

Trudeau's off to slow, weak start on transparency record

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OTTAWA—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is starting off with a mixed and weak transparency record.

Refusing to make fully public a 2015 Saudi Arabia human rights report puts a dent in his promise of "information by default." South of the border in the United States, the government annually releases reports on other countries' human rights records.

Trudeau also missed an opportunity when it came to making government appointments more accountable and transparent. The media recently focused on some 30 past Conservative reappointments and whether their boards and ministers think they remain meritorious, but Trudeau didn't clearly put in place regular parliamentary oversight for selecting appointees.

Worse yet, an awkward secretive process has been put in play to select Trudeau's first five Senators.

One incident that could indicate Trudeau's truer style and preference for private rather than public dealings occurred before he took office, according to access to information documents. That's when he and his representative, Liberal Party policy director, Michael McNair, now the PMO's policy director, wanted their discussions on transparency with the office of Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault kept secret.

Trudeau's transparency private member's bill and the party's platform have not been convincing ways to remake Ottawa's secretive style. Holding scrums and press conferences helps, but like the ministers' mandate letters, they tell little on how open his government's operational files will be.

The appearance of being open may count, but legislative changes and operational changes mean more. Here are a few key areas to watch for in the next few months.

Spending surveillance: Tasked with watching spending, Treasury Board President Scott Brison is a key Cabinet secrecy gatekeeper. How do he and ministers like Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi then fully report to Parliament and the public on money being spent?

Parliamentary Budget Office: Both Trudeau and NDP Leader Tom Muclair agree Ottawa needs an independent parliamentary budget officer to further Parliament's and the public's understanding of Ottawa's finances. But Trudeau is not quickly moving on that important transparency bill's introduction or on the controls Parliament needs to examine public spending.

The Transparency Trioka: Asking three ministries—Treasury Board, Democratic Institutions and Justice—to move on access to information legislation reforms could get tied up in inter-bureaucratic tangling and stakeholders' warfare taking years. Even Trudeau's modest private member transparency changes, when redrafted by insiders, will get watered down. Look to any move to start making any PMO office records public as a litmus test.

Legislative scrutiny: Where are the tough decisions to prevent weak review of legislation, including of the omnibus variety? No one is talking about the need for a new independent parliamentary legislative officer whose office could offer the public and Parliament timely analysis of complex bills filled with hidden clauses. As well, no one is advocating a review of secrecy clauses in acts or introducing proactive disclosure clauses.

Unmuzzling Ottawa: There are no real signs as yet of bureaucrats being given strong whistleblowing protective legislation or less onerous loyalty codes of conduct. Silence is still preferred as are oral directions over written ones.

A new Crown-aboriginal partnership: Starting with a commission on missing and murdered aboriginal woman still begs the question of how the partnership and reconciliation will blossom.

Open meetings: The PM meets the provinces in one open conference but where is the commitment for full open meetings for many more conferences, boards, commissions and agencies including the National Capital Commission? And when will the Commons Board of Internal Economy be open?

In-depth public consultations and public participation: What exactly will the announced Anti-Terrorism Act Bill C-51 discussions accomplish? And on key files like electoral reform, are their plans to really listen, or even hold referenda?

Although not expected, it would be great if the governing priority in the upcoming parliamentary session brought down the democratic deficit, raised the transparency bar and satisfied the public's right to know.

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