of Justice, Jody Wilson-Raybould, took the courageous step of explaining to the media how she had been pushed out of office. Even though she is independent according to the Canadian Constitution, she had for months been cajoled by high-ranking officials close to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to strike a deal with the Canadian engineering company SNC-Lavalin, rather than go to court over whether the company paid bribes to the family of former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The reasons for the political pressure are obvious. SNC-Lavalin has its head office in Québec, Trudeau's main power base. His fear was – [as he admits](#) – a dramatic loss of jobs, as a corruption conviction would possibly lead to the barring of SNC-Lavalin from future business.

The case reminds us of the crisis that erupted when Tony Blair ordered the UK's Serious Fraud Office to close the investigation against British Aerospace for bribing Saudi officials in 2006. The commonality of the two cases is that politicians of major states find no difficulty in blatantly going against international law when they see their domestic interests threatened. Canada, like the UK, has ratified the [OECD Anti-Bribery Convention](#). This Convention restricts the closure of procedures on foreign bribery to professional reasons. It clearly rules out political and economic motives in its Article 5.

In the case of Canada, it is by no means the first time the country has crossed wires with the OECD Working Group on Bribery. This anti-corruption watchdog continuously monitors country compliance with its requirements. Already in 2004, the so-called "Phase 2" report of Canada was scathing: legislation was considered insufficient and the total lack of cases was considered particularly problematic for a hub of the world's extractive industries. The "Phase 3" report in 2011, still under the Harper government, was only marginally more flattering: the otherwise-so-diplomatic OECD expressed "significant concerns", since the "legislative and institutional framework" remained "problematic".

Canada and the UK reacted in a similar manner to the criticism by hitting back at the critics and trying to impeach the chair of the watchdog institution. The Trudeau government seems to have learned from the [Harper administration](#) that speeches about ethics and fighting corruption make good campaign topics, but when it's about money, principles go and people in your way get mobbed out. Trump may have invented "America first", but "Rule Britannia" or "leave Canadian business alone" were there before.



Mark Pieth, a professor of criminal law at the University of Basel, was chairman of the OECD Working Group on Bribery between 1990 and 2013.

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