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Tory insiders and behind-scenes lobbying pave path to new 'Fox North' launch

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OTTAWA _ On March 30, 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper sat down for lunch in New York with Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes.

The meeting was not on any public itinerary released by the Prime Minister's Office and only came to light when The Canadian Press searched media consultant Ari Fleischer's mandatory disclosures with the U.S. Justice Department.

Ailes is the longtime Republican communications guru who is the president of Fox News Channel, which is owned by Murdoch's News Corp.

Harper's soon-to-be-ex-communications director Kory Teneycke was also present.

Four months later, Teneycke had left the PMO _ barely a year into his job as Harper's chief spokesman _ only to pick up a contract with Quebecor to explore a project that Ottawa insiders almost immediately described as a fledgling ``Fox News North.''

His goal was a punchy, provocative, right-of-centre network to shake up what Teneycke describes as the ``lame-stream media.'

On Tuesday in Toronto, barely 10 months after Teneycke left the Prime Minister's Office, his new full-time employer Pierre Karl Peladeau will announce Quebecor Media Inc.'s plans for a ``new investment in Canadian media" and a ``major announcement concerning the marriage of television and the Internet.'

The billionaire media baron has already applied to the federal broadcast regulator for an all-news, English-language television license after a year of personal lobbying in Ottawa.

Teneycke is in the middle of the operation as a newly hired Quebecor vice-president.

It's been a remarkably fast and focused project development.

Peladeau met with Harper twice early in 2009, according to the lobbyist registry, while also making the rounds of senior cabinet ministers such as Jim Flaherty, Tony Clement and James Moore.

By August, Teneycke had left the PMO and in September a three-month contract with Quebecor became public knowledge.

By last October, Quebecor's Sun TV in Toronto had let go anchor Jannette Luu because she was ``not controversial enough" _ according to an insider _ and

Teneycke's vision for a conservative network was leaking out.

By this spring, Peladeau's lobbying efforts were in full bloom.

Since January he has had three registered sit-downs with Konrad von Finkenstein, the CRTC president, along with meetings with other CRTC officials and a Jan. 20 session with Moore, the Heritage minister who oversees the broadcast regulator.

Quebecor's application to the CRTC is reported to be for a coveted first tier designation, meaning all cable subscribers in the country would receive the channel whether they wanted it or not. Quebecor would automatically receive the cable fees accorded such a channel.

For CBC News Network, that amounts to some \$65 million annually.

While the CRTC has been reluctant to grant such licenses, any decision could be over-ruled by cabinet.

Chris Waddell of Carleton University's business journalism program says selling advertising on a news network dedicated to conservative ideology could be a tough sell, because the viewing demographic is so diverse.

But if Quebecor gains access to first-tier fees, Waddell notes you don't even necessarily need many viewers or advertisers to stay afloat.

And as Fox has shown, provocative fare can attract a huge viewership over time.

David Frum, a Canadian-born conservative pundit in Washington, has lamented the power of the ``conservative entertainment industry" to whip ``the Republican voting base into such a frenzy that deal-making was rendered impossible" on health-care reform.

``The real leaders are on TV and radio, and they have very different imperatives from people and government," Frum wrote this spring.

``Talk radio thrives on confrontation and recrimination.'

Anger drives eyeballs.

Teneycke and other conservatives have played down talk of ``Fox News North" and any overt right-wing agenda. Even the Fox News name is held in Canada by rival media giant Shaw.

But Teneycke's partisanship is bred in the bone and goes back years to his work for the Mike Harris Conservatives in Ontario, the Reform party and the Saskatchewan Party.

Before joining the PMO he worked for the Canadian Renewable Fuels Association, where he ran ``Thank-you Stephen Harper" commercials.

His current Facebook page helps complete the picture.

``Have been plowing through Q1 ratings data in the US. 'Crushing' is too soft a word for what Fox is doing to CNN," he wrote April 6.

He lauds Glenn Beck, Fox's anti-government conspiracy theorist, and makes note of a National Enquirer headline about ``Obama Cheating Scandal."

``The Enquirer has a remarkably strong track record on these stories of late... Tiger Woods and John Edwards. We shall see ..." writes Teneycke.

Of his recent CBC gig as a Conservative pundit, Teneycke wrote: ``I am a political commentator, not a journalist and not an employee."

And his edgy, controversial humour shines through: ``To the pot heads who keep sending me crazy, profane emails: I hope (imprisoned pot activist) Marc Emery enjoys group showers as much as he enjoys pot. Three cheers for the DEA."

For the record, Teneycke said Monday the Quebecor venture was not discussed at Harper's New York meeting with the Fox News leadership last spring.

Asked what was discussed, PMO spokesman Dimitri Soudas responded by email that ``the prime minister meets with a wide range of people from the business, cultural, telecommunication and other sectors when travelling or here at home."

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