



## Interview Summary: Bloc Québécois (Mathieu Desquilbet)<sup>1</sup>

Mathieu Desquilbet, Executive Director of the Bloc Québécois (“**BQ**”), was interviewed by Commission counsel on August 23, 2024.

### Notes to Readers:

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

## 1. Background

- [1] Mathieu Desquilbet has been Executive Director of the BQ since August 2022. Mr. Desquilbet holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and is a longstanding activist for Quebec independence. He began his political involvement in 2009 as a political attaché to BQ member of Parliament (“**MP**”) Nicole Demers. He subsequently held a number of positions within the Parti Québécois and in provincial politics, including as political advisor to Laval MP Suzanne Proulx and as liaison officer for the National Assembly of Quebec.
- [2] In January 2020, Mr. Desquilbet took on the position of Director of Operations for the BQ. In this role, he was responsible for training volunteers, recruiting new members and organizing partisan events. Following the September 2021 federal elections, Mr. Desquilbet worked as Parliamentary Assistant to the BQ MP for Terrebonne, Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné, a position he held until he was appointed Executive Director of the BQ in August 2022.
- [3] As Executive Director, Mr. Desquilbet manages the team of the five permanent employees who make up the BQ’s National Secretariat (“**NS**”), also referred to as the party’s “head office.” The NS’s responsibilities can be divided into three main sections: general party administration, financial administration and registry services. In addition to

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<sup>1</sup> Translation.



performing administrative duties for the NS, Mr. Desquilbet acts as the chief agent for the BQ with Elections Canada, making him officially responsible for the financial compliance of the BQ.

## 2. Position of the Bloc Québécois on Foreign Interference

- [4] From the outset, Mr. Desquilbet stressed that the BQ has never been aware of any attempts at foreign interference targeting the party's internal processes, including its nomination and leadership contests, or its elected members of the House of Commons. Mr. Desquilbet explained, rather, that the BQ became aware of the issue of foreign interference in Canada through media reports on the subject [in the fall of 2022].
- [5] According to Mr. Desquilbet, the BQ was alarmed by these reports. As a result, shortly after the reports [in the fall of 2022], the BQ filed a complaint to the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections ("**OCCE**") requesting an investigation into allegations of foreign interference in the federal general elections of 2019 and 2021. During the interview, Mr. Desquilbet explained that, although the BQ is a party that wants to make Quebec an independent nation, defending and protecting the integrity of Canadian democratic institutions, which are also funded by Quebec taxpayers, is a very important issue for the BQ, despite the fact that the initial reports did not appear to involve any incidents of foreign interference in Quebec.
- [6] As issues related to foreign interference have become a "hot topic," Mr. Desquilbet mentioned that the BQ's level of attention and understanding of these issues has increased in recent years. More specifically, Trois-Rivières MP René Villemure is in charge of the foreign interference file within the BQ caucus, and the person with the best grasp on the subject.

### 2.1 Vulnerability of Political Parties and Their Internal Processes

- [7] On the subject of political parties and their vulnerability to foreign interference activities, Mr. Desquilbet stated that publicly reported incidents seem to demonstrate that political parties are indeed targeted by and vulnerable to such threats. He also stressed once



again that the BQ has neither identified nor been informed of any incidents that would suggest the party has been targeted by attempts at foreign interference. However, Mr. Desquilbet noted that within the BQ, as in all political parties, there are groups advocating for specific interests, without this being connected to foreign interference.

- [8] Without claiming to have the right answer, Mr. Desquilbet posited a few hypotheses that could explain the absence of foreign interference attempts targeting the BQ: the party's fundamentally pro-independence stance and its focus on the interests of Quebec and Quebecers; the fact that the BQ alone could not form the government, despite having already been the official opposition in the House of Commons; and the Francophone nature of the party.
- [9] Mr. Desquilbet stated that he had not read the recent special report<sup>2</sup> published by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (“**NSICOP**”), which identifies the internal processes of political party governance and administration as vulnerable to foreign interference. He nonetheless offered his comments and thoughts on the characteristics of certain internal processes within the BQ and other federal political parties, including **(1)** nomination contests, **(2)** leadership contests and **(3)** federal electoral district associations.

