



Interview Summary: Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs)

Background

Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs, was interviewed by Commission Counsel on January 18, 2024.

The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to classified information. This summary has been drafted in a way that removes or summarizes all references to such information so that the summary can be disclosed publicly.

This summary should be read in conjunction with the Institutional Report on the Protection of Information in the National or Public Interest prepared by the Government of Canada.

This preamble and the text contained in square brackets are explanatory notes provided by Commission Counsel for the assistance of the reader.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Minister LeBlanc explained that he is responsible for three main areas within his ministerial portfolio:

- 1) Intergovernmental Affairs: This Secretariat, housed within the Privy Council Office (“PCO”) [central governmental agency that supports the effective operation of Cabinet and coordinates the development and implementation of the Government of Canada’s policies and legislative agenda], fosters collaborative

relationships with its provincial and territorial counterparts in order to advance shared objectives. It ensures that the considerations of provincial and territorial partners are properly reflected within Canada's federal structure.

- 2) Democratic Institutions: This Secretariat, also housed within PCO, leads the integrated response to protect Canada's democratic institutions, including against foreign interference. It advances transparency, fairness and participation in the federal electoral process in conjunction with the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, who operates independently from Ministers.
- 3) Public Safety ("PS"): This department spearheads the effort to protect the safety and security of Canadians and coordinates the activities of five agencies: the Canadian Security Intelligence Service ("CSIS"), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("RCMP"), the Canada Border Services Agency ("CBSA"), the Correctional Service of Canada and the Parole Board of Canada.

Transparency and Foreign Interference

Minister LeBlanc discussed the serious and evolving threats that Foreign Interference ("FI") poses to Canada and the importance of increased transparency in this area, within the bounds necessary to protect Canada's national security. He explained that, as FI seeks to undermine public confidence in democratic institutions by covert means, one of the key means to counter it is to build citizen awareness and resilience. He noted that the Democratic Institutions Secretariat has taken numerous initiatives in this respect, such as the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy [launched by the Minister of Democratic Institutions in 2019 ahead of the 43rd general election, this Plan advances four pillars to strengthen the electoral system and protect it against cyber and other threats, including FI] and the Digital Citizen Initiative [the Digital Citizen Initiative is a component of the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy. It aims to reinforce public

confidence and engagement in democratic processes by supporting projects delivered by the civil society that build critical thinking and resilience against online disinformation].

Minister LeBlanc stated that the creation of the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Canada's Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions (the "Commission"), and the appointment of the Commissioner, both of which were agreed to by every recognized political party represented in the House of Commons, furthered this objective. One of the purposes of the Commission is to inform the public, in a non-partisan forum, of the growing challenges created by FI for Canada.

Minister LeBlanc also pointed to the Commission's mandate under clause (a)(i)(D) of the Terms of Reference, which was put in place given the particular context in which this Commission operates as a result of its subject-matter. While there is a clear public interest in disclosing as much information as possible, the security and effectiveness of intelligence operations require that certain information be kept confidential. He explained that there were both challenges and opportunities, such as the use of summaries and the ability to "write to release", to further this part of the Commission's mandate and make more information available to the public.

Minister LeBlanc stated that he actively encourages security agencies across the country to engage with the public, within the relevant statutory limitations and without adversely impacting the operations of these security agencies. He confirmed that all relevant agencies are looking forward to working with the Commission to make as much information available to the public as possible.

Minister LeBlanc noted that this is coherent with the approach of the report authored by him and then-Clerk of the Privy Council Janice Charrette in 2023, *Countering an Evolving Threat: Update on Recommendations to Counter Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Institutions* (the "LeBlanc-Charrette Report"):

There is more work to be done to ensure broader awareness of both the threats facing Canada and the measures put in place to address them. As per Mr. Rosenberg's recommendations to undertake more robust and frequent communications with Canadians on foreign interference and Canada's efforts to protect Canadian democracy, the Government, including responsible ministers as well as national security and intelligence officials, will find further opportunities to keep Canadians informed of the extent of foreign interference affecting all aspects of society, including in their democracy. An engaged, informed, and resilient citizenry is one of our best defenses against attempts to undermine our democracy and its institutions. Keeping Canadians informed of the activities being undertaken on their behalf, and adopting emerging communications best practices that draw from Canada and NATO's recent efforts to identify and counter Russian state sponsored disinformation in the invasion of Ukraine, will help ensure Canadians' democracy remains strong and secure.

National Security Confidentiality: interaction of the public service level and the political level

Minister LeBlanc clarified the respective roles of elected decision-makers and public service officials with respect to the public disclosure of classified information.

