

Tuesday, January 26, 2010 12:20 PM

WATCHDOGS DESCRIBE COMING 'UNDER ATTACK' BY CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT

Colin Freeze

A trio of recently fired watchdogs visited a prorogued Parliament today to complain that the Conservatives are "at war" with the government's independent tribunals.

The forum, organized as a prorogation protest measure by the Liberals, aired angry remarks from Canada's former police, military and nuclear watchdogs. Their common complaint? The independence of important "quasi-judicial" bodies is being undercut by political interference.

"This isn't somewhere you put a [body] in that seat to keep it warm," said Paul Kennedy, who lost his job as chair of the RCMP Public Complaints Commission last month. He had served four years, but the Conservative government did not renew his term.

"I'm a strong proponent of independent oversight of the government and its agencies," said Mr. Kennedy, a combative complaints chair who has a 35-year background in federal security agencies.

Politicians, he said, stifle dissent from "bothersome" watchdog agencies by starving them of funding or by appointing ineffective chairs. (An estate lawyer with political connections was named to replace Mr. Kennedy last week.)

Administrative tribunals are "under attack by the federal government," said Linda Keen, former chief executive at the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. She recounted how she was "fired" by the Prime Minister and Minister of Natural Resources last year.

"I said at the time this is going to send a chill through federal tribunals," she said in a videotaped message. "... Are we in an era where tribunals must be more interested in meeting the needs of the government than in doing their jobs?"

More diplomatic was Peter Tinsley, whose term as chair of the Military Police Complaints Commission, was not renewed last year.

The commission made news for probing the Afghan detainee controversy, the same hot-button issue that many observers say forced the Tories to prorogue Parliament this winter.

"The perception has become widespread that something is not quite right in the system," Mr. Tinsley said.

1:

Watchdogs Describe Coming 'Under Attack' by Conservative Government

Too often, he said, political “horse-trading” and unelected staffers play key roles in hiring and firing watchdogs that serve at the whim of the government they are appointed to criticize.

“The potential for abuse itself does not bode well for good governance,” Mr. Tinsley said.

Canada has about 30 quasi-judicial bodies where administrative officials oversee government agencies, often with an eye to protecting public safety and upholding ethics. Many of these positions are government-in-council appointments, political decisions made by the government of the day.

Fixed terms, merit-based appointments, performance evaluation, and more independence would go a long way to making sure these bodies do their jobs, the panelists said.

The forum was the first in a series organized by the Liberal Party. Many MPs attended and the event was kicked off by remarks from Michael Ignatieff.

“Liberals are at work as you can see. ... Our purpose today is to use Parliament Hill the way it should be used,” he said.

2: