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## Features

### The meltdown is the message

*How did a government known for its communications skills go so far off the rails on detainees?*

Kady O'Malley, Macleans.ca | May 1, 2007 | 1:32 pm EST

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OTTAWA - Given the near legendary communications discipline that Stephen Harper's Conservatives have displayed since taking office last year, the only thing more confusing than the Canadian policy on Afghan prisoners over the past week has been the resulting message meltdown.

Too many ministers, it turns out, can spoil the message control for even the most maniacal of media micromanagers - as evidenced by the spectacle of senior cabinet ministers tripping over their talking points on the transfer of detainees, contradicting each other and sometimes themselves.

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Not even the Prime Minister has been immune from the collective incoherence bedeviling his cabinet -- just one day after his Defence Minister stunned a Commons committee by announcing that he had reached yet another "arrangement" with Afghani authorities to allow Canadians to have access to detainees, Harper dismissed the notion that such an agreement was necessary at all. Meanwhile, Public Works Minister Stockwell Day thrust himself into the fray by claiming that Corrections Canada officials had been visiting Afghan prisons for months - only to be contradicted by his own staff shortly thereafter.

"I'm very puzzled about this one," says Toronto-based communications consultant Robin Sears, a former strategist with the NDP. "I look at these situations where you know that the people involved are smart and yet are behaving in a way that doesn't seem to make sense for their own self interest. It's not obvious to me, or to anyone looking at the responses from last week, who holds the final responsibility for challenges in this arena."

It's possible, Sears says, that the rumoured "lack of harmony" between O'Connor and Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier is responsible for the minister failing to take action on the file before it hit the crisis level. But he wonders how not one person at any of the departments involved - Defence, Foreign Affairs, CIDA, Privy Council Office - sounded an early warning over the potential for political repercussions.

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"How could they not have known that handing prisoners over to an Afghan agency would get them into trouble?" Sears says. "It sounds as though someone deliberately blindsided them, internally ... I have to assume that the question was asked at one point and was inaccurately - if comfortably - answered."

The resulting confusion is something that could hurt the Conservatives even in one of their core policy areas, SES pollster and Maclean's 50 member Nik Nanos suggests.

"Traditionally, defence issues are a strength for the Conservatives," Nanos says. "So any chance that the opposition has to undermine a core Conservative strength - support for soldiers, the handling of the mission in Afghanistan - represents a unique opportunity to take it to the government."

The most damage, Nanos speculates, could be to the Tories' image as smooth operators. "They've done a lot to frame themselves as competent managers," he says. "What Canadians are seeing here is not that."

What it says to former Liberal strategist Peter Donolo, now with the Strategic Counsel, is that Harper doesn't perform well when he's put on the defensive.

"These guys, particularly the Prime Minister, are so determined to be in control of communications and to be always the one who is assertive and on the attack, that to be on the receiving end is something he hasn't had to do," Donolo says. "It's something that has really thrown them off kilter and has taken some of the sheen off the veneer of competence."

Nanos predicts that over the next few days, the Prime Minister's Office will move in to "tighten things up" by giving directions to cabinet and caucus members not to speak on this issue. "They can get the discipline back into the messaging, but it's going to be very difficult," he says. "The toothpaste is out of the tube. Now that there are a number of players, the opposition can pick which spokesperson to attack or question or make it look like they're being contradictory."

Sears, though, doesn't think that the detainee debacle is necessarily a harbinger of more communications woes to come. "Look back to the Air India kerfuffle of a few weeks ago," he says. "Whether you think it was deliberate or a misstep, the day after the Prime Minister gave his first reply and mentioned Navdeep Bains' father in law, he brought in the Air India families and had them sitting in the House. When they're on their game, the Tories have very good damage control ability."



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Donolo suspects the Tories won't be out of hot water until the subject changes.

"The only thing that trumps big news is bigger news," he says. That doesn't doesn't necessarily mean *better* news. "But maybe it will be news that they can control better."

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