

No evidence against PM's aide in NAFTA leak: inquiry

Andrew Mayeda
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OTTAWA -- There is no evidence that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's chief of staff disclosed classified information in speaking to a reporter about the North American Free Trade Agreement, a government investigation into the so-called "NAFTA-gate" controversy has found.

However, the investigation was unable to track the source of a leaked diplomatic memo regarding Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's position on NAFTA.

The memo, obtained by the Associated Press in March, stated that an Obama adviser had told Canada's consul general in Chicago that Obama's threat to renegotiate NAFTA was just "political positioning."

The revelation hurt Mr. Obama in the polls at the time, prompting the opposition to accuse the Harper government of interfering in the Democratic race.

The memo was "incorrectly classified" and placed on an "inappropriately broad" distribution list, found the investigation, which was conducted by the Privy Council Office, the bureaucratic arm of the Prime Minister's Office.

In the wake of the leaks, Privy Council Office recommends implementing tougher "reporting protocols" at Canadian diplomatic missions in the United States. It also recommends tightening the rules surrounding federal budget "lockups" to clearly indicate that comments by government officials during such lockups must be on a background or not-for-attribution basis.

Mr. Brodie made the comments regarding NAFTA to a CTV reporter at the budget lockup in late February. Journalists are given advance copies of the budget during such lockups under the strict condition that they will not disclose details until the budget is formally tabled in Parliament.

Mr. Harper faced pressure to fire Mr. Brodie this spring after his alleged role in the lockup leak came to light.

It emerged this week that Mr. Brodie is expected to step down by July 1, although the PMO has not confirmed his departure or the reasons behind it.

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