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## Year of the scandal: What do Canada's embattled political leaders do next?

### [CTV National News: Scandal in the Senate](#)



Ottawa Bureau Chief Robert Fife looks back on what made the Senate scandal the top CTV News story of 2013.



**Andrea Janus**, CTVNews.ca  
[@AndreaJanus](#)

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Wrapping up this season of gift-giving, there's been no greater gift for journalists this year than the two major ongoing political scandals: The Mayor Rob Ford saga and the Senate expense scandal.

While most of us will consider ourselves lucky to get through the holidays with only minor weight gain and a small dent in our pocketbooks, Ford and Prime Minister Stephen Harper must feel fortunate to hit the New Year still holding two of the most powerful offices in the country.

So far, admitted crack cocaine use and allegations of boorish behaviour and friendships with unsavoury characters have failed to bring down the mayor of Toronto, while the prime minister has survived ongoing questions about what he and his inner circle knew of a plan to pay Sen. Mike Duffy's ineligible expenses.

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But can the two men keep the scandals at bay in the New Year?

While there are some hard and fast rules for political crisis management, experts say, the two are also at the mercy of elements beyond their control.

Laura Babcock, president of Powergroup Communications, and Scott Reid, CTV political commentator and former communications director for Paul Martin, say that when a potentially problematic issue arises, the first step is to identify all of the details that may come out and determine how they are likely to be



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perceived, before devising a management strategy.

Babcock says getting in front of a story that could turn into a major scandal is more important than ever in the age of social media.

With journalists, strategists and political junkies ready to congregate in the "town square" of Twitter at a moment's notice and analyze every detail, she says "you don't have the time to sit and try to come up with the most-clever,

parsed response" to a potential problem.

Babcock points to Ford as an example of how "you have to be able to as quickly and as authentically as possible tell the truth as you know it."

Ford refused to speak to the media after the 'crack video' allegations first emerged -- and a media circus ensued.

"You have to say, 'listen, here's what happened, here's how I take responsibility for it in an unqualified way,' Babcock says. "And then you have to give an idea, a specific on how you're going to change going forward. Because people need something they can benchmark from you going forward."

### Crisis-management strategies

Reid, however, says there are in fact two legitimate strategies for political crisis management: "You can either smother it, or you can open it to sunshine."

The "smother" strategy involves remaining tight-lipped for as long as possible in the hopes that the details remain under wraps until the storm passes. The "sunshine" strategy calls for revealing all of the details up front because you're fairly sure that they won't do permanent damage.

On the smother strategy, Reid says: "From a strict management standpoint, you can look at it and say 'I do not believe that the risk-benefit ratio suggests that it's in my interest to expose everything to the cleansing power of sunshine, that that will create more difficulty than it's worth.'"

This has been the Harper government's strategy for dealing with the Senate scandal



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This has been the Harper government's strategy for dealing with the Senate scandal.

"We will just put Paul Calandra up, he'll speak nonsense and recite his grandmother's apple pie recipe and we will attempt to smother this by limiting the avenues by which people can examine new developments," Reid says.

"And then you sit back and you pray that the police or other investigative bodies don't contradict you or throw you into chaos."

Which is exactly what has happened to both men. While the scandals enveloping Ford and Harper are quite different in character, there is one similarity they share.

"Because of police investigations, there is an ongoing, recurrent and, to some degree, unpredictable aspect to both scandals that limit your capacity to manage it," Reid says.

Babcock says when politicians try to "obfuscate, parse words and be too-clever by half" and then have to change stories as new information comes out, they risk damaging their own reputations. And when they choose to remain in office while the crisis unfolds, they risk further damage to either their party or political brand, especially because they've struggled to get back on message: their economic records.

"The fact that they are stubbornly both clinging to the idea that they can manage this by out-maneuvering the media or changing the narrative or coming up with some clever half-response to these things, is just perpetuating both of these scandals to the point of reputation damage to not just them but the political brand and policies that they represent," Babcock says.

As Reid notes, the "smother strategy" really only works in absence of a steady stream of new information.

"(It) only works when the wall holds," Reid says. "And when the wall begins to crumble, then you're forced to redraw the boundaries of your fortress. You get more and more and more limited (if) along the way you're contradicted every time by a fact base that suggests you've been at minimum hiding, if not outright misrepresenting, the truth."

Which means there are times when the "sunshine strategy" is best. The strategy, similar to the one Babcock advocates, is a viable option for a politician confident about the outcome.

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"There may be some ugly stuff along the way, and I'm willing to just say, 'look, here are all the facts, I'll open them up to the broadest possible examination because that's the best and only way to get this thing around me and then I can say I'm sure and clearly done with this.'"

## Changing course?

With the two scandals far from over, what comes next for the two embattled leaders?

Babcock advocates a change in tack that would see each give year-end interviews in which they lay out all the details of what they know. In other words, switch to the "sunshine strategy."

"The best strategy ... is for each of them to make an unequivocal, responsible accounting of what's happened in the past year, take responsibility at a level that we haven't seen so far, and say that they'll be coming back in the new year with X, Y and Z to prove that these changes have been made," Babcock says.

But Reid notes that such a move is at odds with how Harper has handled the Senate scandal to date, and in the end, "we don't know what he does."

"If there's something at the centre of this that is truly unpleasant and uncomfortable, then opening up the doors won't work," Reid says.

Harper needs to forge ahead with efforts to maintain the support of his base, and push out the stream of bad news with good. A summer cabinet shuffle, a throne speech and a free-trade deal with the European Union all failed to push the Senate scandal out of the headlines, but Harper has one other card to play: his next budget.

With Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announcing an expected budget surplus by 2015 -- after seven years of deficit -- Harper will be able to move ahead with policy initiatives that will reward voters where it will have the most impact: their wallets.

As for Ford, there's not much he can do to distract from the sensational nature of all that has happened and the allegations still hovering over him.

"From this point forward he is, and will continue to be, a travelling circus," Reid says.

There are three possible outcomes in the Ford scandal, Reid says. He could be turfed from office

if he faces any charges. He could get the boot from voters in the 2014 election. Or he'll be validated through re-election, "because he'll receive the cleansing embrace of a new mandate."

No matter what each leader chooses to do, Babcock says in the end their ongoing problems are "self-perpetuated."

"The damage is in the coverup, it's never in the initial act," Babcock says. "So no matter what egregious thing Rob Ford might have done or Stephen Harper might have done or been aware of, it's the fact that they've tried to cover it up that has created these scandals for them."



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