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Secrets and Lies, Down East

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In Nova Scotia, the scandal remains front page news: For at least the past three years a lot of politicians fudged their expense accounts. New disclosures surface daily, more heads roll and neophyte premier Darrell Dexter isn't looking good at all. He himself expensed \$7,650 for a pair of laptops and a digital camera while taxpayers picked up his annual \$3,500 bar fees.

Next door in Newfoundland, Premier Danny Williams just caused a fuss of his own. Not only did he fail to mention he needed heart surgery, he flew off to the States to get it under cover of darkness. Newfoundland's a small enough and friendly enough place that everyone knows everyone else's business, or feels they should. And so Newfoundlanders were miffed, at first, that they weren't let in on young Danny's secret. But all's forgiven now. Anxiously they await news of his recovery.

It's certainly no scandal like Nova Scotia's. Newfoundland had one of those already. A 2006 spending scandal roped in four politicians, including two former Liberal Cabinet ministers and a former Tory Cabinet minister, once the party leader, who'd overpaid themselves about \$1-million. All went to jail, and Williams took no time to launch a review of the legislature's financial controls.

In Newfoundland, a fraud's a fraud. In Nova Scotia, it's all just headlines. The provincial auditor who spilled the beans now wants a forensic audit, but Premier Dexter has said let's not (nor a public enquiry either).

When it comes to secrets and lies down east, that's why Danny gets a pass from his constituents and Darrell doesn't. Yes, Williams is a Tory and Dexter's NDP. But Atlantic Canadians don't care so much who you came with. They just want someone who's strong and somewhat sincere. So when it comes to Danny's secret surgery, Newfoundlanders say the premier's got a right to his privacy, and to medical care as well. Like the rest of us, in Canada he finds that hard to come by.

As for Darrell's secret spending, it turns out other MLAs and ex-MLAs expensed a few things of their own: \$2,600 for a printer; nearly \$8,000 for a generator (which, according to the CBC, may have been worth only \$800); \$15,000 for another generator, six computers, a 50-inch plasma TV and (perhaps most important of all) a shredder; \$400 for patio furniture; \$2,969 for books; \$6,234 for a constituency office website; \$790 for a model ship; \$1,260 to someone's brother for parking lot sanding; \$13,445 for custom furniture... don't these guys ever shop around for deals?

There was at least a third generator and two more TVs. Someone expensed an office full of furniture, then sold it as his own to a colleague who expensed it again. Some MLAs claimed things several times. Some got their receipts "mixed up." Some didn't provide receipts at all. One former Tory MLA, now called Inspector Gadget, spent the most: \$44,000 for 11 computers, 12 printers, five digital cameras, four video cameras and a \$100 video game called Dance Dance Revolution. You couldn't make this

stuff up.

While all parties have been at the trough, the Tories lived largest. No shocker there, not in Nova Scotia. But it's the new NDP government with pants on the ground. Perhaps no other party ever raised the hopes of Nova Scotians like the NDP did -- until now. Elected just months ago, forming a government down east for the first time, the NDP were going to liberate Nova Scotians from a long, dreary decade of corrupt Tory rule. The NDP were supposed to be pure as the driven snow. They were Nova Scotia's Obama.

And then this scandal. The provincial auditor declined to name names, but pre-emptively many offenders came forward. Sort of. The Premier, said to be on vacation and presumably without a phone, waited nearly a week to explain that he thought he needed "more robust" laptops. Same for his new camera. He waited another week to fess up to the bar fees, and then only when he was prompted.

That \$8,000/\$800 generator? Sure, it had been hard-wired into his home, said the Tory MLA in question, but it was for search and rescue and emergency management, and especially for the folks at the seniors' home down the road who could come by for tea when the power went out. He refused to apologize. When it came out that he'd also expensed an LCD TV for \$3,500, he resigned. Now he's gone to ground.

A Tory Cabinet minister defeated in the last election says she asked first before moving her office stuff (including that second generator and second TV) into her garage.

The new owner of three grand in books said they'll make him a better MLA. The \$790 toy boat was said to motivate people to go to the Halifax waterfront and look at others -- plus it was made locally. The custom furniture was bought (by a senior Cabinet minister) to support local craftsmen as well. "I would definitely like to apologize," said the minister, "if this expensive spending seems to be a real issue."

If you can't say anything sincere, Bambi's Thumper might have advised, don't say anything at all. Darrell, take a lesson from Danny. There's a reason Newfoundlanders love him. He knows that sometimes the best thing to say is nothing; he just gets on with it. What he does say sounds sincere and likely is. He doesn't spend other people's money. And however flawed it's been lately, he has a heart.