### 1. *Nomination Contests*

- [10] From the outset, Mr. Desquilbet outlined the general terms and conditions applicable to the BQ nomination contests, which are detailed in the party's *Nomination Meeting By-laws*<sup>3</sup> (the “**By-laws**”). He emphasized the serious nature of the BQ's approach to regulating nomination contests.
- [11] According to Mr. Desquilbet, the BQ is generally recognized as a party that leaves nomination contests open, in keeping with its tradition of grassroots activism and direct democracy. Nomination contests are also a way of bringing in new members, since

<sup>2</sup> **Note:** This is the *Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions*, published on June 3, 2024, by the NSICOP.

<sup>3</sup> See Annex B in the Bloc Québécois Institutional Report, *By-laws & Procedures for Holding and Conducting a Nomination Meeting*.



each aspiring candidate has to collect signatures from 25 BQ members in the electoral district in question. In the 2019 general election, nomination contests were held in a majority of the electoral districts in which the BQ nominated a candidate.

- [12] During the 2021 general election, however, due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the BQ had to appoint candidates in a large majority of the ridings that the party vied for, rather than hold nomination contests. Mr. Desquilbet explained that acclamations often followed efforts by the National Office (“**NO**”) of the BQ to solicit a potential candidate. For example, a candidate may be solicited in an effort to improve the diversity and representativeness of the BQ’s team of candidates.
- [13] On the other hand, a candidate who has been solicited by the BQ may have to take part in a nomination contest. Mr. Desquilbet clarified that, in such situations, the NO and the NS remain neutral in the nomination contest in order to avoid any accusations of favouritism or interference in local democracy.
- [14] As Mr. Desquilbet explains, a nomination must be approved by a simple majority vote by the members of the NO, a body on which Mr. Desquilbet does not serve, but which he frequently attends as an observer. When the BQ proceeds by acclamation, the party’s head office consults the executive of the local electoral district organization to make sure they agree with the decision. As Mr. Desquilbet explained, in electoral districts where the BQ has little or no chance of being competitive, proceeding by acclamation is often necessary. However, in districts where the BQ is competitive, nomination contests remain the party’s preferred process.
- [15] Under Section 20.1 of the By-laws, the NO may also veto to a candidate seeking a nomination. During the interview, Mr. Desquilbet explained that this veto power could only be exercised if there were serious grounds for doing so. These serious grounds could be based on information disclosed in the candidate’s application questionnaire, or on background checks carried out by the BQ regarding the candidate’s criminal or court record, past activity on social media and former political affiliations, among other factors. The veto by the NO requires a simple majority vote.



- [16] Mr. Desquilbet then briefly explained the requirements for becoming a member of the BQ, and thus be eligible to vote in nomination contests. To become a member, a person must be at least 14 years of age, have submitted a membership form, and have paid an annual fee. There are no restrictions on an individual's legal status in Canada, for example, whether one is a citizen or a permanent resident. Mr. Desquilbet added, however, that the BQ has introduced rules limiting voting rights at nomination meetings to BQ members who reside in the electoral district.
- [17] Regarding the makeup of the BQ's membership base, Mr. Desquilbet indicated that there were only a few members from outside Quebec, who do not necessarily have voting rights in nomination contests since they are not attached to an electoral district. Specifically, only 0.06% of BQ members live outside Canada. Mr. Desquilbet noted, however, that their place of residence provided no indication as to their Canadian citizenship status.
- [18] Regarding the vulnerability of the BQ nomination contests, Mr. Desquilbet said he saw no indication of any foreign interference targeting these processes. He also highlighted the risks of giving in to paranoia and seeing signs of foreign interference everywhere we look. Using the example of a Kabyle candidate in the last general election, Mr. Desquilbet noted that the candidate's cultural community rallied in support of him, as evidenced for example by an influx of volunteers, but that it would be wrong to automatically infer foreign interference in such cases.
- [19] When asked about the vulnerability of nomination contests in general, including those of other federal political parties, Mr. Desquilbet stated that, while he does not believe the political process is de facto vulnerable, there is room for improvement in light of instances that have surfaced in some nomination contests of other federal parties. According to Mr. Desquilbet, political parties should consult each other to strengthen their internal policies and mechanisms, in order to plug any loopholes.

