



FILE PHOTO: Former construction boss Lino Zambito testifies before the Charbonneau inquiry probing corruption and collusion in Quebec's construction industry in this image made off television Monday, October 1, 2012 in Montreal.

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## Parliamentarians must stand up to corrupt politics

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We live in an age of dire cynicism about corruption in politics. Nearly three-quarters of Canadians surveyed for Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer judged their government's efforts against corruption to be "ineffective." By this measure, Canadians have a lower opinion of their own government's commitment to public integrity than do Pakistanis, Iraqis and Nigerians.

Since then, ongoing revelations by Quebec's Charbonneau Commission of an orgy of bribery, influence peddling, and organized crime in the corridors of power have done little to improve the standing of Canada's governing class.

Globally, the consequences of political corruption almost defy understanding.

The World Bank estimates that more than \$1-trillion are paid in bribes every year, the largest of which are to obtain state contracts and monopolies. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that multinational criminality moves \$2.1-trillion per year across borders, enabled by the active collusion or passive inattention of regulators. The Tax Justice Network estimates that governments lose \$3.1-trillion per year because of tax evasion, disproportionately by those with the resources to sway policy makers or public servants.

By comparison, meeting the much-vaunted Millennium Development Goals – eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, establishing universal primary education, reducing child mortality by two-thirds, reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters, halting the spread of HIV and malaria, halving the proportion of people without access to clean water and sanitation, and promoting gender equality in schools and the workforce – would cost no more than \$481-billion in development.

What the world loses to corruption in a single year would be enough to end the worst forms of human misery and transform human civilization, a dozen times over.

Political corruption robs citizens of our own resources, our fundamental rights, and our very identities as members of a free and equal society. It makes the weak prey to the strong, and delivers control of society into the hands of the unjust. It debilitates the nation, undermines the rule of law and rots public confidence in democracy. It is a crime against hope itself.

Corruption takes many forms: the theft of public resources; the sale of political influence; the betrayal of the public trust. In all cases, however, corruption thrives when political power is able to operate in the shadows, and it withers before the glare of public scrutiny.

The solution to corruption is therefore extraordinarily simple to describe, though fiendishly difficult to achieve: a vigilant, relentless, and fearless community of citizens and parliamentarians, standing together between our leaders and the levers of power.

Parliamentarians are the watchdogs of democracy, and it is tragic that so many citizens of so many nations perceive our watchdogs as having muted their bark, muzzled their bite, and been neutered by the very powers they were meant to hold at bay. It is a perception that is too often justified, but it is a perception that is just as often desperately unfair.

There are parliamentarians around the world who risk their lives every day to speak for those who would otherwise have no voice. There are parliamentarians who tilt at the powerful for no better reason than to shield others. There are still parliamentarians who understand that election to office is not a licence to rule, but a contract to serve.

Civic organizations, parliamentarians and global institutions have come together this week in Brasilia at the International Anti-Corruption Conference, in an effort to join forces in the fight against corruption. It is the single largest anti-corruption gathering in history.

We have seen a parade of Nobel laureates and village volunteers. We have wrestled with strategies that tell of vision and of folly. We have heard cries of optimism and howls of impotent rage.

But ultimately, this gathering will succeed only if it ends by inspiring cynical citizens to believe that the political process can be part of the solution, not only part of the problem; by stirring courage in timorous legislators to stare down those who know no restraint; and by convincing both groups that together, we can achieve the victory over corruption that none of us can reach alone.

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