

Law firm playing host to Liberal fundraiser with justice minister had lobbyist in ranks

Senior partner de-activated lobby registration status 1 day before controversial event

By Kathleen Harris, Alison Crawford, [CBC News](#) Posted: Apr 07, 2016 7:06 PM ET Last Updated: Apr 07, 2016 7:57 PM ET

Tonight's private fundraising reception with the Liberal justice minister is hosted at a Toronto law firm that had at least one registered lobbyist on staff — until he de-activated his status on the eve of the controversial event.

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- [Kathleen Wynne cancels private fundraisers](#)

The fact that John Tobin, a senior partner in Torys LLP's tax department, [had been registered to lobby various government](#) departments, including Justice Canada, appears to violate Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's own guidelines under his Open and Accountable Government document.

That 87-page document released in November prohibits fundraising events with "employees of corporations and organizations whose employees are registered to lobby Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, their staff or their departments" as well as "individuals employed in, contracted by, or who otherwise represent corporations and organizations that have current or anticipated official dealings with Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, their staff or their departments."

Dormant registrations

Tobin told CBC News that it was brought to his attention that he had several dormant registrations open with the federal Registry of Lobbyists.

"These were older matters that my staff automatically renewed. None of these files has had any activity for more than 12 months," he wrote in an email to CBC News, adding he closed them as soon as he became aware of the registration.

Tobin also said he was unaware of the Liberal event hosted by another partner at his law firm involving the minister until yesterday, and that he will not be attending.

Cash raised at the \$500-a-head reception featuring Minister of Justice and Attorney General Jody Wilson-Raybould will go to the Liberal Party of Canada.

No specific response to CBC query

Repeated requests for an explanation on how the event fits with Trudeau's accountability guidelines, directed to the minister's office and the Liberal Party, received no specific response.

[Trudeau deflected when peppered with questions](#) from reporters Wednesday about whether this event is appropriate. Instead, he spoke only about party's general commitment to meet high standards for ethics and accountability.

Asked today specifically about how this event is permitted under his accountability orders to ministers, Trudeau stuck to his line and said the party banned donations from unions and corporations and touted the government's ethics record. Federal parties are restricted to receiving individual donations only, up to a maximum of \$1,525.

"We have pledged and demonstrated a level of transparency that no federal government has demonstrated before," he said during an infrastructure announcement in Sudbury, Ont., Thursday.

Tory critic says event 'blurs the lines'

The Conservatives' deputy justice critic, Michael Cooper, wrote to Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner Mary Dawson Thursday raising concerns about using the attorney general's ministerial responsibilities "to solicit donations from targeted members in the legal community."

"Most Canadians would consider this an ethical breach," said Cooper in a news release. "When the Attorney General has a fundraiser for the Liberal Party at one of the top law firms in Canada, it blurs the lines between what is Liberal Party business and what is government business."

Based on information to date, the commissioner told CBC News Wednesday she has no plans for an investigation.

Citing "confidentiality considerations," the office said the commissioner can't comment on any specific advice given, but spokeswoman Margot Booth did confirm that Wilson-Raybould's office was in contact yesterday morning.

The minister's office did not respond to a query from CBC about the specifics of that advice.

Questions around the Wilson-Raybould event came as Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne announced Tuesday that she was cancelling her private fundraising events and would no longer allow such events for her ministers.

Wynne's move came after harsh criticism of her party's fundraising tactics, which included quotas for cabinet ministers. Wynne has promised to work with other parties to revamp Ontario's political fundraising rules this fall.

'Open and accountable government'

Trudeau's Open and Accountable Government document requires that ministers and parliamentary secretaries "ensure that political fundraising activities or considerations do not affect, or appear to affect, the exercise of their official duties or the access of individuals or organizations to government."

"There should be no preferential access to government, or appearance of preferential access, accorded to individuals or organizations because they have made financial contributions to politicians and political parties," the guidelines read.

The only provision in the Conflict of Interest Act that deals with fundraising is a section that prohibits a public office holder from personally soliciting funds if it would place the public office holder in a conflict of interest.

Liberal Party spokesman Braedon Caley has defended the event, insisting that the party complies with the Election Act in all of its fundraising activities and that no lobbyists are expected to attend.

"As one would expect, all MPs have a role to play in attending events for their political party," he added.

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