

Government betrayed me, says distinguished author

By Murray Hogben
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THE STUDENTS PEPPER-SPRAYED at the APEC summit in Vancouver last year are just the latest victims of "unbridled political power" by governments, says noted journalist, author and educator Peter Desbarats.

But, he added in a speech in Kingston yesterday, he hopes there might be "some signs of impatience among Canadians about the arbitrary use of political power in this country."

Addressing a lunch meeting of the Canadian Club of Kingston at the Holiday Inn, Desbarats said his two years as a member of the Somalia commission radically changed his previous attitude.

IDEAS HAVE CHANGED

He used to think that "most of our politicians and bureaucrats were well-meaning and relatively honest," Desbarats said.

However, the Liberal government abruptly terminated the inquiry last year and changed his views.

"I now belong to the growing number of Canadians, living and dead, of all racial origins and shades of political opinion, who have been betrayed and victimized by their own governments, particularly the federal government."

This use of "unbridled political power" has added new recruits to this "international fellowship," he said.

APEC STUDENTS

These new recruits are "the students who were tear-gassed during the APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation) meeting in Vancouver and whose rights continue to be violated by a government determined to protect itself from public exposure and criticism."

Desbarats said that because of his own eye-opening experience with the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia he could say to the students:

"Welcome. Join the crowd. Be proud that you have become victims, because you are now in the vanguard of change in this country."

Desbarats said that when the government closed down the Somalia inquiry it felt like a punch to the stomach. Details of what happened and how he felt were published in his book last year, *Somalia Coverup: A Commissioner's Journal*.

He said the government made poor excuses for ending the inquiry, but the

SPEECH



PETER DESBARATS: Betrayed

most alarming development was that the Canadian public accepted its closure.

He added later that the media haven't done enough to stand up for Canadian democracy.

In the case of the inquiry, he said, the media were not much interested in civil liberties but in stories about the politics and tactics of the debate, which he said weren't the real issue.

IMPRESSED WITH SOLDIERS

In his speech, Desbarats also said he was impressed by the willingness of the soldiers and junior officers – not the higher officers – to talk frankly about Somalia and even to offer to testify although it wasn't in the best interests of their careers.

Desbarats said the broader implications of the government's decision to close it down are its affects on the future of democracy in Canada.

Respect by governments for the independence of public inquiries lasted until the Somalia inquiry.

Its termination then "led directly to last month's decision to interfere in the work of the RCMP Public Complaints Commission by refusing to fund legal representation for protesters [at APEC]."

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He said if the government doesn't respect the law then it encourages disrespect throughout a society which had previously been "notably law-abiding and even overly respectful of authority."

Desbarats then mentioned cases where a distinguished British lawyer and academic was recently hauled off the street in Toronto and stripped and internally searched by police on the basis of mistaken identity, and of similar cases involving women in Toronto and Calgary.

HISTORY NOT TAUGHT

Canadians tend to say these are just "aberrations," he said, but there is a pattern there, which is shown in the Canadian history they don't teach in schools.

"When you're caught inside something like this – whether you're a British visitor or a black woman in a Toronto police station, a student being pepper-sprayed in Vancouver, a native being gunned down by the police in Ontario, or a royal commissioner being fired by the government – you quickly realize how thin and fragile the Canadian attachment to democracy and to democratic rights is," he said.