

Brazilians have knickers in a knot

BY OLIVER MOORE

THURSDAY, JULY 21, 2005 PAGE A1
WITH A REPORT FROM REUTERS

In staid Canada, bribe money is passed in plain brown envelopes. In raunchy Brazil, political operatives smuggle huge amounts of cash in their underpants.

Facing allegations of Liberal Party wrongdoing, Prime Minister Paul Martin saw his sterling popularity take a hit. But in Brazil, President Luiz Inacio (Lula) da Silva has seen his ratings climb while bribery accusations circulated.

Responding to allegations of party corruption during the leadership of his predecessor Jean Chrétien, Mr. Martin faced down the wrath of the people and called a public inquiry. He appealed directly to Canadians and promised to resign if found to have acted improperly.

The indignation of Brazilians seems more difficult to rouse. A wave of dark humour has arisen from allegations of pork-barrelling and bribery by the governing Workers' Party, known by its Portuguese initials PT, that are being probed by congressional inquiries.

Apparently things really are different in Brazil -- not just topless beaches, better weather and a love affair with cosmetic surgery. It also has an electorate that must have Mr. Martin watching enviously.

Consider the contrast between the two countries. Brazilians quip that underwear now comes in sizes S, M, L, XL and PT, a reference to the accusation of smuggling by a governing party operative. Would such a story in Canada have provoked the joke that underwear was available in S, M and Liberal?

Mr. Martin might want to take notes on the survival skills of Mr. da Silva. Although lampooned wearing an "I didn't know" T-shirt on an animated website, Mr. da Silva's popularity has actually risen during the scandal.

The differences don't end there. In Canada, an Auditor-General's report showing that government money went to Liberal-friendly companies, sometimes for little work, led to hand-wringing and a public inquiry, whereas more serious allegations about the PT in Brazil provoked an explosion of satire.

(The Brazilian accusations centre on alleged pork-barrelling and jockeying for influence in the Brazilian Congress. High-level operatives in Mr. da Silva's party, which won a minority in 2002, are accused of skimming money from Brazil's state corporations in order to secure support from members of competing parties.)

The accusations have made a household name of Congressman Roberto Jefferson, a Brazilian whistle blower who is accused of running his own bribery scheme.

A mask maker has sold hundreds of copies of his likeness, "and it's not even carnival time now," Armando Valles said.

After Mr. Jefferson appeared with a black eye he was caricatured by newspapers, and jokes abounded about which of the people he accused had, in turn, clobbered him.

The Canadian scandal never verged on violence and certainly didn't feature a player as sultry as television star Sabrina Sato, who appeared on the air in Brazil wearing a bustier and large men's underpants, inviting spectators to stuff as much money into her underwear as they could.

Television has played a more sober role in Canada's scandal: There was Mr. Martin's appeal to Canadians and also the public inquiry he called.

Although the probe headed by Mr. Justice John Gomery was often as dull as dishwater, it still drew substantial audiences in Quebec.

At one point in early March it was being televised on RDI, the French-language equivalent of CBC Newsworld, to daily

audiences of about 185,000 people -- which adds up to about six times the news network's usual draw.

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

