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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

Interview Summary: Martin Benjamin

Martin Benjamin was interviewed by Commission counsel on February 22, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to 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 produced in reliance on 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. Any 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 unclassified Institutional Report prepared by GAC and the unclassified summary of the interview of GAC representatives.

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1. Background

- [1] Martin Benjamin was **Director General (“DG”)**, Intelligence and Chief of Intelligence at GAC from 2018 until his retirement in September 2022. Before assuming this position, Mr. Benjamin was acting Assistant Deputy Minister for the Americas region at GAC from 2017 to 2018.

2. Role of the Intelligence Bureau

- [2] Mr. Benjamin explained that his primary role as Chief of Intelligence of the Intelligence Bureau was to ensure that intelligence provided to GAC was disseminated in a timely manner to all relevant and eligible clients within the Department. His role was not to make recommendations on policy. In his view, it is important to separate the activities of the intelligence branch from those of the policy branches to ensure policy priorities are unable to influence the assessment of intelligence, and vice versa. He also believed that it was important not to limit the amount of intelligence shared to relevant desks so as to inform their outlook on the broader underlying foreign policy issues.

3. Transformation of GAC’s Intelligence Activities

- [3] Mr. Benjamin discussed the important changes made to GAC’s intelligence bureau between 2018 and 2020. In the 1990s, a significant portion of GAC’s intelligence resources were transferred to the Privy Council Office (“PCO”) to create the Intelligence Assessment Secretariat. When Mr. Benjamin became DG in 2018, GAC had very limited intelligence assessment capabilities. The Department had 4 or 5 Client Relation Officers (“CROs”) who disseminated intelligence within the Department but did not assess, curate, or brief the intelligence. The Intelligence Bureau’s funding increased significantly in 2019 as part of the Duty of Care Program [a program dedicated to protecting Canadian missions and staff abroad]. This increased funding allowed the Intelligence Bureau’s intelligence assessment capabilities to reach a level that had not existed since the 1990s.

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4. Intelligence flow within GAC

- [4] When Mr. Benjamin became DG in the Intelligence Branch in 2018, he received intelligence from partner agencies, such as the Canadian Security Intelligence Services (“CSIS”) and the Communications Security Establishment (“CSE”) through the Canadian Top Secret Network (“CTSN”), often with little to no context and limited relevance to GAC priorities. One of his priorities as Chief of Intelligence was to make sure that moving forward, partner agencies would provide more context when sharing intelligence with GAC. This would be achieved by providing partner agencies with better parameters regarding GAC’s intelligence priorities and interests and by building GAC’s ability to assess intelligence.
- [5] Mr. Benjamin discussed how intelligence was disseminated within GAC by the end of his tenure at GAC. The GAC Intelligence Assessment Division [a division within the Intelligence Bureau] received intelligence from partner agencies or from GAC’s Intelligence Bureau, conducted a first triage, and selectively developed an assessment from a GAC perspective. From that point, a CRO was responsible for disseminating intelligence to internal clients, including GAC’s Geographic Desks, Policy Desks, Ministers’ Chiefs of Staff and Deputy Ministers. Key intelligence was also shared weekly with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of International Trade, the Minister of International Development and their respective staff as appropriate through the production of reading binders. As policy priorities shifted from counterterrorism to hostile activities of state actors between 2016 and 2020, each weekly binder began to include a section dedicated to foreign interference (“FI”). The Intelligence Bureau provided tailored briefings to GAC senior clients on a weekly basis or, depending on the issue and client, upon request.
- [6] GAC tracked highly classified material in accordance with established rules and processes. GAC recorded which intelligence products were included in the weekly binders provided to senior officials and the Ministers’ offices. This tracking system did not allow GAC to confirm whether senior officials, the Minister or Staff had read the intelligence, unless the Intelligence Branch had briefed them.

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- [7] Mr. Benjamin opined that intelligence dissemination within the government of Canada was "a bit messy". CSE had a good system in place as compared to CSIS which primarily shared its intelligence products to clients via email on CTSN. Furthermore, he had to "fight" for his analysts to be indoctrinated into certain subcompartmented types of intelligence products. He is glad to see that, since then, the system has improved and continues to evolve.
- [8] Mr. Benjamin explained that, in normal circumstances, Ministers and their staff would not be briefed during the caretaker period.

5. Relationship with Other Agencies

- [9] During Mr. Benjamin's tenure, the Intelligence Bureau maintained active communication channels with CSIS and CSE. The Intelligence Bureau met with CSIS and CSE three to four times per year at the DG and ADM level to discuss strategic intelligence priorities. Geographic desks and other policy bureaus also met with the intelligence agencies as required. In Mr. Benjamin's opinion, these meetings were useful to identify gaps between GAC priorities and the agencies' collection activities.
- [10] There was an inevitable institutional tension between the security and intelligence agencies and GAC's geographic desks regarding FI-related intelligence and actions taken in response. He stated that GAC was aware that intelligence agencies thought that a stronger response to certain intelligence products was warranted. GAC has a host of competing interests to consider before taking action on a given issue, whereas an agency like CSIS has a narrow focus because they have an exclusively security-oriented mandate. To increase mutual awareness and to address this institutional tension, Mr. Benjamin explained that the GAC and CSIS developed a consultation framework in 2017.

6. Intelligence priorities within GAC

- [11] FI was an Intelligence Bureau priority during both the 2019 and 2021 elections. GAC understood that the People's Republic of China ("PRC") and India were the main FI threats to the integrity of Canadian elections. However, most of the senior management

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focus and resources allocated to the Intelligence Bureau in this period were invested in managing international crises.

7. Other Information

- [12] Mr. Benjamin explained that it was not uncommon for foreign diplomats to conduct research on the background of Canadians and that this on its own did not constitute foreign interference. He described the persona non grata sanction as the “nuclear weapon” of diplomatic action.
- [13] Mr. Benjamin stated that GAC was aware of reporting about allegations of foreign interference by the PRC during the 2019 election. He had made sure the relevant geographic desks had been informed of the situation. He did not recall that GAC had taken any action in relation to foreign interference, beyond sending an email to all foreign missions prior to the election reminding them that they should not interfere with the democratic process in Canada. He noted that targeted messages would have been provided to known threat actors in the FI space and that an Assistant Deputy Minister-level official would meet with diplomatic personnel from those missions to reinforce those messages.