

Decisions lack proper paper trail, watchdogs complain

By JEFF SALLOT, *Globe and Mail*, 22 May 2006

OTTAWA -- Two of Parliament's independent watchdogs say their investigations are being thwarted by federal officials who refuse to keep written records of governmental deliberations and decisions.

Too often bureaucrats try to avoid accountability and oversight by simply not writing down what it is they are doing, even in cases involving expenditures worth millions of dollars, Auditor-General Sheila Fraser and Information Commissioner John Reid say.

Mr. Reid's investigators say bureaucrats use a variety of ploys to avoid leaving a paper trail. These include briefing cabinet ministers orally without background documents and using BlackBerry privacy technology to send e-mail messages that avoid routing through computer servers that would create copies of the e-mail traffic.

Some bureaucrats write cryptic handwritten notes on disposable Post-it notes that can be discarded before a final record is created.

"They have anticipated they might have to disclose, so there are no records," Mr. Reid said.

Ms. Fraser complained in her recent report on the gun registry about the dearth of documentation regarding a decision not to record \$21-million in costs for a current fiscal year, but to carry it over. Her auditors were amazed not just by the decision, but by the lack of documentation.

"It seems to us like a fairly significant decision," she said in an interview. "There was a meeting held where that decision was made and there is great confusion as to what was actually decided. There is confusion about who actually attended.

There is even some confusion about the date the meeting was held. We thought there would be some minutes of the meeting to record the basics, like who was there, whether everyone is in agreement."

Ms. Fraser said auditors have seen many such examples of undocumented decision-making in departments such as the Canadian International Development Agency and most notoriously, the scandal-plagued sponsorship program.

Government sources told *The Globe and Mail* last year that Industry Canada officials were discouraged by their managers from keeping too many written notes about the ranking of corporate applicants for Technology Partnership Canada (TPC) financing.

Former Liberal cabinet minister David Dingwall quit his job as president of the Royal Canadian Mint two days after *The Globe* reported he had charged a lobbying contingency fee for one company trying to get TPC financing and had failed to register as a lobbyist for another company applying for TPC money.

Ms. Fraser said undocumented decision-making "is not the norm in government, but it is not an exceptional event."

She and Mr. Reid say it's important to have a paper trail to insure accountable and transparent government. But Ms. Fraser has an additional concern about undocumented business leading to poor management.

The federal Access to Information Act, introduced in the early 1980s, "has had a chilling effect [on bureaucrats] and affected whether or not reports are written," Ms. Fraser said. "There is a fear that if this information gets out, it could provoke incidents of embarrassment, [and] it could take a lot of time and energy."

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