

And the Academy Award goes to ... Brian Crawley

Open Line radio host Randy Simms wondered about the other day what the big deal was that staff in the premier's office can't remember telling Danny Williams about the problems with breast cancer victims.

Randy had swallowed the line that Brian Crawley, the premier's chief of staff, had offered to the Cameron Inquiry. People have many conversations in the course of several years, said Crawley. How can you be expected to remember a particular one?

Well, that's true, people do have many conversations in the span of several years. But some stand out more than others.

Like if your wife tells you she's pregnant.

Or the boss says there's going to be layoffs.

Or something so big is coming down the pike that you better hide under a chair.

Some conversations stand out, because they're more important.

It seems to me that if I was the premier's chief of staff, or his press secretary, and someone said there's a big story coming about botched cancer tests in the province's biggest hospital, I'd remember it. And if it was my job to pass on that information to the premier, which in the case of Brian Crawley and Elizabeth Matthews it certainly was, I'd remember that too.

These people have an antenna when it comes to things that might cause controversy in the media. As a friend put it recently, Matthews and Crawley occupy the jobs they do, because they can see a controversy brewing from a continent away. They are veritable meteorologists of bad

Pillar to Post



By Craig Westcott

news. It's their job to stay ahead of dangerous issues and to brief the premier just in case he's ever asked about them by a reporter.

Nobody wants Danny Williams, or any other premier, looking stupid. That's the job of political staff. To make sure the boss doesn't look stupid. So when political staff like Brian Crawley and Elizabeth Matthews claim they can't remember telling the premier about the cancer scandal, it begs closer inspection. Either they are avoiding the truth, not telling the truth, or are incompetent, which is ironic, given that the premier gave them, and them alone, a 13 per cent raise last year without bothering to go to cabinet or run it by Treasury Board.

Just the word cancer coupled with the phrase "a big story is about to break" raises this thing above an ordinary conversation. That's the warning Matthews' and Crawley received back in July 2005.

Some of the smarter people I know are running their minds back to that period, trying to remember what else the premier

had on his plate then. The thinking is that Crawley, and for sure Matthews given the tightness of her relationship with the premier, gave him a heads up about what was brewing in Eastern Health. But given Williams' micromanagement style, he was probably engrossed in something else and forgot to deal with it.

Given the consequences to hundreds of Newfoundland families of having their loved ones misdiagnosed, Williams can't afford to admit he dropped the ball. So to spare him the discomfort and shame of owning up to it, Matthews and Crawley had to take the stand and act like a couple of dummies. That's the theory some people are maintaining. One thing is for sure, you can't question their loyalty to the boss after their performances last week, or his loyalty to them. In any other job, they'd be fired.

But getting back to Randy Simms' query as to why any of this matters, well, that should be obvious too. It should matter if the highest political officers in the land are obfuscating, or are incompetent.

So far Justice Margaret Cameron has had to endure watching a Herculean game of Hot Potato. Just about everyone who has taken the stand has tried to toss any semblance of responsibility away from themselves and onto someone or something else.

Well, as Harry Truman famously said when he was President of the United States, "the buck stops here."

Williams is supposed to be our Truman. If something as critical

as health care is being screwed up, it's his job to catch it and fix it. And because he works for us, it's his job to tell us about it, right from the get go.

That's why it's important to get to the truth of what happened inside the premier's office. From Crawley's testimony last week we learned that the Chief of Staff to the Premier of Newfoundland doesn't keep notes, that he systematically deleted his e-mails and that the Premier's Office doesn't guide the actions of cabinet ministers.

The first two points sound suspicious on their own merits and demand further scrutiny.

The latter point we know for sure isn't true. The recent resignation/dismissal of Deputy Premier Tom Rideout made clear that the Premier's Office manages things to the smallest detail, having even taken away the prerogative of the Transportation Minister to allocate road work. Deciding how much money goes to each district for paving is actually done by Williams himself and a minion in his office.

That's why Crawley's and Matthews' dumb act is so unconvincing. Again, both Crawley and Matthews were apprised of the scandal in Eastern Health at least as early as July 2005. Either they told the premier about it then or they didn't. Given the seriousness of the issue, that conversation, if it happened, shouldn't be hard to remember.

What is also certain, given all the evidence we've heard and seen so far, is that neither Williams, Crawley nor

Matthews seem to have done one thing about the crisis affecting cancer patients... nothing until the media broke the story months later. Even then, because the story broke in *The Independent*, which has a minuscule readership, the story was missed by most people and the trio running this province continued to say nothing.

It was nearly a year later when CBC Radio reporter Mar Quinn started delving into and reporting on a court case involving women who were misdiagnosed that Williams, Matthews and Crawley finally started acknowledging there was a problem, despite the fact briefing notes had been sent to William himself in the meantime.

And it's only this past few months, three years after Crawley and Matthews were first informed, that some of the last cancer victims were finally told that their tests, and result ing treatments, were wrong years ago. We don't even know how many women died prematurely because of the screw-ups and communications failures.

The buck, or hot potato, or whatever you want to call it, has to stop somewhere.

In our system of government that somewhere is the Premier Office.

That's why this thing is so important. And Danny Williams constant badgering of the Commission and its staff, his attempts to stifle debate in the legislature, and his efforts to distract the public doesn't change the truth of that one iota. ■

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