He explained that, in his capacities as Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs, he works closely with the national security agencies and is regularly briefed on ongoing issues. However, he is not involved, nor is it appropriate for him to be involved, in the process of how information is classified or in deciding whether information can be disclosed to the public without prejudicing national security.

He has not given direction to officials, nor believes it would be appropriate to give direction to officials, regarding the release of classified information. These decisions are made by expert, non-partisan public servants, not politicians.

The Minister noted that the agencies, in partnership with the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister (“NSIA”) [the NSIA acts as advisor to the Prime Minister in national security matters and as liaison with other foreign governments in the intelligence community], coordinate the sharing and dissemination of information across the Government and to the public in Canada.

Minister LeBlanc highlighted that one of the purposes of the ongoing consultations to modernize the *CSIS Act* is to allow information to be shared with other orders of government, academia and the business community in a more effective and transparent manner.

National Security Confidentiality and Cabinet

Minister LeBlanc discussed the sharing of classified information relating to national security within Cabinet. He explained that the number of Ministers who were exposed to this type of information was limited and depended on the issues at stake, the need to know principle and the Ministers’ portfolios.

The Minister was asked to respond to the following questions in writing following his interview: (1) whether Cabinet members all hold Top Secret security clearance and are indoctrinated to all compartments; (2) whether Cabinet meetings take place in a secure facility where Top Secret information can be discussed (a SCIF); (3) whether Top Secret information and intelligence are frequently discussed at Cabinet.

In response the Minister provided the following information:

- Individuals appointed to the King's Privy Council for Canada and as Ministers undergo thorough background checks, which include verifications with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. These background checks, coupled with oaths of secrecy and security briefings permit Ministers to receive information classified as Top Secret. All Ministers are indoctrinated to the Talent Keyhole (TK), Special Intelligence (SI) and GAMMA (G) control systems which will permit them access to this level of information if it is required for the performance of their duties. Access to information in additional compartments can be granted as required for the performance of a Minister's responsibilities, which varies across ministerial portfolios. Portfolio organizations, led by their Deputy Ministers and Deputy Heads, bring classified information to the attention of a Minister when a Minister has a need to know the information to perform his or her official duties, the same principle that is applied in access to classified information by officials.
- Cabinet as a whole does not routinely consider classified information, although certain Cabinet committees such as the National Security Council may consider classified information more regularly. The Cabinet and its committees have access to various types of meeting facilities and meet in appropriate locations commensurate with the classification of the information they are considering.

National Security Confidentiality Sample Documents

Minister LeBlanc indicated that he receives different types of briefings from the heads of security agencies. These briefings are usually verbal, but he sometimes also receives documents, including CSIS briefs, intelligence reports, intelligence assessments and placemats (rarely) of the type included in the sample of redacted documents requested by the Commission for the NSC hearings.

Minister LeBlanc explained that the heads of security agencies are responsible for identifying the information and documents that needed to be brought to his attention, and will usually go through the information and documents with him. Typically, the heads of the security agencies will ask to brief him on specific subjects. In other, rarer cases, he will ask for a briefing on a specific issue of concern.

The Public Inquiry

Minister LeBlanc identified what he hoped the public inquiry will achieve. He made several observations. He observed that the Commission will raise the awareness of the Canadian public on the threats to national security that result from FI activities, which have existed for more than a decade and are increasing and evolving. He wants Canadians to better understand how actors are trying to weaken our democratic processes. He also noted that the Commission represents the best opportunity to continue to build citizen resilience and confidence. Additionally, the Minister hopes that the inquiry process will provide reassurance to Canadians on the integrity of the electoral process by examining the non-partisan measures put in place and the changes made to those measures to meet the evolving FI threats, and the strength and resiliency of Canada's democratic institutions.

Minister LeBlanc agreed with the statement that although a number of different review bodies and committees are examining the question of foreign electoral interference, the Commission is different because it is a public process that aims to disclose as much information as can reasonably and safely be disclosed to the public. He stated that it is also different because of the non-partisan process that led to its creation. He stressed that every recognized political party represented in the House of Commons approved

every line of the Commission's Terms of Reference, and the selection of the Commissioner. This is a distinguishing feature of this inquiry.

Minister LeBlanc also noted that the tight timeline for the delivery of the Commission's final report (December 31, 2024) was also agreed on by the recognized political parties represented in the House of Commons, and was deliberately chosen so that Canadians will hopefully have a clearer picture of FI in the electoral process before the next general election.