

# Defection puts PM, ethics czar at odds

BRIAN LAGHI

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Stephen Harper and Canada's Ethics Commissioner were headed on a collision course yesterday after the Prime Minister said he is disinclined to co-operate with a preliminary inquiry into his conduct over the political defection of David Emerson.

“The Prime Minister is loath to co-operate with an individual whose decision-making ability has been questioned and who has been found in contempt of the House,” said Sandra Buckler, a spokeswoman for Mr. Harper.

“All this really is, is a partisan complaint and a political dispute.”

Ms. Buckler made the comments after federal ethics chief Bernard Shapiro said he will launch an inquiry into both Mr. Harper and Mr. Emerson, in the wake of complaints from opposition MPs that the Prime Minister may have offered an inducement to the former Liberal MP to cross the floor and join the Conservative cabinet.

“Although the subject of this inquiry is the Prime Minister, given that the actions of Messrs. Harper and Emerson in this incident were intertwined, questions will no doubt be raised during the course of the preliminary inquiry on the conduct of Mr. Emerson as well,” Mr. Shapiro wrote in a letter to House of Commons Speaker Peter Milliken.

“In fact, my office has received numerous requests from the public to launch an inquiry on the behaviour of Mr. Emerson.”

But the letter invited an immediate rebuke from the Prime Minister's Office, which raised the issue of Mr. Shapiro's appointment by the Liberals and wondered why he did not investigate the cases of Belinda Stronach and Scott Brison, both of whom crossed the floor to the Liberals — Ms. Stronach from the Conservatives and Mr. Brison from the now-defunct Progressive Conservatives.

“I find it strange that Belinda Stronach or Scott Brison were not investigated by this individual and I'd like to know why he didn't see fit to look at those instances,” Ms. Buckler wrote in an earlier e-mail to reporters.

“This Liberal appointee's actions have strengthened the Prime Minister's resolve to create a truly non-partisan Ethics Commissioner, who is accountable to Parliament.”

Mr. Shapiro was not in office when Mr. Brison crossed the floor.

Mr. Shapiro made his decision to investigate after receiving requests from three MPs, Liberals Wayne Easter and Bryon Wilfert as well as New Democratic Party member

Peter Julian. The decision to launch the probe ensures that the issue, which had begun to recede from the public mind, will be resurrected and almost certainly stay in the news for months to come.

In his request, Mr. Julian wanted Mr. Shapiro to investigate whether the Prime Minister offered Mr. Emerson an illegal inducement before the latter's decision to join the Tories. Mr. Shapiro can recommend a wide array of sanctions, including censures and reprimands.

Mr. Emerson has already said he would resign if Mr. Shapiro were to find him guilty of violating ethics rules. The new International Trade Minister has been facing a firestorm of protest in his home riding of Vancouver Kingsway since he crossed the floor, as upset voters demand he quit the seat and run in a by-election. Mr. Harper also upset voters with the simultaneous decision to appoint one of his campaign workers, Michael Fortier, to the Senate, so he could sit as the Public Works Minister.

“Harper, with his appointment of Emerson and others, has shot himself in the foot, if not the head,” said Duff Conacher of Democracy Watch, a government-ethics watchdog.

“His failure should be looked at very harshly by Canadians.”

Mr. Conacher said he, too, plans to file a complaint on the issue.

But Ms. Buckler noted that former NDP MP Ed Broadbent has asked for Mr. Shapiro to step down.

She also referred to the fact that Mr. Shapiro was found in contempt of the House of Commons last year when a parliamentary committee ruled that he made inappropriate comments during an interview. MPs said at the time that the Ethics Commissioner revealed details about an inquiry into MP Deepak Obhrai.

Mr. Harper and Mr. Shapiro already have a history, after the Prime Minister — who was then opposition leader — refused to meet with Mr. Shapiro to discuss the case of former Conservative MP Gurmant Grewal.

Mr. Julian said yesterday he based his complaint on the case of Mr. Grewal, who was involved in a controversial taping of then-health minister Ujjal Dosanjh and former chief of staff to Paul Martin, Tim Murphy, on the prospect of crossing the floor to join the Liberals. Mr. Shapiro said at the time that, if a benefit had been offered to Mr. Grewal, it would have constituted a serious breach of the federal code for members of Parliament.

“I think that politically it's a wake-up call that Stephen Harper cannot govern the way the Liberals governed,” Mr. Julian said.

“People were expecting more and they haven't seen it.”

Mr. Julian noted that Mr. Emerson will receive increased salary, a car and driver, and other benefits from becoming a cabinet minister.

He shied away from suggesting what an appropriate sanction might be, but said an ethical response to the episode might be to have Mr. Emerson resign and run for his seat. "Voters in Vancouver Kingsway feel they've been treated with contempt," he said.

The nature of a preliminary investigation means that Mr. Shapiro will meet with Mr. Harper face to face, something he failed to do over the Grewal matter.

Meanwhile, Mr. Easter, the Liberal MP, said he is pleased with the decision. He said it appears that Mr. Emerson himself made no request to come over to the Tories and that it was Mr. Harper and/or his agent, former Conservative MP John Reynolds, who wooed Mr. Emerson.