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OTTAWA—The federal government deliberately kept negotiations on a border deal with Washington secret while it planned ways to massage public opinion in favour of the pact, according to a confidential communications strategy.

The 14-page public relations document recommended that talks keep a “low public profile” in the months leading up to the announcement by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and U.S. President Barack Obama. At the same time, the government would secretly engage “stakeholders” — interested parties such as big business groups and others — in a way that respected “the confidentiality of the announcement.”

In advance, the government departments involved — including industry, foreign affairs, international trade and citizenship and immigration — were to “align supportive stakeholders to speak positively about the announcement,” according to the strategy prepared by Public Safety Minister Vic Toews’ officials.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper shakes hands with U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington last week.

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

On Friday, Harper and Obama signed off on a plan that for the first time envisions throwing up a single security ring around the perimeter of Canada and the U.S. The wide-ranging blueprint calls for increased cooperation between the two countries’ police, border and intelligence agencies; an integrated Canada-U.S. exit-entry system using high-tech identification techniques and more sharing of information about Canadians with U.S. authorities.

At least three major business organizations — the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the Canadian Trucking Alliance — quickly issued statements praising the framework agreement Friday.

The document was prepared last fall, when the Canada-U.S. talks were being conducted without any public notice.

Under “communications challenges,” the document lists: “Greater information sharing is part of the initiative. The safeguarding of privacy and sovereignty will be of concern for Canadians.”

It also says Canadians may be too sanguine about security to see the need for the deal. “The Canadian public may underestimate the security threat to Canada.”

The confidential government document also contains a list of “high risk” stakeholders — those in Canada who might raise strenuous objections to stepped-up Canada-U.S. security arrangements.

Officials surmised that Jennifer Stoddart, the federal privacy commissioner, would be worried by plans to share more personal data on Canadians with U.S. authorities. “Will raise concerns re information sharing and protecting private information,” the document says of Stoddart. In response, the government should stress that “we value and respect our separate constitutional and legal frameworks that protect privacy, civil liberties and human rights.” It also recommended “ongoing engagement by officials” with Stoddart.

Advocacy and civil rights groups such as the Council of Canadians, led by Maude Barlow, were also expected to react negatively because of “privacy concerns.” The strategy paper again recommended that Conservatives should stress Canada’s protections for human rights and privacy. It also suggested that cabinet ministers be made available to the media to counteract Barlow’s statements.

Refugee and immigration organizations were considered “high-risk stakeholders” and expected to react by saying the new U.S.-Canada border measures will limit immigration. The recommended response was to say that the deal “will accelerate legitimate travel” and won’t change Canadian immigration and refugee policy. Another high-risk stakeholder was expected to be the Mexican government, which “may raise concerns about not being included in the vision.”

A separate list of "medium risk" stakeholders included academics, who will "expect proof of economic benefits" and may be worried about privacy and sovereignty, and the media, which will "look for specifics" that would be announced later. Also considered a "medium risk" are U.S. critics, who will see the new deal as a "threat to U.S. jobs."

Now that Canada and the U.S. have begun work on implementing the deal, the Liberals and NDP say they are planning to bring cabinet ministers before a Commons committee to find out the details of the plan.

The public campaign to persuade Canadians that a muscular security deal won't trade away Canadian rights was clearly underway Monday.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews, appearing at a Senate committee on national security and defence, painted it as "necessary" to the free flow of cross-boarder trade, and "beneficial" to Canada.

The Americans, he said, bring greater resources, "assets" and much-appreciated expertise to border security, citing joint efforts during the Olympics security operations.

Asked later whether Canadians should be concerned about a new regime that might see random searches or seizures at the border, Toews said there's little need to worry.

"I don't think that is a concern that they should have, but those are the kinds of questions that need to be asked and discussed."