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OttawaWatch 221: Sex-trading and the Olympics

By Lloyd Mackey

I am always indebted to Frank Bucholtz, quoted toward the end of this piece, for pointing out the collaborative nature of the Robert Borden prime ministerial tenure during World War I. There have been at least two other “collaborative” periods in Canadian governance, both in times of minority houses. The first was during the Liberal tenure of Lester Pearson in the 1960s and the second during Stephen Harper’s minority years from 2006 to 2011.

It could well be that the election taking place two days after this is written may result, as an afterthought, in advancing a more collaborative form of governance. But, as in both the Pearson and Harper examples, they will require some constructive faith-political interface initiatives.

Next February’s Winter Olympics, in British Columbia, have Winnipeg area MP Joy Smith working long hours. The objective of her labours is the passage of her private members’ bill calling for mandatory minimum sentences for human trafficking offences.

Smith’s strong sense of need to combat trafficking is starting to seep through around Ottawa. This morning (Tuesday, May 5), I attended a press conference in which she and Steven Blaney, the chair of the governing party’s Quebec caucus, made the case.

Two weeks ago, the House of Commons passed second reading on Bill C-268, which takes it to the committee debate stage. For Smith, the occasion gave pause for both happiness and apprehension. She has been involved in fighting human trafficking for ten years, first as a Manitoba provincial legislator and, since 2004, as a member of parliament.

Tuesday’s press conference was, among other things, to address the urgency of getting the bill out of committee and back for house approval before summer.

Her point is that the part of the nation’s population that attracts girls and very young women into the sex trade are already organizing for the Olympics, where there is substantial money to be made from this exploitative practice.

Smith says criminal elements have traditionally used major international athletic events to attract young people to the sex trade.

She first became concerned about human trafficking when her RCMP officer son was working with the force’s integrated child exploitation (ICE) unit. What he saw turned his hair gray in two years, she says. And that was only the beginning.

But human trafficking, as an issue, has a low profile, given that it involves the “enslavement” of so many people worldwide. Its illicit earnings are second only to the drug trade, for what Smith describes as its predators.

It is the organized criminal activity associated with the trade that ensnares so many, yet also forces the issue beneath the radar of most Canadians.

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Smith makes her church home at Eastview Community Church, an evangelically-rooted congregation of 800 in Winnipeg. And with that base of encouragement, among others, she tries to draw the interest of Christian people, to become informed. Recently, she was scheduled to speak to the issue at the BC Leadership Prayer Breakfast.

It ended up that rookie West Vancouver Sea-to-Sky MP John Weston, had to fill in for her. As it happened, she needed to be in Winnipeg during a critical care period for her husband, who is battling cancer.

It was Weston’s explaining of Smith’s deep concern for the issue to me that first flagged that I should be paying attention. (Around that time, also, Frank Stirk reported on the emergence of Bill C-268, for *ChristianWeek* newspaper.)

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Tuesday’s press conference had the particular objective of catching some attention in Quebec. That was because the lone party voting against C-268 was the Bloc Quebecois, who object on principle to the idea of mandatory minimum sentences. They maintain that sentencing decisions should remain, as much as possible, in the hands and minds of judges.

Smith keeps her fury at that opposition well in check, not wanting it to be a partisan issue. In short order, she turns constructive, citing the “courage” of the one Bloc MP who voted in favour and “has been strongly supportive”. That person is Marina Mourani.

Were there Liberals and NDPers who helped garner support in their caucuses? Among such, she named Paul Szabo, Borys Wrzesnewskyj and Dominic LeBlanc. And Joe Comartin figured with the NDP.

And, did her own party show any official support, apart from all attending government MPs, including the prime minister, casting in favour, on the night of the vote? The answer to that question came at Tuesday’s press conference, when the parliamentary secretary to Justice Minister Rob Nicholson delivered a strong statement in French. His name is Daniel Petit.

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One last point on human trafficking: Major Grant Effer, federal government liaison for the Salvation Army, had some strong support for Smith at the press conference. He spoke of the need for mandatory sentencing as one important element in dealing with a serious issue. Among others, he noted, is the need for restorative justice.

On that, Smith is in complete agreement. She told me in an interview after the press conference that “when girls are rescued, they need time out.

“One 15-year-old victim told (me) that it takes a long time to feel safe ... from retaliation.”

There is a need, Smith says, for “safe shelters for girls ... a place to feel placid and quiet” after being rescued.

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I will wrap this week with a response to last week’s *OttawaWatch* from a long time friend and sometime colleague, Frank Bucholtz, editor of the *Langley Times* newspaper. As it happens, Frank holds a history degree from Simon Fraser University. And my mention of the World War I coalition government of Sir Robert Borden, as part of my review of *Blue Thunder*, by Bob Plamondon, caught his attention. With his permission, I am passing on what he had to say:

I studied that era extensively in my SFU history courses. The Union government that Robert Borden led was made up of Conservatives (including a small number from the Montreal area) and Liberals from provinces outside of Quebec.

Virtually no Quebec MPs supported either conscription or the Union government, other than those noted above. In fact, most of the Liberals elected in 1917 were from Quebec and opposed conscription.

Mackenzie King did manage to get elected as a Liberal in an Ontario riding, and thus positioned himself to succeed Laurier.

I am a great admirer of Borden and believe he is consistently ignored by far too many historians and political scientists. The weight on his shoulders as prime minister was greater than that borne by any other, given the widespread and ongoing carnage of the First World War.

The movie *Passchendaele*, which was released last year, gives a hint of what he had to deal with both on the home front and on the battlefields.

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