

PM prerogative, public's knowledge of his office and fleeting glimpses

It's time for the Prime Minister's Office to be covered by the Access to Information Act.



BY KEN RUBIN

OTTAWA—Of late, the opposition, media, the RCMP, and the public all want to know more about the Prime Minister and the PMO's involvement in containing the Senate expenses scandal.

The email trail the RCMP has disclosed in its continuing investigation in the PMO/Wright/Duffy expense case reveals a small bit about the PMO's operations, and the PM, his political party, and Senate allies.

However, records concerning the PMO/PM behind-the-scenes actions are not normally ever releasable or covered by access to information legislation. All this pretty absolute wall of secrecy helps make possible the tight, centrally-controlled information ship Prime Minister Harper runs.

Sometimes, though, severed access requests obtained from federal agencies provide glimpses of the PM and of his office's reach from the command deck.

One such instance occurred on Sept. 16, 2013, when the Prime Minister held a press conference in Richmond, B.C., announcing a promise for a national online database accessible to the public. It was for listing the names of high-risk offenders of children and proposed changes via the Tougher Penalties for Child Predators Act to track the travel plans of convicted sex offenders wanting to travel overseas.

Behind him at the press conference were navy-blue uniformed Canada Border Services Agency officers acting as a background visual prop.

CBSA access documents revealed that those 19 officers consisted of the Pacific region director, four CBSA chiefs of operations from the Vancouver area, and officers from both the downtown CBSA Vancouver office and the airport. The coordination of getting them all there to stand behind the PM began the Sunday afternoon of Sept. 15 and included using CBSA vehicles so they all could arrive at the press conference site.

That's quite a lot of high-priced "help" that only a PM and his office could call on and divert for hours from their regular workplace tasks. Other CBSA access records indicate that their inspection load is already stretched with other less politically calculated high enforcement priorities.

The other instance of his office's clout and prerogatives is intriguing and comes courtesy of the still-named Museum of Civilization.

There, museum officials helped the PM and the PMO select exhibits of his liking from their original warehouse collections to be placed on display outside the PM's third-floor Centre Block office, which is not exactly a high-traffic accessible area to the public.

One past PM exhibit there was on some aspects of the fur trade; the current one is on the Franklin expeditions.

Access documents from the Museum of Civilization indicate that the proposal to the PMO for the Franklin/Northwest Passage exhibit won out in late 2012 over another

unnamed exempted museum proposed display for the PMO. "Both proposals have been received enthusiastically and the choice is to do the Franklin/Northwest Passage first." A middle management museum official indicated in a Nov. 21, 2012 email, "I have a call to the PMO and expect a return call later this afternoon (on the PMO exhibit's choice and go-ahead)."

A more senior level email exchange on the PM's exhibit on the same day between an unnamed PMO official and the Museum of Civilization's director, Mark O'Neill, is, however, blacked out. The museum labelled its high-level priority exchanges as being in the "Red Category."

The existence of the PM's private Franklin exhibit, deep within the Centre Block, is not widely known although PM Harper during his eighth 2013 Arctic tour last summer made a passing reference to the exhibit. Yet a museum response to NDP MP Andrew Cash's Order Paper query #1177 tabled in Parliament on April 15, 2013, vaguely describes the exhibit's location as simply being at "Parliament".

The catch is that the PM's Franklin exhibit is not at all open to the public. Access records indicate the Franklin exhibit is there for the PM and his invited guests until at least March 2014.

According to access records, the Franklin exhibit in the corridor outside the PM's office consists of several display cases containing some 25 government-obtained artifacts from metal message canisters, to a leather sea boot.

Ironically, records note that one displayed artifact, a ship deck

plank fragment—may not even be from one of the two Franklin ships.

Another fragile artifact—a sleigh used in the Francis Leopold McClintock's 1859 Arctic Expedition search for Franklin—a museum official noted on Nov. 1, 2012, had been up for consideration to be "chosen for the PMO (exhibit) or (the new) Canada Hall." The later choice would have meant putting this formerly publicly displayed item (at Expo 67 in Montreal in 1967) back on public display.

The Parliamentary Order Paper #1177 response only lists the Franklin exhibit's costs as \$5,714.

But the access records show that costs were estimated in January 2013 as being at least \$10,800. Nowhere calculated in specific dollars were the considerable tax-paid time of several museum research staff from October 2012 to April 2013 to research, select, treat, design, and install the PMO exhibit or the time expended by senior museum officials to present and discuss the proposed exhibit with PMO.

The additional costs of the PMO are unknown, including for a by-invitation-only late, April 2013 "opening" reception. The lists of guests who had privileged access to see the Franklin exhibit remains a secret.

At the same time in late 2012 and 2013, the Conservative government pressed forward on its Canadian Museum of History Act (Bill C-7, formerly Bill C-49) to refocus the Civilization Museum and granted the museum \$25-million just to begin the transformation of its exhibits and Canada Hall.

Opposition parties criticized the expensive rebranding as catering to a Conservative Party notion of how Canadian history should be presented and partnered with. Bill C-7 passed the House of Commons this November and is expected to

become law in early 2014. The first new private sector partner sponsor of the new history museum's major exhibits—in for a million dollars—is none other than the good folks at the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

In addition, the October Throne Speech indicated that the government would be accelerating its search for the lost Franklin ships that were sent to Canada on a British exploratory expedition. Some critics see the continued search as an already overly costly venture that distracted from resources going to more worthy Canadian Arctic history probes, getting such special high priority because it is PM Harper's personal legacy project.

That government agencies should cater to and spend time and monies responding to a PM's preferences and policy announcements is perhaps not all that unusual and rarely questioned.

And a Prime Minister widely known as a message and information control freak backed up with a majority in Parliament and with help from a very secretive and dominating PMO can get his way and use public resources and pass new legislation that impacts on Canada's future directions.

Yet, had there been greater access to the PM and PMO records and a requirement that there was a duty to document all actions taken, it may well be that this now turbulent and secretive inner sanctum would be under less attack. With greater transparency and accountability, there would have been less chance of scandals and events at PMO that could "end badly" or be perceived as being part of a "cover-up."

At a time now when the PM's credibility and his office's functioning are under attack, laying bare the ways the PMO and PM operate and putting more of their actions on public display would be a welcome sea change. It would set the stage in future for real transparency at the centre and changes to the amount of power the centre holds.

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