NEWS ELECTION 2015

2015 Election campaign to be longest, most expensive: insiders

BY ABBAS RANA

If Prime Minister Stephen Harper sticks with the fixed election date of Oct. 19, the next election campaign will be the country’s longest and most expensive as the unofficial campaign already under way will go into high gear around June when all parties start to run attack ads and initiate other election activities that will continue until election day, say political insiders.

"All the parties are just going to go crazy with the advertisements. They’re going to do as much as they can before the [next] election is dropped," Keith Beardsley, former deputy chief of staff to Prime Minister Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.), told The Hill Times last week. "It’s almost like [the Conservatives] standard operating procedure. They saturate the airwaves as much as they can pre-week, do as much damage and essentially put a frame around the opposition leader. Now the other parties are on"

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NEWS ELECTION 2015

Three candidates jockeying for Tory nomination in Ottawa West-Nepean

BY ABBAS RANA

Three candidates have been feverishly preparing behind the scenes to win the Conservative Party’s nomination in Ottawa-West Nepean, Ont., hoping to hold on to the battle contested seat in the upcoming election since popular incumbent John Baird is running to another riding.

Andy Wang, 27, a staffer in Democratic Reform Minister Pierre Poilievre’s (Nepean-Carleton, Ont.) constituency office and Scott Singer, a local restaurant owner, told The Hill Times that they’re running for the Conservative Party nomination. Ottawa Police officer Abdullah Abdul, currently on secondment with the RCMP, is also said to be entering the race and is already signing up new members.

The nomination meeting has yet to be scheduled, but in interviews last week, Mr. Wang and Mr. Singer told The Hill Times that they are signing up new members and they’re receiving a positive response in their interactions with people in the riding.

Mr. Wang, who holds a bachelor’s degree in economics and political science from McGill..." You never do get certainty with these things, no matter how long you wait," said Don Drummond, a former senior Finance Department official and TD executive who’s now at Queen’s University. "If the catalyst to the oil thing, this is not going to play out over the next little while. It’s extremely volatile." Finance Minister Joe Oliver (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.) told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce last week that he would not table the federal budget because of the instability caused by plummeting oil prices.

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NEWS MEDIA

Access to information laws need reform, say authors of how-to book

BY LAURA RYCKERMANS

Canada’s access to information laws are the “ultimate form of democracy” but they were designed in a pre-digital age with too many rules to allow government not to disclose information quickly. If at all, and badly need to be modernized, say two veteran Hill journalists who just published a book on the subject.

“Information is power but the government doesn’t make it easy to get. This is a very important law. There are laws like this around the planet now, and Canada is really slipping in terms of our efficiency,” said the authors.

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CIVIL CIRCLES

Defence

DM shuffle likely to mean slow progress on DND procurement

BY MARK BURGESS

Changes to senior public service positions dealing with defense procurement are a further signal not to expect movement on major projects before the next federal election, insiders say, as bureaucrats need time to get up to speed on their new files and the Conservatives will avoid drawing attention to a potential weakness.

The government announced a contract with Irving Shipbuilding last week to begin construction on the Arctic patrol ships that had long been promised. The $3.5-billion deal, an increase from the original $3.1-billion price tag, is for five ships with a possible sixth depending on costs. The project was first announced in 2007. But defence insiders said there likely wouldn’t be movement on major files until after the federal election.

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NEWS EXPENSES

MPs spent almost $52-million in first half of 2014-15, expense reports show

BY LAURA RYCKERMANS

MPs spent almost $52-million during the first half of the 2014 fiscal year, according to new quarterly expenditure reports, but one MP is questioning whether the cost to produce more of these reports is worth it.

Independent MP Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Leonard-Saint-Michel, Que.), one of the lowest spenders so far this year, said the $3.8-million cost to put together the quarterly expenditure reports is "absolutely not worth it."

"I don’t think anybody has a problem with disclosure. It’s just, is it worth it?" he said. "I think it’s a debate that should probably be had, to see how reasonable this whole thing costs and what the benefit."
Access to information laws need reform, say authors of how-to book

"This is a citizen's guide to freedom of information," said Jim Bronskill. "It walks people through what I think can be an intimidating process: the idea of using laws and filling out forms. I mean, it's not fun, so we've tried to make it easy and accessible for people.

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David McKe, senior reporter with CBC's Parliamentary Bureau and a part-time journalism instructor focused on researching methods and data journalism. "There have been a lot of prominences to make things right and a succession of information commissioners have really sought for reforms and they've been rebuffed by Liberal and Conservative politicians alike."

McKie and Canadian Press journalist Jim Bronskill, have authored a new book, Your Right to Know: How to Use the Law to Get Government Secrets, a step-by-step-how-to guide for filing access requests.

Any Canadian citizen can file an access to information request, and it's easy to do: fill out a form and send it off with $30 attached. Getting it right, and following through, can be hard, the authors said.

