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Senate studies using taxpayer money for partisan newsletters

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Last Updated: February 10, 2011 8:07pm

OTTAWA — Should senators be allowed to bill taxpayers for partisan newsletters?

That's what a Senate committee planned to discuss behind closed doors Thursday when a Liberal senator demanded the meeting be held in public.

Liberal Sen. Jane Cordy said newsletters that serve as blatant partisan advertisements should be outlawed and said she made the point clearly during an in-camera meeting in December — but her point of view was not reflected.

"When it is blatant politics," she said, interrupted by the chair, Tory Sen. David Tkachuk who was laughing. "When it is a blatant political advertisement in your newsletters, I have a problem with that."

The minutes from the December meeting, however, state that "after discussion, it was agreed that senators' newsletters, with partisan content, is acceptable."

Cordy said she "did not agree to that."

Quoting from QMI Agency stories, she said she was upset Tkachuk supported the use of party colours in newsletters because he said, red was the Liberal's colour.

"No Liberal would tell me that this was the Liberal red. This is burgundy," she said, holding up a newsletter in the Senate's colours.

Liberal Sen. Jim Munson said senators should not be allowed to use taxpayers' money to target ridings with propaganda mail, because MPs had disallowed the practice last year.

"Perhaps we should change our policies," he said, after which senators agreed to form a small committee to study the issue.

More than a week after QMI Agency asked for a specific breakdown of Senate newsletter costs, Tkachuk approved the public release of the data Thursday.

The Senate won't disclose which senators spent the most on newsletters and who they sent their mailings to, citing rules requiring the prior approval of senators affected.

But the newly released data suggest the Senate spent \$45,722 on printing for 180,865 copies of 64 newsletters in the last three years.

It is unclear whether the figure includes newsletters that were also funded through individual senators' budgets.

The costs provided also omit any mailing charges.

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