

UNCLASSIFIED



Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference
in Federal Electoral Processes and
Democratic Institutions

Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère
dans les processus électoraux et les
institutions démocratiques fédéraux

Public Interview Summary: the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence

Minister Bill Blair was interviewed by Commission counsel on February 21, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and referenced classified information. This is the public version of the classified interview summary that was entered into evidence in the course of the Commission's in camera hearings held in February and March 2024.

Notes to Reader:

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary has been prepared pursuant to subclause (a)(iii)(C)(II) of the Commission's Terms of Reference. It discloses the evidence pertinent to clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of the Commission's Terms of Reference that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, would not be injurious to the critical interests of Canada or its allies, national defence or national security.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission's mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Information provided during the interview that relates to other aspects of the Commission's Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.
- This summary should be read with the Public Safety Institutional Reports prepared by the Government of Canada.

1. Background

UNCLASSIFIED

[2] Minister Blair was appointed the Minister of National Defence in July 2023. Prior to this role, he held several other Cabinet portfolios: Minister of Emergency Preparedness and President of the King's Privy Council (October 2021 – June 2023), Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness (November 2019 – October 2021), Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction (July 2018 – November 2019) and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice (January 2017 – July 2018). This interview focused on Minister Blair's tenure as the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

2. General description of the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness

[3] Minister Blair stated the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness (the "Department") is responsible for matters of public safety, national security and emergency management. The Minister of Public Safety oversees five agencies: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("RCMP"), the Canadian Security and Intelligence Services ("CSIS"), the Canada Border Services Agency ("CBSA"), Correctional Service of Canada ("CSC") and the Parole Board of Canada ("PBC"). [Minister Blair has subsequently confirmed that, in addition to the five agencies, the Department also includes three review bodies: the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP, the Office of the Correctional Investigator, and the RCMP External Review Committee.] The Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness is led by the Deputy Minister. The Deputy Minister reports to the Minister, as do the Heads of the five agencies noted above. Minister Blair referred Commission counsel to the mandate letter he received from the Prime Minister at the beginning of his tenure for greater detail on his Ministerial mandate.

[4] Minister Blair explained that the Minister "presides" over and has "the management and direction" of the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. [Minister Blair subsequently confirmed that the Minister has a broad array of statutory duties, functions and responsibilities which are set out in a wide range of federal statutes. Further, each agency has its own governing legislation which sets out its statutory authority and to various degrees, the role and authority of the Minister.] For instance, he is not involved

UNCLASSIFIED

in operational matters, such as CSIS and RCMP investigations). The Heads of these agencies report to him to ensure appropriate oversight. If necessary, he would ask questions about the information presented.

- [5] Minister Blair discussed Ministerial Directions, which are formal instruments that provide high-level direction while leaving the Heads of the Agencies to determine the ways and means of carrying out the direction. Minister Blair referred to the 2021-2023 Ministerial Directions he issued to CSIS and the RCMP during his tenure.

3. Tenure as Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness

- [6] Minister Blair explained that his prior roles as Chief of Police of the Toronto Police Service, Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister of Justice, and the Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction facilitated his transition to the role of the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. When he took office, Minister Blair was already familiar with the 2019-2021 Public Safety Ministerial Directives drafted by his predecessor, Ralph Goodale. Minister Blair received very extensive briefings by officials from within the Public Safety portfolio when he was appointed.
- [7] Minister Blair discussed the importance of foreign interference (“FI”) to his Department. He stated that Public Safety – among other offices, departments and agencies such as the **Privy Council Office (“PCO”)**, the **National Security and Intelligence Advisors to the Prime Minister (“NSIA”)**, CSIS, **Communication Security Establishment (“CSE”)** and Justice Canada – is responsible for protecting Canada from all threats, including FI. He stated that FI was a priority during his tenure, as is apparent from the 2021-2023 Ministerial Directions he issued for CSIS and the RCMP. Although it was not a ranked list, FI appeared as the second item for both Ministerial Directions, which he viewed as consistent with its relative importance. Minister Blair also acknowledged that the Government of Canada’s awareness and concern of FI grew over his tenure.
- [8] Minister Blair described the division of his team during his term as Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. His work was supported by two groups: the exempt staff in his Ministerial Office and the officials in the Public Safety Department. The

UNCLASSIFIED

Minister's Office was composed of his Chief of Staff, four Directors (Director of Policy, Director of Parliamentary Affairs, Director of Operations and Director of Corporate Communications) and additional staffers.

