

## Responses out of sync with tragedy

By Jim Coyle

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By most accounts, Attorney General Chris Bentley – who has just endured a week in political hell – is not the sanctimonious stuffed shirt he sometimes seems.

After all, you have to like the humility of a guy who had to scramble to find tickets for his family to attend his swearing-in to cabinet after his election in 2003 because he'd given his allotment to a colleague he figured more likely to make the cut.

For an attorney general, the heat could hardly have been more scorching than it was this week. A 23-year-old innocent bystander shot dead last weekend in east-end Toronto, the accused a man with a long criminal record and history of violence; a 75-year-old woman and her daughter murdered earlier this month in their Toronto area home, the accused a neighbour out on bail.

Outraged questions about bail and sentencing were as predictable as they were proper.

Astonishingly, Bentley's initial response was an act of buck-passing so partisan it drew an unprecedented slapdown from the federal justice minister.

Remarkably, it took Bentley four days to get the tone – sorrow for victims, anger at perpetrators, expressed determination to do better – about right.

It appeared yesterday, however, he still hasn't mastered the art of providing answers to reasonable questions about bail and how it was granted – filling the air, instead, with dubious fog about what he's prohibited from saying.

To be sure, Bentley will never be a figure oozing empathy. By temperament and training, he is cerebral. Under pressure, his tone goes sonorous. His demeanour is that of a bird of prey – gaunt face, eyes hooded, crowned by a crest of rigorously disciplined hair.

Even given these limitations, it was difficult to have made such a cock-up of things as he did this week. But two factors beyond his own recurring bouts of political tone deafness might be to blame.

First, the McGuinty government seems slow to recognize what even the Harperites in Ottawa appear to have understood – that there is no public appetite anymore for the finger-pointing, jurisdictional hairsplitting and partisan games so long in vogue.

The McGuinty government has been in office five years now. They have a record. And still the response by virtually every minister to virtually any question is to blame the feds or demean previous provincial governments.

Bentley was simply slow to realize that the response he hears daily from colleagues was out of sync with the circumstances of tragedy.

The unfortunate part for him is that his response was, in fact, inconsistent with his own instincts.

Before the last election, during debate on a motion urging greater civility in the Legislature, Bentley said he couldn't imagine speaking in court the way MPPs routinely spoke to each other in the House. But it seems to have taken him little time, alas, to go native.

Which goes to the second explanation for his unbecoming performance. Electoral landslides in the '80s and '90s caused a huge turnover in MPPs. There were fewer veterans from whom to absorb reverence for the institution.

For Bentley's generation of Liberal MPPs, the role model seemed to have been the acutely partisan attack-dog politics of George Smitherman. Every day in the house, it is possible to see smirking cabinet ministers seeking to one up each other in cheap partisan retort.

And every day, they demean the office they hold, devalue the currency in which they trade, insult and repel the public they are supposed to serve.

*Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*