"It's not difficult to file a request but it takes a bit of persistence and patience and commitment to see it through," said Mr. Bronskill, a long-time researcher with the Canadian Press who covers national security issues. "It requires understand- ing Methods course in Carleton University's master's journalism program and guide Mr. McKie, who also teaches at Algoma University College and Carleton University. Published by Self Counsel Press in December, Your Right to Know is a slim, 128-page step-by-step-practical guide for filing access to information requests.

It's packed with information: taking readers through the history of the act, related laws and rights (like the right to complain), how to write a request, the importance of follow-up and keeping track of a request, a review of the exemptions and exclusions allowed, including "languid" timelines and impose "very short extensions, if any at all."

"The act" was designed in the era of filing cabinets and pre-internet age, so people's expectations about the act have changed and the ability of information quickly don't mesh with filling out forms.

In terms of recommendations for improvement, Mr. McKie said the "biggest one is reducing the number of exemptions that can be used to withhold information. He said the government should also start routinely disclosing "certain kinds of records," like briefing notes or media response lines, redacted as required by the legislation.

"What's really frustrating is you've got an access to information committee [in the House of Commons] that spends its time basically bashing the CBC and not really looking at ways that the act itself should be improved," said Mr. McKie. "I'm not saying the CBC is be- yond bashing, but to me, if you're looking at access to information, there are a lot of legitimate issues, I think, that are to be raised."

Successive federal Information Com- missioners have called for changes to the exemptions and exclusions allowed under the act — in addition to a long roster of other changes. Current Information Com- missioner Suzanne Legault, who served under Mr. McKie and Mr. Bronskill's book, is expected to table a new report with recom- mendations on access to information. Access to Information Act by the end of January. "Departmental depart- ments are now shifting towards online access to information re- quests, in many cases requests still have to be sent through snail-mail. Mr. Bronskill said the big- gest change he'd like to see is an "attitudinal shift" on the part of the government that "recognizes the spirit of the existing law, that information should be released by default," and said there should also be incentives—or even disincentives—for departments to "actually use timelines and impose very short extensions, if any at all."

"The act" was designed in the era of filing cabinets and pre-internet age, so people's expectations about the act have changed and the ability of information quickly don't mesh with filing out forms.

The government's final plan for its open government initiative for 2014-16 makes no recommen- dations to change the Access to Information Act, despite the Con- servative government's 2008 elec- tion platform including promises to introduce sweeping reforms.

Your Right to Know is now avail- able online, and the pair say they've had conversations with professionals, including one at the University of Ottawa, interested in including the book as part of their syllabus.

Former CP journalist and re- cent Vancouver mayoral candidate Kirk Lapointe is editor-in-chief for Self Counsel Press. It was Mr. Lapointe who approached Mr. Bronskill with the idea of writing the book in March 2014. Working with his fellow Carleton instructor, Mr. McKie, was a logical next step.

Over their careers, both Mr. Bronskill and Mr. McKie have earned a reputation for being ac- cess to information experts — they prefer the moniker "experienced practitioners" — having broken a number of important stories through access requests, which they both file on a regular basis. Mr. McKie said one of his earli- est significant access to informa- tion on Health Canada's adenose reaction database, which ultimately led to an investigation into the Access to Information Act by the end of January. Departments are now shifting towards online access to information requests, in many cases requests still have to be sent through snail-mail. Mr. Bronskill said the biggest change he'd like to see is an "attitudinal shift" on the part of the government that "recognizes the spirit of the existing law, that information should be released by default," and said there should also be incentives—or even disincentives—for departments to "actually use timelines and impose very short extensions, if any at all."

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"There are too many excuses the government has to say that it can't release information," said Mr. McKie. "There is such a thing as a bad access request—asking for "all records" on a broad issue with no timelines included, for example, is a bad request, said Mr. McKie. There's an emphasis on those filing requests to understand the law, including finding out what types of documents and information are produced by a given department, he said.

Departmental access to infor- mation coordinators can at times be treated with suspicion. But Mr. Bronskill and Mr. McKie stressed that these coordinators are required to help access files under legislation, and that there's a separation between them and the actual department that holds the information.

"The act" is not "broken," both say, but it does need to be improved. "If you follow the steps in the book you can really make it work for you," said Mr. Bronskill. "It's staying on top of the process that is important."

Ask whether there was need for a book like this, Josée Villemure, director of public affairs at the fed- eral Information Commissioner's office, said generally, there's a lack of awareness among the public about their rights under the act.

"The act does not expressly allow the commissioner to edu- cate the public about the right of access," said Ms. Villemure. "Awareness of the act is a change the commissioner has been making recently."

"At present, there are limited tools or resources to help Cana- dians acquire the skills needed to know how to exercise their rights. As noted in the forward, the guide will be a valuable resource or tool in that regard," she said in an email to The Hill Times.

"The Access to Information Act needs a complete overhaul to adapt to today's realities, to harmonize the legislation with the most progressive and cur- rent national and international standards and to ensure that there is real and effective implementation to meet its stated open government objec- tives and commitments to foster transparency and accountability," bychewett@hilltimes.com

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