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An opportunity lost

By **GEOFF MATTHEWS**, Ottawa Sun

I was perhaps 12 years old when I had my first taste of how tough the business world can be if you don't measure up to expectations. Hired on by a local bakery in Halifax, my job was to ride in a delivery van and go door to door peddling pies, bread, cakes and other goodies.

At the end of the third day on the job, my cash float was \$2 short -- the result, no doubt, of making incorrect change somewhere along the route.

But as far as the van driver was concerned, I was responsible for the shortfall. He suggested, in no uncertain terms, that I had stolen the money, and fired me on the spot.

Thinking back on that experience serves as a reminder of just how different are the worlds of government and business.

If you're the government, it seems, nothing -- absolutely nothing -- can get you fired from your job. No amount of lying, cheating and stealing, apparently, is enough to convince your employers -- the Canadian electorate -- to kick you out of office.

STOLEN SILVER

Imagine if you had hired a plumber to come into your house and install all the infrastructure you need to upgrade your bathroom, kitchen and laundry room.

Of course he would have told you in advance the work would take four days, would cost you \$5,000 and he'd leave the house spotless.

Instead he takes two months to do the work, bills you \$50,000 and you discover he has stolen all your silver and given it to his friends.

Would you be satisfied? Would you hire him again? Perhaps recommend him to your friends?

Not very likely, even if he tried his best to convince you that the other plumber across town was a really scary fellow who would install the devil himself in your pipes.

(There are two other plumbers in town, but one wants to put gold handles on all your sinks and the other wants to move all the pipes outside the house, so they aren't really options.)

Why, then, if we wouldn't rehire private sector people who have proven themselves incompetent would we send people back to office after they have demonstrated an appalling disregard for how they spend taxpayer dollars?

Over the past 11 years our government has frittered away literally billions of dollars of our money -- a large chunk of it funnelled directly to Liberal-friendly ad agencies.

And yet, when we had a chance to throw the rascals out, we turned it down. We accepted the devil-in-the-pipes warning about the Conservatives and, in doing so, gave the incumbents one more piece of proof that they can do whatever they want and there won't be any consequences. We're Canadians, after all. How angry could we get?

We did give what could possibly pass as a mild reprimand, reducing them to minority government status instead of the crushing majority they dreamed about.

But in doing that have we punished them, or ourselves?

Jeffrey Dale, president of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation, is worried the government may not follow through on some of its promises, given the precarious position in which it finds itself.

'NEW ECONOMY'

"A minority government is not good for bold new economic initiatives," says Dale. "We're going to be watching very carefully. In a minority situation, there's a tendency to not look at sweeping new programs because they're harder to put in place."

For OCRI, Dale said, one of the keys will be who is appointed to cabinet from the local area. "We need someone at the table who understands our (hi-tech) sector. We're not the auto industry or the fishery. We need someone who is going to focus on the new economy."

Heck, we'd settle for a government that just knew the fundamentals of running a business.

geoff.matthews@ott.sunpub.com