

**Comments on the Topic of Exempt Staff  
Relating to  
Dr. Paul G. Thomas  
Draft Report  
“Who is Getting the Message? Communications at the Centre of Government”**

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Below are some comments designed to clarify the portrait of “political staff” painted in Professor Thomas’s draft report, particularly on p. 35, where PMO staff are described as “potentially too zealous in their loyalty to the prime minister,” suffering from “a lack of experience and judgment, or a lack of issues and the contexts in which they arise,” deficient in training, and operating with “no code of conduct to guide their behaviour.” Professor Thomas’s portrait fails to mention several sources of professionalism, competence, and accountability that are important to so-called “political staff.”

Rather than labeling these people “political staff,” it would be better to use the federal government’s normal term: “exempt staff.” Designated ministerial employees are categorized as “exempt staff” because they are exempted from certain Public Service Commission rules relating to recruitment, compensation, termination, etc. They are exempted because of the nature of the work that they are hired to perform, but they are still public servants in the broader sense. They are paid by money appropriated by Parliament in the annual budget; and employee benefits, office space and supplies, telephone, Internet access, accounting services, and legal advice are provided by civil servants.

During the years 2002-05, I worked for Stephen Harper, then Leader of the Opposition, as Director of Operations, Chief of Staff, and Senior Political Adviser. As someone coming to “the Hill” from university life, I was impressed by how conscious exempt staff members are of their role as public servants. A great deal of effort goes into determining what they may do and what must be left to political parties, which are outside the ambit of government. Exempt staff are not free agents making it up as they go along. They work in a highly structured environment that sets well-defined limits on what they do.

Professor Thomas also says on p. 35, “To a large extent, it is the prime minister who shapes the culture and climate of the PMO.” This is true, and it would be an accurate statement about the influence of the CEO in any organization. However, it must be qualified by reference to the role of the Chief of Staff, Principal Secretary, and other senior officials in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition (OLO). People appointed to these positions, especially Chief of Staff, usually hold advanced educational qualifications such as LL.B, MBA, or Ph.D. and have a record of accomplishment in law, business, elective politics, or academia. Appointees in recent decades have included eminent Canadians such as Derek Burney and Senator Hugh Segal (Conservative), and Jean Pelletier and Eddie Goldenberg (Liberal). People with such qualifications and experience don’t forget everything they have learned about competence and accountability as soon as they go to work for the PMO or OLO. It is they who are in daily contact with staff, and they play a vital role in setting standards.

The Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff also plays a supervisory role over all exempt staff in Ministers’ offices, reviewing the senior appointments, holding frequent meetings at the chief of staff level, giving instructions to carry out the Prime Minister’s policies, and in general making sure that exempt staff are supporting the government with competence and integrity. This mirrors, on a smaller scale, the role of the Clerk of the Privy Council as head of the public service. Again, the conclusion is that exempt staff are not free agents but are integrated into an organizational structure.

Another point to consider is that working in the PMO is an extremely desirable experience for exempt staff. For senior officials, it is an opportunity for public service close to the head of government. For junior staffers, it is invaluable training that can lead to future

challenges such as becoming Chief of Staff, Director of Communications, or Director of Policy in a Minister's office. As a result, the PMO can staff its operations by drawing on a wide pool of qualified people who have had experience working in Ottawa. As one example, the current director of Prime Minister's Correspondence in the PMO performed a similar job in the OLO for almost a decade, during which time she supervised correspondence for half a dozen Leaders and Interim Leaders of the Opposition of three different political parties.

Exempt staff are human beings, and like all human beings they may make mistakes; they work in a human institution, which, like all human institutions, is imperfect. But one should not lose sight of the sources contributing to their professionalism, competence, and accountability. Though exempt from some Public Service Commission rules, they work in a public-service environment subject to legal and accounting controls, and they are conscious of their boundaries. They are supervised by experienced and qualified senior officials often brought in from other walks of life. And they regard it as an honour and a challenge to work in the PMO, which means that the PMO can draw from the most experienced and qualified people available. For the sake of balance, anyone reading Professor Thomas's report should take these factors into account.