

Chief of staff quits Tory Leader's team

BY CAMPBELL CLARK

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OTTAWA -- Conservative Leader Stephen Harper has lost yet another senior aide, this time his chief of staff, Phil Murphy, who, insiders say, had already been sidelined in a long-running office power struggle.

The departure of the top staffer in Mr. Harper's office comes in a summer in which there was a full-scale exodus from his communications department, including director Geoff Norquay and four other key staffers.

Sources said Mr. Murphy left the job after a 10:30 a.m. meeting yesterday, although it was not clear whether he had quit or had been fired.

"There is no comment on internal human resources issues," said William Stairs, Mr. Harper's acting director of communications.

Mr. Stairs said the large number of departures is not a sign of turmoil, but a coincidence because people who leave political jobs often do so in the summer.

"Summertime is the traditional time for people who decide to choose careers elsewhere to do it, because that's the low period in our political year."

There was no word on who will replace Mr. Murphy, although many in the office have been expecting deputy chief of staff Doug Finley, also the Conservatives' campaign director, to take over the top job since he joined the Opposition Leader's office in the spring.

Mr. Finley, who is married to Southern Ontario member of Parliament Diane Finley (Haldimand-Norfolk), had already started to assume many functions that appeared to be those of the chief of staff -- asking Mr. Stairs to take over the job as acting communications director, for example -- leaving Mr. Murphy more and more sidelined, according to party insiders.

Although Mr. Harper's office has denied there is turmoil, insiders said tensions led to some of the departures from his communications team.

The Conservative Leader has been said to have a hands-on role in many decisions that subordinates consider their purview. And two mid-level staffers who spend a lot of time with him -- press secretary Carolyn Stewart Olsen and executive assistant Ray Novak -- are seen as having his ear, much more so than many higher-ranking staff in the office of about 100.

Mr. Murphy joined Mr. Harper's office when the latter became Canadian Alliance leader in 2002. Mr. Murphy was deputy to then chief of staff Tom Flanagan. When Mr. Flanagan returned to his job at the University of Calgary in 2003, Mr. Murphy took the top spot in the office.

Some in the party say Mr. Harper moved to push Mr. Murphy aside after the federal election in June of 2004, but was eventually persuaded to keep him on. However, Mr. Harper increasingly turned to Mr. Flanagan, with whom he has close ties, for long-distance advice from Calgary. In the spring, Mr. Harper brought in Mr. Finley from Conservative headquarters in what was perceived as a bid to shake up the office, further reducing Mr. Murphy's influence.

The shakeup comes as Mr. Harper's popularity appears to be plummeting, according to a poll by SES Research conducted last week. It found that the proportion of Canadians who rated him as the best potential prime minister of all the federal political leaders had dropped to 14 per cent, from 27 per cent three months ago.