



Fraser blows whistle again

Prison official collects over \$325,000 in unearned pay and perks

By JIM BROWN The Canadian Press

OTTAWA — The former ombudsman for federal prison inmates often failed to show up for work, billed the government for personal travel and hospitality, and collected up to \$325,000 in salary and benefits he didn't deserve, says Auditor General Sheila Fraser.

Ron Stewart, who left the post of correctional investigator in 2004, spent much of his time during his last six years on the job at an isolated cottage where he couldn't be reached by staff, Fraser said in a report Tuesday.

She also found that Stewart, a one-time star halfback for the Ottawa Rough Riders, charged for hospitality and travel apparently unrelated to his work, including five trips to cities hosting Grey Cup games and another jaunt to his high school reunion.

Fraser wouldn't comment directly on whether any of the alleged misconduct amounted to criminal wrongdoing but she noted pointedly: "We have referred the file to the RCMP."

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day said he's asked Howard Sapers, the current prison ombudsman, to explore "all avenues possible" to recoup any improper payments to his predecessor.

"Everything that can be done will be done," Day promised.

But he said he can't get directly involved because the ombudsman's office operates at arm's length from him.

Stewart couldn't be reached for comment.

According to Fraser's report, he told her office the time he was absent from his post made up for overtime and weekend work he put in on other days. He said he kept records to prove it but disposed of them a year after leaving the job.

Stewart also insisted to the auditor general that his travel expenses were justified but again couldn't produce evidence to back up the claim.

The correctional investigator's office wasn't the only agency at Public Safety to come under fire in Fraser's report.

She also raised questions about management abuses in the RCMP pension plan and said the Mounties failed to ensure that a criminal investigation of the affair would be publicly perceived as independent and unbiased.

Moreover, she found that only about half the employees of the RCMP, Correctional Service Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency believe their organizations will take any action if they report ethical shortcomings to their superiors.

Fraser also reported that the bidding process for a contract to relocate 15,000 members of the RCMP, the Canadian Forces and the federal public service unfairly favoured one firm over its competitors. Most of the blame for that, however, was laid on the Public Works Department.

By far the harshest criticism was reserved for Stewart.

"Heads of agencies should demonstrate the highest ethical standards of integrity," said Fraser.

"When they fail to do so, public trust and confidence in government suffer. The behaviour we observed on the part of the former correctional investigator, and the fact that it persisted over a long period of time, are extremely disturbing."

The audit found that during the years 1998 to 2004, Stewart was absent from work more than 300 days. Fraser estimated that, as a result, he collected \$83,000 in unearned salary.

The auditor general also concluded that, during the same six years, Stewart improperly cashed out \$95,000 in vacation time. She estimated he had claimed another \$127,000 in "questionable" cash-outs.

Stewart also claimed some \$12,000 in improper travel and hospitality expenses and \$8,000 for the purchase of computer equipment used for non-business purposes.

Fraser said the executive director of the ombudsman's office was aware of some of the abuses but did nothing, while Public Safety and Treasury Board, the government's financial watchdog, failed to provide adequate oversight.

Turning to the RCMP, Fraser reported that \$1.3 million was charged to the force's pension fund for consulting and other work of "little or no value."

The Mounties asked Ottawa municipal police to conduct a criminal investigation of possible fraud, but Crown attorneys concluded in 2005 there was no point in laying charges because the evidence was likely too weak to obtain a conviction.

Fraser said she was assured by the municipal police that there was no interference from the RCMP. But she also observed that the lead investigator reported directly to a senior RCMP officer, raising a potential public perception of bias.

Several Mounties were targeted for internal discipline, but the force had to abandon that effort because the one-year time limit for action had expired. Day promised the government will amend the RCMP Act to prevent that kind of thing from happening again.

It was Public Works that oversaw the contentious contract to move RCMP, military personnel and public servants to new cities — a deal that has been a bone of contention for years.

Royal LePage Relocation Services emerged victorious from the bidding, but it was later disclosed that some employees at Public Works had received company gifts and gone on a Caribbean cruise with Royal employees.

Envoy Relocation Services, one of the losing bidders, has twice challenged the bidding process at the federal trade tribunal and now is threatening to sue for damages in the courts.

Public Works Minister Michael Fortier dodged comment on the affair Tuesday, saying he can't speak out for the time being for legal reasons.