

# Communications Issues

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*A Community Service of Harley House Consultants Inc.*

## The New Policy on Communications and Federal Identity – Five Things To Think About

### Introduction

The long-awaited Policy on Communications and Federal Identity has arrived. The new TB policy was promised during the last federal campaign and was featured in the President of Treasury Board's mandate letter. It is one of a series of amended policies and practices giving form to the government's commitment to change the way things run in Ottawa.



As a former Treasury Board Assistant Secretary responsible for the Coms Policy and the FIP, I couldn't wait to check it out and compare it to my glossy hard-copy version of the old policy! I also wanted to see how it compared to policy reforms proposed during my tenure at the Secretariat that were never officially considered by the Board.

So, is this policy that much different from its predecessor; the rambling, oft-amended 2002 Communications Policy of the Government of Canada? And maybe more to the point, should any of you care?

I know Harley House, probably other firms too, will be offering analytical services to help departments figure that out and to help them see how they stack up against new directions and requirements in the policy and the accompanying Directive on the Management of Communications. The Directive might actually be the most important document to become really familiar with. The particulars on what Heads of Communications must deliver are laid out there, not in the policy.

And stay tuned for more guidance and discussion with central agencies. A change like this is a watershed moment for a government community, and the powers that be will want all to understand and get on board.

Reforms to advertising practices are getting top billing from Minister Brison and many in the media. That is obviously important, but there are other developments that you should pay attention to. So, here is our take on five important things in the new policy:

### 1) Heads of Communications come out of this policy change with at least as much authority as they had before.

This is a much shorter, crisper document. It features the requirement to have a head of communications to "manage" communications prominently and early on in the text -- a clear statement that heads of coms are not just here to do what they are told. Some would argue the last government was oblivious to much of the language in the last policy. This government is choosing to use this language of delegation and empowerment, so the pressure will be on to deliver. A great opportunity as well!

### 2) This policy is clear, precise, but less aspirational than its predecessor.

Gone is the extended policy statement with the ten principles of Government of Canada Communications. Among other things, these principles said that the "government has a duty to explain" what it does, that the public has a "right" to information, and that it is policy to encourage public service managers and employees "to communicate openly" about government activity. (Continued on next page)

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## 2. The New Policy on Communications and Federal Identity

It might have been inevitable that this and other prose on communications commitments would hit the chopping block in an effort to simplify this TB policy, as others have been simplified, but I miss those principles already.

### 3) The definition of “non-partisan” is a great step forward for government communications.

It's odd to think that one definition in an appendix could be among the most important things in a policy, but that's the case here. Government policies and codes are riddled with calls for non-partisanship, but it has been pretty tough to find an official definition of what that means. The definition offered in this policy is detailed and extensive enough to give strength to efforts to keep partisan politics out of the public service and prevent the use of public funds to support partisan communications efforts. The new review mechanism for advertising is another bold move in this area.

### 4) Making Deputy Minister's responsible for Public Opinion Research planning approvals is a good sign.

Under amendments to the previous policy, Ministers had to approve all POR projects through the annual plan and usually a second time before going into the field, no matter how small or insignificant the project was. In this policy, that responsibility has been devolved back to the Deputy Head and the definition of what must be captured in rigorous POR approvals processes has been tightened up considerably. The message here is clear – assessments of the views of the public are back as legitimate research options, not something to be feared and controlled to prevent results from bringing into question existing policies and programs.

### 5) The overdue move to “digital by default” marches on.

The Canadian government has been slow to modernize its communications offerings. It's not alone. Governments by nature are rarely bleeding edgers when it comes to coms technology. But this policy pushes hard to accelerate that modernization, making digital by default the policy requirement, officially making social media use part of the communications head's responsibilities, and requiring uniform use of web and social media analytics across government, among other changes.

## In Conclusion

There is much to digest here, in the policy and in the directive. In our view, they will prompt positive evolution in communications services from the government of Canada. The question for communications leaders is how do you live up to, and leverage, both its requirements and its intent?

At Harley House we would love to talk more. Let's keep the conversation going.

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“At Harley House Consultants Inc. we believe that effective communications involves meaningful, constructive and thoughtful engagement with internal and external stakeholders. You have to be strategically positioned to provide timely, complete, honest, open and sincere information about the policies, programs and services of the Government of Canada.”

For more information about how to improve the effectiveness of your consultation and communications strategies,

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