

PM's top aide set off storm with Obama NAFTA leak

Source of initial tip revealed after Harper vows to investigate 'unacceptable' act

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OTTAWA — The leak of a confidential diplomatic discussion that rocked the U.S. presidential campaign began with an offhand remark to journalists from the Prime Minister's chief of staff, Ian Brodie.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper vowed yesterday to use whatever investigative means necessary to find the source of leaks that, he said, were "unfair" to U.S. Democratic candidate Barack Obama and may have been illegal — although opposition leaders insisted the Conservatives cannot be trusted to investigate political players on their own team.

But the story that reverberated through the U.S. presidential campaign began as a terse, almost throwaway remark that Mr. Brodie made to journalists from CTV, according to people familiar with the events.

Mr. Brodie, during the media lockup for the Feb. 26 budget, stopped to chat with several journalists, and was surrounded by a group from CTV.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's chief of staff Ian Brodie watches from the back of the room during a photo op before the government caucus meeting on Parliament Hill in Ottawa Wednesday. (Tom Hanson/Canadian Press)

The conversation turned to the pledges to renegotiate the North American free-trade agreement made by the two Democratic contenders, Mr. Obama and New York Senator Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Brodie, apparently seeking to play down the potential impact on Canada, told the reporters the threat was not serious, and that someone from Ms. Clinton's campaign had even contacted Canadian diplomats to tell them not to worry because the NAFTA threats were mostly political posturing.

The Canadian Press cited an unnamed source last night as saying that several people overheard the remark.

The news agency quoted that source as saying that Mr. Brodie said that someone from Ms. Clinton's campaign called and was "telling the embassy to take it with a grain of salt."

The story was followed by CTV's Washington bureau chief, Tom Clark, who reported that the Obama campaign, not the Clinton's, had reassured Canadian diplomats.

Mr. Clark cited unnamed Canadian sources in his initial report.

There was no explanation last night for why Mr. Brodie was said to have referred to the Clinton campaign but the news report was about the Obama campaign. Robert Hurst, president of CTV News, declined to comment.

The Prime Minister's communications director, Sandra Buckler, has said that Mr. Brodie "does not recall" discussing the issue.

On Tuesday, Mr. Harper denied that Mr. Brodie was a source of the leak — but he appeared to be referring to a diplomatic memo that described the key conversation between an adviser to Mr. Obama and Canada's consul-general in Chicago, Georges Rioux.

Although Mr. Harper has for days brushed aside allegations that his government interfered in the U.S. presidential campaign, yesterday he promised to "get to the bottom" of the matter and said laws may have been broken.

"It is not in the interest of the Government of Canada, and the way the leak was executed, Mr. Speaker, was blatantly unfair to Senator Obama and his campaign," the Prime Minister said in the Commons.

"We will make sure that every legal and every investigative technique necessary is undertaken to find out who exactly is behind this."

But opposition politicians accused Mr. Harper of hiding behind artful denials — ignoring the verbal leak, while denying that the diplomatic memo came from his top aide.

However, Mr. Harper did not appear to be distinguishing between the two leaks yesterday.

Yesterday, he said he had asked the top civil servant, Clerk of the Privy Council Kevin Lynch, to call in an internal security team, with the help of Foreign Affairs.

Members of the opposition asserted that an internal inquiry is unlikely to look seriously at Mr. Harper's own high-level political aides and appointees, such as Mr. Brodie, or Michael Wilson, Canada's ambassador to Washington.

NDP Leader Jack Layton said it is time to call in the RCMP.

The first leak sparked stories that Mr. Obama had privately delivered a message through an aide to Canadian diplomats that the stand against NAFTA was more political posturing than a real policy plan.

The Clinton campaign seized on the stories to argue that Mr. Obama was making promises that he did not mean. The Obama campaign sputtered after this and other attacks on his experience and integrity.

Days later, the leak of the internal Canadian diplomatic note revealed that Mr. Obama's adviser, Austan Goolsbee, spoke to Mr. Rioux on Feb. 8.

In a summary of the meeting written by Canadian diplomat Joseph de Mora, Mr. Goolsbee was described as indicating that Mr. Obama's NAFTA stand "should be viewed as more about political positioning than a clear articulation of policy plans." Mr. Goolsbee denied using those terms.

Mr. Clark of CTV says he called Mr. Wilson for reaction.

The next day, the embassy and Mr. Obama's campaign denied the story. Since Mr. de Mora's memo was leaked to The Associated Press, the Canadian embassy in Washington won't respond to questions about "NAFTA-gate," as the issue has been dubbed.