

Harper restricts ministers' message: Officials urged to stick to five key priorities; PMO wants to vet all other public comment

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OTTAWA — Prime Minister Stephen Harper has imposed central control over all information and comments to the public issued by government officials and even cabinet ministers, directing them to have everything cleared by the Prime Minister's Office, according to an internal e-mail and government sources.

The orders, described in an e-mail to bureaucrats, indicate that ministers have been told to avoid talking about the direction of the government, and that the government wants them to be less accessible to the news media. And all government officials are instructed to avoid speaking about anything other than the five priorities outlined in the Conservative campaign.

"Maintain a relentless focus on the five priorities from the campaign. Reduce the amount of ministerial/public events that distract from the five priority areas identified in the campaign," the e-mail states.

"In order to keep a grip on such events [those that distract from priority areas], PMO will approve all ministerial events."

The seven-point e-mail summarizes a briefing that the federal government's top bureaucrat, Clerk of the Privy Council Kevin Lynch, and his senior official in charge of government communications, assistant cabinet secretary Dale Eisler, gave to the top communications official in several government departments last week. The e-mail was made by a senior bureaucrat who attended the meeting.

Government officials and Conservatives confirmed the instructions, including orders that the PMO clear all public communications — including minor comments and letters to local newspapers.

"PMO will have final approval for all communications products — even Notes to Editors or Letters to the Editor," the e-mail states.

The instructions reflect the extreme caution of a new government with few seasoned hands, worried that even its ministers might slip. It reflects a desire to create the perception that the government is focused — to differentiate itself from Paul Martin's Liberal government, which was widely criticized as having scattered attentions.

While government ministers are holding some events on issues not included in the five priorities — a Federal Accountability Act, a GST cut, a child-care allowance, tougher criminal sentences, and a patient waiting-times guarantee — such events are being kept to a minimum. Comments or information on other issues are closely guarded.

Since they were sworn in on Feb. 6, cabinet ministers have, for the most part, refused to grant interviews to reporters, providing only terse and often vague responses to questions outside cabinet meetings.

Last week, the Prime Minister's Office asked officials to remove the microphones that have for decades been set up in hallways outside cabinet meetings. When press gallery officials intervened, they backed off temporarily. Mr. Harper's press secretary, Carolyn Stewart-Olsen,

said the issue would be discussed with gallery representatives. She then insisted reporters would have "more space" if they asked to see ministers in the Commons foyer.

The e-mail, however, suggests the government intends to reduce reporters' access to ministers to help them stick to their orders to say little about government plans.

"Set-up for post cabinet scrum is intentional — Ministers have been told they are not allowed to speculate on future direction of government," it states.

Ministers who have strayed from the government line have quickly issued retractions.

Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay, who suggested some Canadian aid might flow to the Palestinian Authority despite the recently elected Hamas majority, reversed course the next day.

A spokesman for the Prime Minister, Dimitri Soudas, refused to comment yesterday on the e-mail's details.

Mr. Harper's PMO is not the first to want the final say on communications — but it has extended the practice to a level never seen in Ottawa.

The offices of prime ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin demanded to approve major communications, and asked to be informed when ministers planned announcements or speeches. Now, government officials, and even ministers, must clear every interview or comment, and even the most anodyne pamphlet must get PMO clearance.

The restrictions on cabinet ministers were also evident last week when Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said Liberal equalization-payment deals made an incoherent mess of the system, even though the Conservatives had pushed for the offshore-resource deals with Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

Later that day, Mr. Flaherty issued a statement protesting that he never referred specifically to Newfoundland or Nova Scotia or mentioned "oil and gas," but those two agreements were the only ones the Liberals had signed.