





Tories accused of trying to muzzle military

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OTTAWA – Important information and interview requests directed to the Canadian military must now be cleared by senior bureaucrats who are under the direction of the prime minister's office, say defence sources.

The Privy Council Office directive applies to all matters of "national importance," but is primarily focused on shaping information related to the war in Afghanistan.

The order was issued within the last two weeks and caps a determined effort by the Conservatives to assert more civilian control over the military, which has been seen in government circles to have too much influence in the conduct of the war.

Clamping down on public comment follows restrictions imposed earlier this year by the military itself on the release of documents under access-to-information legislation.

Smothering the political fire of the Afghanistan debate has been a principal aim this fall for Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who effectively shut down opposition criticism in the House of Commons by appointing a eminent persons panel to review Canada's role beyond 2009.

"They want to turn the noise down," said one defence source.

A second official added that the military side was in the "information business" while the political side was "in the marketing business."

Requests for comment from the Prime Minister's Office and Defence Minister Peter MacKay's office were not answered Monday.

A call to interview senior public affairs officers at the Defence Department was denied, but officials did release a two-line email suggesting the military has long "co-ordinated (communications) with both the minister's office and the Privy Council Office."

Regulations governing members of the Canadian Forces when they speak with the media were enacted in 1998.

"There has been no change in policy," said the note.

But clamping down on information and interview requests wouldn't require a formal change in policy, only a political order.

Such a directive would be "extraordinary, but not unprecedented," said a leading expert

on federal government administration.

"Informally, this has been done for years," said Donald Savoie, chair of public administration at the Universite de Moncton.

"Civil servants who want to advance their careers have made sure that PCO is informed on important or embarrassing stories, but formalizing such a process would be extraordinary."

A retired colonel and expert in access-to-information said the military, the group that has been most effective in rallying support for Afghanistan and explaining the mission to Canadians, has been gagged.

"People should absolutely be concerned because these are our sons and daughters serving in Afghanistan," said Michel Drapeau, a lawyer and defence commentator.

"It leaves one with the impression of some sort of political manipulation or lack of transparency, where transparency should be absolutely necessary."

Savoie, an author and adviser to former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna, also said the sweeping nature of what could be interpreted as "national importance" is troubling, especially in a time of war.

It is unclear how far along the chain of command the order extends and how much freedom the country's outspoken chief of defence staff, Gen. Rick Hillier, has been given. He has raised the ire of Conservatives for his blunt public statements, which have sometimes contradicted his political masters.

Drapeau said that he suspects the government is trying to keep the issue of Afghanistan off the public radar until an independent panel, headed by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley, reports in January.

Those recommendations could lead to a vote in Parliament later that month or in early February.

"If there's a requirement to rally around the flag and democratic support for the extension of the mission, then you don't get this by having a bunch of idiots voting in the dark," said Drapeau.

"We as educated, sophisticated, well-informed Canadians have to be able to make decisions based on at least some information."

Idealists may view the creeping stranglehold on information related to Afghanistan as a back-door imposition of censorship, Savoie said.

Last summer, the military stopped releasing documents under access to information regarding Taliban prisoners. At the same, it has subjected almost all requests to an extra review process – over and above existing checks – in the name of national security, even if they don't relate to Afghanistan.

Over the last few months, routine information and interview requests by various media have either been answered by short, often non-sequitor e-mail responses or by silence.