

Full disclosure urged for avoiding conflicts

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Mississauga South MP Don Blenkarn may not think his colleague Sinclair Stevens should be thrown out of the Conservative caucus, but he believes all federal MPs should be required to disclose their financial situations.

Blenkarn caused a stir recently when he said Stevens should not be removed from the Tory caucus after a federal inquiry found the former Cabinet minister guilty of contravening federal conflict of interest guidelines 14 times.

In an interview, Blenkarn said the Parker inquiry found Stevens, whose leadership campaign Blenkarn once managed, did nothing legally wrong. "They never found that he stole anything or made any money (by Cabinet decisions)," said Blenkarn.

The veteran Conservative MP went on to list a number of examples where MPs and former MPs were involved in more serious offences including: a former Cabinet minister who is now a Senator who was convicted of drunk driving; a former Liberal Cabinet minister who resigned after only 10 days when he was charged with tax evasion and fraud; an MP from the Northwest Territories who pleaded guilty to beating his wife; and an MP from the Territories who was found guilty of possession of cocaine.

"They didn't throw any of the other guys out," says Blenkarn, pointing out that Stevens is appealing the findings of the Parker inquiry in the courts.

"Disclosure is the only way to go, not blind trusts," said Blenkarn, referring to the federal government's current requirement that Cabinet ministers place their holdings in trust to try to eliminate conflicts of interest with firms that deal with the government.

Blenkarn says that may work for public companies, but many MPs own or control private companies that are run by other family members. A blind trust clearly does not work in those cases, he says.

The chairman of the Commons finance committee said disclosure should not just include assets either. In most cases, disclosures of liabilities is more important because MPs are more likely to try to show favor to a firm with which they may have mortgages or loans in order to curry favor.

The public should know if an MP is heavily in debt and to whom, says Blenkarn. "It would be interesting to know who holds the mortgages on the houses of Opposition members," says the Port Credit lawyer. "Maybe then it wouldn't be so easy for them to hide behind their role as Opposition and throw mudballs," he added.

Blenkarn also said MPs should be required to disclose the personal guarantees they may have given for loans taken out by companies in which they invest. He and his wife, Marguerite, probably have \$6-\$7 million worth of such guarantees, he said.

The MP joked that his own complicated investment operations and businesses are so widespread that "sometimes I can't explain it to myself, with all the twists and turns there are."