THE PRICE OF POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

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By Stephen Bede Scharper, The Toronto Star, 19 July 2010

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We in North America have been faced with these taxing questions quite dramatically for the past decade. Ever since the 2000 U.S election, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in an unprecedented move, amid hanging chads, discarded votes and roughed up election officials, stopped the Florida recount, and handed George W. Bush the U.S. presidency, such questions have loomed on our collective political horizon.
This was explosively followed in 2002, when the U.S. began dropping bombs on Baghdad without UN Security Council approval, based on specious claims that Iraq was furtively stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. U.S. invading troops, like the UN inspectors before them, were unable to find such weapons. In fact, there were none.

Moreover, the use of water-boarding by the U.S., in which a prisoner undergoes simulated drowning, long regarded as torture by western nations (and used against captive U.S. troops by the Japanese in World War II) has been vigorously defended by former U.S. vice-president Dick Cheney. In addition, the declaration of post-9/11 prisoners as "illegal combatants," who have no rights under the Geneva Conventions, are further examples of how the hard-won rule of law has recently been set aside in the name of political expediency. In the words of Cheney, such efforts were part of the necessary exploration of "the dark side" in the war on terror.

Now, it appears Canada may have done its own dabbling on "the dark side" with allegations that Afghan prisoners were wittingly handed over to authorities known to torture prisoners, allegations which only appear more credible with the government's refusal to hand over documents relating to the case.

And last month, during the G20 meetings, stupidly held in downtown Toronto, scenes of burning police cars and smashed businesses have been followed by online images of police "kettling" protestors, including tourists and TTC workers, along with eye witness accounts, such as that of TVO's Steve Paikin, of journalists being beaten by police. Coupled with "now you see it, now you don't" provincial legislation allowing police to arrest folks within five meters inside of the security fence has prompted calls for a thorough investigation at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of how this sidestepping of civil rights came to pass in Ontario.

This is a sobering litany, suggesting not just a few aberrations, but rather a pattern, something that is

becoming normalized, indeed, a part of our social fabric. When such violations of civil rights become more commonplace, the questions are raised: What values does our society truly hold, and what values stand as a counterpoint to such menacing developments?

Accountability in these instances has much larger ramifications than the investigations of isolated incidents. Accountability is a fundamental protection of a social fabric that respects both human dignity and the rule of law, which in Canada has enshrined itself in the not unenviable tradition of "peace, order, and good government."

That's why the need for a thorough inquiry into such potential violations both of Afghan prisoners and what happened at the G20 are essential. If we are left wondering who is responsible, then these activities run the risk of becoming regular, rather than singular, practices.

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