# Cabinet ministers get own press secretaries

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## Redford doubles staff

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Premier Alison Redford is transforming the way her government talks to Albertans, shifting control over messages to a powerful, political communications office that reports directly to her.

She has given each cabinet minister a partisan press secretary who will spin the Progressive Conservative message and fight political battles.

Those press secretaries will report to the premier's communications office, which Redford has nearly tripled in size, to eight from three staff. The director of that office, Jay O'Neill, reports to Redford.

"We want to have informed conversations with Albertans," Redford said this week. "Part of what Albertans are going to want to know is: What are the choices we're asking them to make? And why do we think that what we are putting forward makes sense?"

"I do think it's important for our ministers to be able to work very closely with communications professionals," she said, adding the idea was hers.

The press secretary positions are new, so the number of communications staff working for each minister will double, O'Neill said. The maximum salary for the job is $128,000 and it will be paid out of the ministers' office budgets.

O'Neill said the goal is to draw a clear line between government and partisan communications, a line that has been fuzzy in the past, and often criticized.

"This eliminates any of the criticism that has been directed toward government communicators," O'Neill said. "There is no grey area."

The system is different from the one employed by Redford's predecessors.

Under the old system, government messages were delivered by communications directors, civil servants who reported to the Public Affairs Bureau.

The directors were non-partisan, in theory, and expected to explain government policy in a neutral way. Political questions were supposed to be answered by politicians.

The system has been criticized from inside and out.

Journalists seeking unbiased information said directors were too politicized and engaged in partisan spin. Ministers, who relied on the bureau to explain policy, complained the directors were not politically sensitive enough.

The long-standing conflict prompted several reviews. In 1991, a communications task force struck by then-premier Don Getty recommended the Tories put the premier and cabinet in charge of setting the communications agenda; a 2005 report commissioned by former premier Ralph Klein said ministers needed more political support.

"We found the (directors) are in a no-win situation," said Ron Liepert, a retired cabinet minister who wrote the 2005 report for Klein. "Their job isn't to be the spinmeister for the minister, and yet when you're in elected office, it's all about politics."

"If you have a press secretary within a minister's office, that individual should be more politically attuned, and be able to assist the minister in pure political issues that may not have anything to do with the department."

The changes will have consequences for journalists and the public.

Under the new system, the first point of contact will be a partisan political press secretary instead of a civil servant. The public affairs bureau will still exist and will continue to report to the premier's office, but its role will change — though it is not clear how.

Asked how the jobs will differ, Redford said bureau directors will relay "information about programs and daily operations" while press secretaries will "engage in a public dialogue in a different way." She did not elaborate.