- [9] Minister Blair discussed the flow of classified intelligence within Public Safety. He remarked that agencies' Heads did not typically report intelligence to him through the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, but rather reported directly to him. Top secret material would not be brought to his attention through Department of Public Safety personnel. As a result, he never received top secret briefings from anyone within the Deputy Minister's office of the Department. CSIS Director David Vigneault often briefed him in relation to classified material and, at times, the Deputy Minister was present at top secret briefings. The Director was forthcoming with information and Minister Blair spoke fairly regularly with the Director. On matters involving classified information, the Director asked that Minister Blair go to a sensitive compartmentalized information facility ("SCIF") to be briefed. During these briefings, Mr. Vigneault would either brief Minister Blair verbally or present him with different types of documents.
- [10] Minister Blair discussed receiving and reviewing specific applications for judicial warrants, as required by sections 12 and 16 of the *CSIS Act*. [Minister Blair subsequently confirmed that his Ministerial Office would receive applications for judicial warrants from the Deputy Minister's Office.] Mr. Vigneault provided classified briefings to him on these warrants and he was able to pose questions, as needed. Minister Blair referred to two such warrant applications. Minister Blair stressed the importance of the broader context within which these briefings were taking place: there was an increasing concern of Hostile Activities by State Actors ("HASA"), including by the People's Republic of China, given the on-going case of Meng Wangzhou, and the two Michaels. It was within this context that Minister Blair and the Director discussed the possible actions that CSIS proposed be undertaken in response to the classified information shared with Minister Blair.
- [11] The Deputy Minister of Public Safety had access to classified material when it was sent by CSIS through Canada's Top Secret Network ("CTSN") to the attention of certain security cleared personnel at the Department of Public Safety. If the Deputy Minister independently concluded that intelligence should be brought to Minister Blair's attention,

UNCLASSIFIED

the Deputy Minister could have done so. This never happened. Neither the Minister, nor members of his Office, had direct access to classified intelligence.

- [12] Minister Blair mentioned the need for more explicit public attribution of FI activities to a foreign state, as well as clearer warnings to victims or those who could be co-opted through FI activities. Director Vigneault did not tell him about any of the “defensive” (or, as he preferred to characterize them, “proactive”) briefings CSIS intended to provide to a **Member of Parliament (“MP”)**. An MP spoke to him once while exiting the House of Commons, and expressed a concern that CSIS had approached and wanted to speak to the MP. Minister Blair recalled encouraging the MP to attend the meeting, but said that he was unaware of the purpose of CSIS’s briefing. At that time, Minister Blair was unaware that CSIS was conducting defensive briefings of MPs.

4. Han Dong

- [13] Minister Blair was briefed by CSIS **after the 2019 election on the alleged FI-related irregularities linked to the 2019 Don Valley North** Liberal Party of Canada nomination contest, after he assumed the role of Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. The briefing was for situational awareness. Minister Blair was not concerned about the intelligence at the time because (1) it was not firmly substantiated; (2) it did not suggest MP Dong was aware of the irregularities; and (3) it did not suggest that the Don Valley North election results had been compromised. Minister Blair had faith in CSIS, and believed that if the Service had believed MP Dong to be under the influence of the PRC, it would have taken the appropriate actions.

5. FI during the 2021 Election

- [14] Minister Blair stated that he was briefed by CSIS on another FI matter after his mandate as Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness had ended.

6. Erin O’Toole

- [15] Minister Blair was absolutely not aware of any intelligence relating to FI activities targeting MP Erin O’Toole. Minister Blair first became aware of the alleged targeting of MP O’Toole after MP O’Toole made a public announcement.