



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Akaash Maharaj Releases a General Letter to the Liberal Party Membership
on the Federal Sponsorship Programme**

Toronto – Saturday 14 February 2004

*Akaash Maharaj
responds to the leak of his 2002 letter to Paul Martin regarding
Party members' concerns about the possible misuse of public funds*

Dear Colleagues,

I hope this note finds you well, and weathering the political storms of the past week. I wanted to write to you directly, in response to media coverage of a letter I sent to the Prime Minister two years ago, in which I expressed misgivings over the federal sponsorship programme.

My letter was leaked to the press by a third party soon after the Prime Minister's recent press conference, at which he stated that he would pursue those responsible for undermining the integrity of the programme, be they in the bureaucratic or the political arms of government. As might be expected, much of the ensuing media and opposition reaction to my letter bore only a casual relationship with the truth. I should like to set the record straight.

I wrote to Paul Martin in February 2002, in his then capacities as Minister of Finance and our senior minister in Quebec, to relay to him widespread anxieties over the public scandal emanating from the sponsorship programme. I also asked him to consider assisting in either refuting or discovering any truth behind rumours that had been mounting in the Party and in the press.

Since I was fulfilling my duty as the National Policy Chair, and writing on a subject that was very much in the public domain, I shared copies of my letter freely with many Party members who had come forward with their concerns. As a result, it was perhaps inevitable that one of those copies would resurface after the publication of the Auditor General's report, although the timing of the leak was clearly calculated.

I emphasise that my letter dealt only with broad rumours in general circulation. The letter explicitly stated that none of the individuals who had approached me had been able to offer hard facts or new information. Moreover, at the time of writing, I felt certain that the enormity of the allegations meant that they could not be true. My belief was that even unsubstantiated rumours could have a corrosive effect if they were allowed to grow unchecked, but that in the extremely unlikely event that there were any truth behind the rumours, we would have a still greater responsibility to act.

The Prime Minister has publicly stated that he had been aware of these rumours before February 2002, and that the contents of my letter "confirms exactly" the situation he described in Parliament. Most importantly, our government asked the Auditor General to investigate these rumours and the entire sponsorship programme within a month of his receipt of my letter.

For the record, it is my personal conviction that since the publication of the Auditor General's report, the Prime Minister has acted with resolve, particularly in his decision to initiate a judicial inquiry. The inquiry will have an unrestricted remit, and will be no respecter of rank or affiliation in its pursuit of justice.

The Liberal Party is made up of people who have come together because of a shared belief in the nobility of public service, and as such, I know that there are no Canadians more upset at the assault on the public trust than us. The vast majority of Liberals are patriots before they are partisans, and put our country before our politics.

When I wrote my letter to Paul Martin, it was because I felt then, as I do now, that our nation is held together by a covenant of trust between the people and the political process, and each of us has an absolute duty to speak out, to protect the integrity of both the Liberal Party and the public institutions it serves.

If we are to rebuild public confidence in the political process, we must demonstrate to Canadians that in our Party, the virtue of the many is far greater than the greed or malice of the few. I believe this means that we must stand together in rooting out those individuals who have abused the public trust, and those who were complicit through their silence or indifference. It means that anyone with any information on these abuses must have the courage to come forward without delay. It also means that no one must use these dark days as a pretext to settle old scores or re-fight old battles.

Immediately after I was informed by the press that they had obtained a copy of my letter, I contacted the Party office and the PMO to offer my assistance and support. If the past week has taught us anything, it is that when our government, our leader, or our Party is diminished, we are all diminished in the eyes of Canadians.

I hope this addresses any questions you might have had. Feel free to contact me if you wish any additional information, but please be patient with the speed of my reply, as I have been inundated with correspondence of late.

These have been difficult times for Canada, but I am confident that we will ultimately return to the people's business stronger for this political test of character.

With best wishes,
Akaash

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