

Politics

David Johnston resigning as special rapporteur on foreign interference

House of Commons passed a motion calling on Johnston to step down last week

[Darren Major](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 09, 2023 5:31 PM EDT | Last Updated: June 9, 2023



David Johnston, independent special rapporteur on foreign interference, arrives to present his first report in Ottawa on Tuesday, May 23, 2023. (Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press)

 [comments](#)

David Johnston — tasked by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau back in March with looking into allegations that China tried to meddle in the past two federal elections — says he has decided to step down from that role.

In a resignation letter sent to Trudeau, Johnston said his role has become too muddled in political controversy for him to continue.

"When I undertook the task of independent special rapporteur on foreign interference, my objective was to help build trust in our democratic institutions," the former governor general wrote.

"I have concluded that, given the highly partisan atmosphere around my appointment and work, my leadership has had the opposite effect."

- [David Johnston no longer working with crisis communications firm Navigator](#)
- [Johnston disputes claims of bias despite enlisting help from experts with Liberal, NDP ties](#)

A government source said Johnston made his own decision to resign and wasn't asked to step down by the Prime Minister's Office.

Since his appointment, Johnston has been accused of being unfit for the job because of his personal connections to Trudeau.

The leaders of the Conservative and Bloc Québécois parties have both said Trudeau and Johnston are self-declared friends and their longstanding ties are too close to allow Johnston to judge the prime minister's actions.

Johnston has said that while he was friends with Pierre Trudeau and skied with the Trudeau family back when Justin Trudeau and his brothers were children, he hasn't had any meetings, dinners or personal contacts with Trudeau in the past 40 years.

WATCH | Johnston says he doesn't regret taking on role



David Johnston says he doesn't regret taking on foreign interference assignment

▶ 8 months ago 0:23

"When you're asked to serve your country, you do so," Johnston says in an exclusive interview with Power and Politics host David Cochrane.

That didn't stop opposition parties from questioning Johnston's investigation of foreign interference. Even the NDP — which currently has a supply-and-confidence deal with the governing Liberals — put forward a motion in the House calling on Johnston to step aside because of an "appearance of bias." The motion passed with Conservative and Bloc support.

At the time, Johnston said he planned to stay on until his mandate was complete.

In his initial report released last month, Johnston recommended against calling a public inquiry on foreign interference — despite opposition parties and diaspora groups calling for one.

- **PM's ex-security adviser calls system for flagging vital intelligence 'ad-hoc' and 'inconsistent'**

- **Diaspora groups join calls for public inquiry on foreign interference**

Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Dominic LeBlanc took aim at the Conservatives after Johnston's announcement.

"The partisan attacks levied by the Conservative Party against the former governor general were unwarranted and are unacceptable. Democracy requires us to rise above partisan considerations," he said in a statement.

But Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre blamed the Liberals for putting Johnston in a tough spot and repeated his demand for a public inquiry.

"[Trudeau] has destroyed the reputation of a former governor general all to cover up his own refusal to defend Canada from foreign interests and threats," he said in a tweet.

Conservative ethics critic Michael Barrett told CBC that Trudeau was "setting [Johnston] up for failure" by not calling a public inquiry from the start.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh tweeted that Johnston had "done the right thing" and again called on the government to launch a public inquiry.

WATCH | NDP House Leader reacts to Johnston's resignation



NDP House Leader reacts to David Johnston's resignation

▶ 8 months ago 7:30

NDP House leader Peter Julian tells Power & Politics MPs should choose a replacement for special rapporteur David Johnston. 'It needs to be [someone] non-partisan. Let's work together to find that person and the mandate so that we can put this into place.'

In a separate statement, Singh said he respected Johnston but he had "fallen victim to the bungled handling of foreign interference by the Liberal government."

"When we tabled our motion calling for the special rapporteur to step aside, we said that the appearance of bias was too much to continue. I always thought that Mr. Johnston is an honourable man and today's decision shows that," Singh said.

Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole took a similar tone, tweeting that Johnston is an "exceptional Canadian" and that his service to Canada has been "extraordinary."

"It is so disappointing that the prime minister used his stellar reputation as a political shield," O'Toole said.

WATCH | Bloc Québécois MP says Johnston 'did the right thing'



'I think he did the right thing,' says federal minister after special rapporteur resigns

► 8 months ago 5:14

"It should have been done way before so public trust would not be as damaged," René Villemure, Bloc Québécois MP and ethics critic, told Power & Politics Friday, referring to David Johnston's resignation as special rapporteur on foreign interference. "I think this was a hard job to entertain in the first place."

Bloc Québécois ethics critic René Villemure told CBC News Network's Power & Politics that stepping down was "the only option" for Johnston. He also said his party is still hoping the government will call a public inquiry.

"I think it's about time we move on, do something right and inform the populations what are the risks and what's at stake," he told host David Cochrane.

Prior to his resignation, questions were also being raised about the individuals Johnston chose to work with during his investigation.

On Tuesday, the Globe and Mail reported that Sheila Block, a lawyer Johnston hired to assist with his work, has donated to the Liberal Party in the past.

Read Johnston's resignation letter:

[Mobile users: View the document](#)

[\(PDF KB\)](#)

[\(Text KB\)](#)

CBC is not responsible for 3rd party content

Johnston also told the procedure and House affairs committee on Tuesday that he has received unpaid informal advice from Don Guy, former chief of staff to former Ontario Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty, and Brian Topp, chief of staff to Rachel Notley when she was the NDP premier of Alberta.

CBC also reported last week that Johnston had hired communications crisis firm Navigator at the start of his mandate and that taxpayers were footing the bill.

Johnston cut ties with the firm after it was revealed that Navigator had also worked with Independent MP Han Dong, who was a subject of the former governor general's initial investigation and report.

WATCH | Former Conservative national campaign manager on Johnston's resignation



'I was totally taken aback': former Conservative national campaign manager reacts to Johnston's resignation

▶ 8 months ago 9:36

Fred Delorey, former Conservative national campaign manager, speaks to Power and Politics about David Johnston's resignation as special rapporteur on foreign interference.

In his resignation letter, Johnston insisted that he doesn't think a public inquiry would be a "useful way" to address foreign interference, given that much of the intelligence associated with the issue is classified. But he called on Trudeau to appoint a new rapporteur.

"Ideally, you would consult with opposition parties to identify suitable candidates to lead this effort," he wrote.

Johnston was set to begin public hearings next month. In his letter, he calls for those to continue under new leadership.

The letter says he will be stepping down no later than the end of June after delivering a brief final report.

LeBlanc's statement said he would be consulting with experts and opposition parties on a replacement for Johnston.

With files from Ashley Burke and Raffy Boudjikianian

[CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) | [About CBC News](#)

[Corrections and clarifications](#) | [Submit a news tip](#) | [Report error](#) ▼

©2024 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.

Visitez [Radio-Canada.ca](https://www.radio-canada.ca)