

Raises could boost top aides' salaries above those of MPs

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OTTAWA -- One of Paul Martin's first acts as Prime Minister was to quietly boost the pay of his new cabinet ministers' senior political staff by more than \$32,000 a year.

His next act was to freeze pay boosts for other public servants.

The increase in salary means that chiefs of staff for his 29 full cabinet ministers will earn as much as \$147,300 a year, \$12,100 more than elected members of Parliament make.

"The optics of the new Prime Minister are not good," said John Williams, the Canadian Alliance's critic of government waste.

Last month, several days after the new government was sworn in, it announced it was capping the size of the public service, putting all capital projects worth more than \$5-million on hold and prohibiting the reclassification of bureaucrats.

"On the day that he takes office he freezes hiring; he freezes bracket creep for all civil servants except for the chosen few which are the coterie around him and his new cabinet," Mr. Williams said.

When Jean Chrétien took office in 1993 he pared down the staffs in ministers' offices in an effort to save \$10-million a year.

As well, he changed the classification of the most senior ministerial staffer to executive assistant from chief of staff, which the Mulroney government had used.

The reclassification put those senior staff on a lower pay scale.



Prime Minister Martin has reinstated the chief-of-staff title and increased salaries of the most senior ministerial staffers from \$114,500 to \$147,300.

He has boosted their classification two levels, from EX-02 to EX-04.

The chiefs of staff for his nine secretaries of state will earn up to \$114,500 a year, the same as senior policy advisers, communications directors and parliamentary affairs directors in the offices of full ministers.

The Prime Minister and his office are carefully controlling the placement of senior staff in ministers' offices.

Names are vetted through a "human resources committee" run by former Allan Rock executive assistant Cyrus Reporter and former Martin executive assistant Ruth Thorkelson.

Ministers are allowed to pick their staff from a list of names submitted to them by the committee.

The Prime Minister's communications director, Mario Lague, said this week that reinstating the chief-of-staff title was not merely a reclassification because the chief-of-staff job is entirely different than that of the executive assistant in the Chrétien regime.

"They're different positions. That was the main reason they changed the name," Mr. Lague said.

He said this is not the same as a reclassification in the public service, in which an employee remains in the same job but is promoted to a higher level of pay or classification.

Mr. Lague said "ministers' offices are going to be asked to do much more, dealing with parliamentary secretaries, dealing with parliamentarians so . . . the whole role is enhanced."

He also said that ministers and their staffs will have to pay much more attention to the work of committees, which are to play a bigger role in Mr. Martin's government.

Mr. Lague was referring to the Prime Minister's vow to address the so-called democratic deficit and give regular MPs more clout in framing legislation and decision-making.

It is expected that cabinet ministers will have to spend more time defending their legislation and selling it to MPs.

"So therefore they are different positions . . . and therefore the pay rates are basically reflecting that."

The increased salaries are also a way to attract more senior people than those who worked in Chrétien cabinet ministers' offices. "It's more responsibility; you want to get more senior people," he said.

A former executive assistant to Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, Charles Boyer, came under fire last September for spending more than \$31,000 of taxpayers' money on lunches and dinners during a two-year period.

The changes to the job titles and the salary increases have not gone unnoticed by former Chrétien cabinet ministers' staff members.

One former executive assistant doesn't buy Mr. Lague's defence of the salary increases, saying it was also his job, and that of others in his position, to talk to parliamentary secretaries, meet with MPs and deal with committees.

"There's no new tasks, and who did they think used to deal with committees?"

Mr. Lague noted that the "overall envelope" for exempt staff salaries has not changed from that of the Chrétien government. Ministers are allowed a budget of \$828,000 for salaries. He says this will mean that there will be fewer senior staffers in ministers' offices.

Alliance MP Williams said: "I would have thought [Prime Minister Martin] would have waited until he had some experience before he started messing around with these reclassifications, especially when 175,000 [public servants] got their classification frozen, whether they deserve it or not."



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