

OPEN GOVERNMENT



Countering and presenting images: inside PCO's and Fisheries' attempts to deal with Sir Paul McCartney

By KEN RUBIN

There have been many expensive government communications plans that I've obtained over the years that have tried to minimize government exposure and counter negative images.

The Harper government is no exception as it, for instance, dresses up its green plan and tries to place its expanded military mission in Afghanistan in the best light.

Yet it becomes difficult to convey the government's side of things with all those Canadian-flag-draped caskets coming home. And staging an announcement against a backdrop of mountains and fresh air in Vancouver does not necessarily make for an accepting climate for a rather humdrum eventual clean air program.

But what if you come up against a world-wide celebrity like ex-Beatle Sir Paul McCartney intent on presenting an image of Canada's seal hunt as inhumane and who is set on boycotting its products?

There it is in vivid TV/internet colour. Sir Paul and now estranged wife Heather were there last March lying together on the ice off of Prince Edward Island looking lovingly at a little white baby seal pup. That's a government PR type's worst nightmare. And that staged event had instant world-wide appeal.

But I can now report on the valiant behind-the-scenes efforts of the Harper government's to counteract the deadly wrong impressions such images make. After all, Canadian honour was at stake. The international public might get the wrong impression of the clubbing and shooting of all those young seals and then demand Canada's annual seal hunt be banned.

Access to information records obtained and released from Fisheries and Oceans show that officials desperately wanted theirs and Newfoundland's view of the seal hunt as a reasonable community job program to prevail. Three options were presented in the original communications plan, knowing the McCartneys were coming and that Paul had placed a call to Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The first option was strictly a soft-sell scenario. Have PM Harper call Paul McCartney back "and invite him to visit a small, rural Newfoundland and Labrador fishing village." The ensuing excitement to the rest of the strategy was considered top secret and is blanked out.

The second option, so Canadian, is to get the Prime Minister to have a telephone chat with Paul. "The PM listens to his (Paul's) concerns while providing facts on Canada's seal hunt and its importance to rural Canadian communities in New-

foundland and along the East Coast of Canada."

The rest is just too boring or too much for us Canadians to know about, and it too is blanked out.

Which leads to the last and accepted third option of passing the buck and letting Harper's Fisheries Minister, Loyola Hearn, return Mr. McCartney's call. This "time listening to his concerns, providing facts on Canada's humane, sustainable and economically viable seal hunt."

Naturally, this was the preferred clever choice because "it does not raise the profile of anti-sealing groups as high as a response from the PM himself likely would..." That line was likely supposed to have been exempt as another copy of the same memo had the offending line blanked out. And of course, the strategy of option three was great because it allows for "a low-key, reactive approach to media" queries.

The idea, in any case, was to respond to the local and international media before Sir Paul's arrival so "he cannot claim he has received no response from the Canadian government and hopefully somewhat moderate any comments on the hunt he may make."

This was important enough stuff for Privy Council Office and Fisheries officials to huddle on over the days before, during and after the McCartneys came to conjure up all those pictures of seals being clubbed or shot to death. A command centre, at some expense, was set up, too. And Fisheries must have felt honoured as it was even asked by PCO to input a few notes to drafting a reply letter to a letter Sir Paul had sent to PM Harper.

But Fisheries Minister Hearn did not reach Sir Paul by phone and give him the Canadian heave-ho message. Still, media accompanying the McCartneys were pumped for any information on Paul's plans and all video footage of the groups sponsoring him like the Humane Society of the United States was examined.

Expectations were not high though "due to the 'celeb' factor..." Yet thank heavens "a couple of media outlets expressed interest in both sides of the story." And self-congratulatory efforts were made to be "proactive"... "correcting the record when needed."

But records show just how nervous officials were. The Canadian Tourism Commission was also on high alert to watch out for world-wide protests.

The rest is history, as they say since the McCartneys helped turn European public opinion further against the seal hunt's evils and assisted in the denial of entry to seal products like clothing.

Today, however, the McCartneys are engaged in their own PR battle and in a



Photograph by Jake Wright, The Hill Times

Inside communications: Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn. According to documents, officials in Mr. Hearn's Fisheries and Oceans and PCO officials huddled for days to come up with a communications strategy to counter Paul McCartney's high-profile visit to Canada against the seal hunt.

nasty divorce proceeding in which Heather is allegedly claiming Paul was clubbing her too.

But the point is spinning images in the hands of government isn't always a win-win situation and does not happen without its costs and consequences. It can sometimes seal fates.

Governments can only act and look tough and decisive if they see all sides and don't spin things to the point that

makes them look like they're downright silly and indecisive. Access to information to government documents may come back on occasion to show, but not celebrate, those high-end counter communications failings.

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