

Loose talk part of federal NAFTA leak probe

Bruce Campion-Smith
Toronto Star
March 27, 2008

OTTAWA—Federal investigators are probing allegations of "unauthorized" talk by government officials that may have helped Senator Barack Obama lose the Ohio Democratic presidential primary.

Kevin Lynch, the Clerk of the Privy Council, has confirmed an ongoing internal investigation will look at "unauthorized verbal disclosure" as well as the leak of a Canadian memo about the Illinois senator's views on NAFTA.

That could put Ian Brodie, chief of staff to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as well as Michael Wilson, Canada's ambassador in Washington, at the centre of the probe.

"Based on the information that's been made available to the public thus far, one would infer that those two individuals would be part of the investigation," said Liberal MP Navdeep Bains.

Questions have been raised about discussions both Brodie and Wilson had with CTV journalists and whether they were responsible for sparking stories that suggested Obama's public criticism of NAFTA was less than genuine.

Bains (Mississauga-Brampton South) said official word provided to him that the verbal disclosure is being probed is further reason Brodie and Wilson should step aside until the investigation is completed – a demand the Prime Minister's Office has so far rebuffed.

Lynch, who is overseeing the probe ordered by Harper into how sensitive diplomatic information made into headlines in the U.S. on the eve of the March 4 Ohio primary, replied to a request from Bains about the scope of the probe.

"The internal investigation currently underway involves the unauthorized verbal disclosure of privileged information and the leak to the Associated Press of a report from the Canadian Consulate in Chicago," Lynch wrote back.

The senior bureaucrat also confirmed that the results of the investigation would be made public, a pledge welcomed by Bains.

However, Lynch said the probe's length will "depend on the number of individuals who will need to be interviewed or investigated.

"I can assure you that the investigation is being conducted in a thorough and comprehensive manner, and that all necessary resources are being put at its disposal," Lynch wrote in his March 17 letter.

First came the "leak" that a member of Obama's campaign team gave Wilson a heads-up that the candidate would be speaking out against the trade deal but not to worry.

Then the Associated Press received the memo claiming Obama's economic adviser assured a Canadian consular official that Obama's NAFTA criticism should be seen only as "political positioning."

Harper apologized to Obama, who denied such assurances were given.