

**FOR BRITISH COLUMBIANS, IT'S THE MESSAGE, NOT THE MESSENGERS –
IN HARPER'S LATEST CABINET SHUFFLE**

It was Ralph Klein, the former Albertan premier and one of the most politically astute first ministers this country has ever had, who said "ninety-five percent of politics is communications." Watching the ceremonies from Rideau Hall this week as Prime Minister Harper shuffled his cabinet, I could not help but think that this can be a blessing when the message is what Canadians want to hear, yet it can also be a curse if the deeds behind the words do not meet with their approval. For ordinary British Columbians, the message Mr. Harper was sending with this shuffle should give us pause for thought.

The appointment of Gordon O'Connor to Revenue from his embattled place at the helm of National Defence was simply a case of shooting the messenger, in the hopes that Canadians do not notice the message remains the same. In conversations with my constituents, and indeed in poll after poll taken in communities across the country, Canadians are increasingly uncomfortable with the lack of a clear exit strategy for our troops in Afghanistan. Never mind the controversy surrounding the troubling lack of interest from this government on the treatment of detainees, with well documented reports of human rights abuses. The bigger concern remains the safety and well being of our men and women serving abroad, those extraordinary, 'ordinary heroes' who depend on the leadership which can provide a clear timetable and plan for their exit from the region, assured that an infrastructure of a functioning democracy is in place. No one has ever seriously thought that leadership would come from Gordon O'Connor – this is the most rigidly controlled government from the Prime Minister's office in modern memory. But the appointment of Peter MacKay to Defence, a more "effective" communicator (remember his weeping over Belinda with his dog?) will only change the tone and perhaps the coherence of the message; it will not change its substance – or lack of it.

The appointments of Ministers Bernier and Verner to Foreign Affairs and Heritage, respectively, are also essentially strategic communications gestures. For British Columbians who perhaps had at one time hoped such major portfolios might see real leadership from a BC Minister, it does not take an Ottawa insider to understand the rationale behind these appointments. In a word, Quebec. Mr. Bernier has been tasked with reporting how things are going, creating a functioning democracy in Afghanistan to the same audience, and in the same sunny tone that he could speak of investment in the aerospace industry in Quebec. Ms. Verner will also reassure Quebecers that in matters of culture, Ottawa cares.

In matters of multiculturalism, of course, we still have Jason Kenney.

Perhaps the one appointment British Columbians can take heart in seeing is Chuck Strahl going to Indian and Northern Affairs. Yet upon closer examination of Mr. Strahl's history with his previous portfolio, where embattled farmers are still fuming about decisions surrounding the Wheat Board, there is little hope for effective management in his new job. You will undoubtedly be hearing many quotes reflective of Mr. Strahl's positions on aboriginal issues, from his beginnings in the Reform party up to his recent years in Parliament, but I remain hopeful his perspective, now that he is given this responsibility, will become more reflective of average Canadians.

In fact I would normally hope that all of our new Ministers will grow into their roles and provide British Columbians with effective, truly representative government. However, I am speaking of their roles as Ministers, not messengers.



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