

GOVERNMENT SPENDING Brenda Martin is no VIP (GLOBE AND MAIL, A20)

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Home may be, as Robert Frost said, the place that has to take you in when you have to go there. But should the people at home have to pay \$82,767 to bring you there? That is the mind-boggling tab for flying Brenda Martin from her Mexican jail to a women's prison in Ontario. The Canadian government apparently decided Ms. Martin needed a leased Challenger jet, complete with her own personal crew, just like what the Prime Minister uses.

The Stephen Harper government has a strange way of picking and choosing whom it stands up for abroad. Ronald Allen Smith faces the death penalty in Montana; Canada is silent. Omar Khadr, a Canadian arrested as a 15-year-old, is the lone Westerner remaining in the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; Canada is silent. Abousfian Abdelrazik, a Canadian suspected of terrorist affiliations, is in limbo in Sudan, prevented by red tape, says the Canadian government, from coming home. But when Ms. Martin awaits her prison transfer after being sentenced to five years in jail in Mexico, having been convicted of taking part in an Internet scam, the Canadian government throws caution, and money, to the wind.

Presumably not every Canadian prisoner abroad qualifies for a return trip on the Challenger. As of April 8, there were 1,815 Canadians jailed in foreign lands. There are not enough Challenger jets – or taxpayers' dollars – to go around. So what was it about Ms. Martin? Assume for the moment that the 51-year-old from Trenton, Ont., was badly treated and wrongly convicted (the actual facts are unclear).

Why not fly her home on a commercial aircraft with a Mountie beside her? Ms. Martin says she was in Mexico working as a cook and was unfairly implicated in the schemes of the fraud artist she was working for, a man now jailed in the United States. Her anguished face became familiar to Canadians during a slow-news season. Discovering her plight after she had spent two years in prison, Canada even sent a cabinet minister, Jason Kenney, to meet with her as she awaited her transfer home. How much did his trip cost? Brenda Martin may or may not have been wronged by Mexico. But the Canadian government, wanting no prolonged negative news coverage of her case, broke the bank to get her home. It's not the government's bank to break.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

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SUBJECT TERM: government finance; political; travel; costs; prisoners

PERSONAL NAME: Brenda Martin