Corruption within and without

The Ontario Progressive Conservative government of Doug Ford has shown a remarkable commitment to corruption and self-dealing, as shown by:

1. The Greenbelt land scandal - Real estate developers close to the provincial government purchased land in the Greenbelt around Toronto before it was to have been opened for development and stood to gain over $8 billion from the change before public anger caused the government to reverse course.
2. The Skills Development Fund scandal - Hundreds of millions of dollars of grants for skills development were directed to organizations with ties to party officials (including Ford himself) and clients of former staffers and campaign managers.
3. The Ontario Place scandal - As part of a plan to revitalize Ontario Place, a private spa company was awarded the right to operate a luxury spa on the site through a process that was described by the auditor-general as “not fair, transparent, or accountable.” Costs have skyrocketed from $400 million to over $2 billion for the project.
4. The Metrolinx scandal - Metrolinx is a Crown Corporation owned by the Ontario government which employs public-private partnerships (as in, the public sector pays, and the private sector profits) to complete transit projects in and around Toronto. Unsurprisingly, their projects have been plagued by massive cost overruns and delays, and allegations of a lack of accountability and questionable land dealings.

And yet, the Ontario Progressive Conservatives have won 3 straight majority governments since taking office in 2018. Why, despite such evidence of corruption, have they remained the preferred choice of Ontario voters?

Astonishingly, despite the scandals, the Progressive Conservatives are nevertheless seen as capable. History helps - from 1943 until 1985 the “Big Blue Machine” under premiers such as Bill Davis delivered good government. Just as the federal Liberals are considered “Canada’s natural governing party,” so too are the provincial Conservatives considered the default choice by many voters in Ontario.

However, more worryingly, the routine corruption of this government may not just be being overlooked by voters, but may instead be seen by Ontarians as unavoidable or even necessary.

To understand this point of view, it is helpful to understand the Russian concept of “blat,” meaning the use of personal networks to obtain goods and services in short supply while circumventing formal procedures.

As the Soviet Union teetered towards collapse, if you were the manager of a tractor factory and needed tires, it was increasingly unlikely that you would get them via official channels. Therefore, to meet your tractor quota, you turned to ‘blatniks’ who made sure that you got your tires outside of the formal state procurement processes.

Basically, when the official system stopped functioning effectively, people turned to unofficial systems that, while corrupt, at least functioned. Or, stated more generally, when the implicit, often procedural, corruption inside organizations renders them ineffective, people come to rely on explicitly corrupt personal networks to get things done.

In Ontario, such implicit procedural corruption takes several forms, usually related to regulatory and procedural compliance. For instance, in order to build anything, it is necessary to first pay for a whole array of impact studies, several of which are often unnecessary. Operating any sort of organization, meanwhile, requires adherence to labour, environmental, equity, and other codes which both increase costs and often make otherwise desirable projects impossible.

Of course, there is a class of consultants and bureaucrats (in both the public and private sector) whose livelihoods depend on such procedural faff. The late David Graeber, in his book *Bullshit Jobs*, called them “box-tickers” whose work involves creating the *illusion* that an organization is addressing problems through generating paperwork, performing purely symbolic tasks, and managing appearances. For such workers, being seen to follow and enforce the rules takes precedence over actually getting things accomplished.

Why, though, are our rules and procedures so onerous and obstructive? While it may appear that our sprawling regulations are intended to promote fairness and avoid expensive mistakes (and consequent lawsuits - good old CYA in action!), their true purpose is to preserve the status quo. Processes and systems that limit decision-making to box-ticking sharply limit the ability of democratic leaders to make changes that might threaten the dominance of corporate and financial interests over our core institutions. As such interests love power but dislike the accountability that comes with wielding power openly, enforcing their dominance with opaque, seemingly neutral procedures offers them the concealment they need to preserve their power indefinitely.

And so, worthwhile projects that would improve people’s lives are delayed, shelved, or balloon in cost because faceless and unaccountable regulations and procedures dictate that nothing happens without finance (and its handmaiden, consultancy) getting a piece of the action (which explains why so much is done with Public-Private Partnerships as with Metrolinx). Politicians and bureaucrats who seek to make life better for others eventually give up when they realize that, to use Margaret Thatcher’s phrase, “there is no alternative” to slavish compliance with paralyzing procedures.

Thus caught in a horrible double bind, people broken by their experiences with institutions that have been rendered ineffective feel they have no alternative but to acquiesce to, or even depend upon, open corruption by the powerful for the powerful. Clearly, until we address the procedural “corruption within” our institutions, the explicit “corruption without” exemplified by the Ford government’s self-dealing will be seen by many as inescapable and therefore acceptable.

To break free of this no-win situation, all of us have a responsibility to challenge (and, when it is within our power, reform) accepted ways of doing things that only make completing tasks more difficult and expensive, even if by doing so we risk being reprimanded (or worse). All of us (and especially those people working in leadership and management positions) have a responsibility to tackle the implicit, “corruption-by-rules" which, by sapping the effectiveness of the organizations and systems we depend on, only benefits the interests of finance. Only when our leaders are free to be guided by rules without being dominated by them, and thus empowered to use their informed judgement to make responsible decisions that aim to improve people’s lives, will explicit corruption of the kind we are seeing in Ontario be considered unnecessary and therefore intolerable.

while policies and procedures are needed to guide human decision-making, they should not replace it. Decision-makers should neither avoid nor be robbed of their responsibilities of leadership by being made to defer to arbitrary rules in situations that demand they instead exercise their common sense and informed judgement.

Note - make this more explicitly about implicit versus explicit corruption - how when systems become too process-oriented (often to ensure that they remain clean), they cease to function effectively, which, in turn, encourages people to get things done outside of the system, often in corrupt ways.

The thing is, systems should never seek to replace human judgement and decision-making. The cult of CYA needs to be challenged.

Steiner's view of Ahriman: https://share.google/aimode/EwXZu87QXrtUMQnAN

In his book *Bullshit Jobs*, anthropologist David Graeber defined box-tickers as employees whose primary role is to create the illusion that an organization is doing something it isn't. These roles exist entirely to generate paperwork, complete symbolic tasks, and manage appearances. [1, 2, 3, 4]

The concept highlights the soul-crushing nature of modern corporate bureaucracy. Key characteristics of box-tickers include:

- The Purpose: They allow a company to fulfill bureaucratic requirements or point to "reports" to claim a problem is being handled—even when no real-world change occurs. [1, 2]
- Examples: Corporate compliance officers, in-house newsletter writers, survey administrators, and auditors. [1]

To take an example from my own experience, about 15 years ago I wrote a Canadian high school textbook. In order to be considered for inclusion on the list of Ontario Ministry-approved textbooks, I had to pay several thousand dollars to a company to review it. While the review was very positive, the book was not approved for reasons of “bias and sensitivity.”

Of course, none of the examples cited as being biased or insensitive were in fact problematic. However, as I had paid for the review, I asked if I could post it on my website and use it (in its entirety, without cherry-picking just the good bits) to promote the book to schools.

Imagine my surprise when I was told that, no, the review was a “confidential ministry document” and that I would not be allowed to post it. My observation that making the reviewers’ work itself above review smacked of unaccountability was not welcome. However, other publishers I spoke with told me that I was lucky to have even seen the review, as their own books were often not approved without any written explanation being provided.

Unsurprisingly, by the time I had submitted my book for review, many teachers who had come to realize that the list of approved textbooks was no longer a helpful guide were instead relying on reviews from other teachers to guide them when looking for materials. As the official procedure became ineffective, they turned to their personal networks.

Increasingly, only large firms who can afford to