## *2. Leadership Contests*



[20] On the subject of the vulnerability of leadership contests, Mr. Desquilbet indicated that, in his opinion, they were less likely to be affected by foreign interference activities than nomination contests. While political party leadership positions hold more power than those of general election candidates, leadership contests are more difficult to influence due to their national scope (or provincial scope, in the case of the BQ) and the number of players involved. However, Mr. Desquilbet qualified his remarks by acknowledging that these characteristics of leadership contests, on the other hand, make foreign interference more difficult to detect.

[21] Mr. Desquilbet said he had no information to report on any attempts at foreign interference in the BQ leadership contest. He also noted that during the last leadership contest that led to the election of Mr. Yves-François Blanchet as leader, the BQ had implemented additional verification measures requiring members to provide their membership card number as well as a unique personal identification number in order to vote.

### *3. Federal Electoral District Associations*

[22] Mr. Desquilbet had no comment to make on the specific allegation in the NSICOP report that the People's Republic of China ("**PRC**") had attempted to take control of a federal electoral district association.

[23] Mr. Desquilbet explained that over the last several years, the BQ has undertaken a process of financial centralization, which involves phasing out its electoral district associations and replacing them with electoral district organizations. The six BQ electoral district associations in existence today are regulated by Elections Canada, they manage their funds more independently, and they must produce their own financial statements annually. The electoral district organization model involves the NS collecting the funds raised by the BQ and redistributing it to the organizations based on agreed terms and conditions. Under this model, electoral district organizations are not required to register with Elections Canada, and the NS prepares overall financial statements for the BQ.



## 2.2 Foreign Interference and Political Financing

- [24] During the interview, Mr. Desquilbet identified the elimination [in 2015] of the public funding model for federal political parties [through the allocation of a per-vote allowance] as one of the Canadian political system's major vulnerabilities to foreign interference. Mr. Desquilbet believes that the maximum individual contribution amount of \$1,725 is too high, making the political contribution system susceptible to manipulation for the purposes of foreign interference.
- [25] Mr. Desquilbet explained that the BQ is advocating for the reinstatement of the public funding model for federal political parties, to ensure fairness in the funding received by parties and to limit the risk of undue influence. In this respect, Mr. Desquilbet pointed out that the model currently in force in Quebec for provincial political parties – a mixed model of public funding and a \$100 cap on individual donations – could be an interesting alternative.
- [26] Without stating an official BQ position on the matter, Mr. Desquilbet referred to the fact that permanent residents can currently make maximum contributions of \$1725 to a federal political party. Referring to the possibility of permanent residents' right to vote in internal political party processes being restricted or abolished, he argued that there should be consistency between any restrictions on voting rights and the ability to make political donations.
- [27] Finally, when asked why political parties are the only entity regulated by Elections Canada that are not required to provide supporting financial documents when filing their financial reports, Mr. Desquilbet said he felt the current requirements were sufficient. He noted that the BQ, like other parties, files an annual report and audited financial statements with Elections Canada.

## 2.3 Interactions with the Government of Canada and its Agencies

- [28] Mr. Desquilbet then discussed the interactions pertaining to foreign interference that the BQ and its representatives had had with the Government of Canada and its agencies since the last general elections.



- [29] In his role as Executive Director, Mr. Desquilbet regularly attends Elections Canada meetings with stakeholders from federal political parties. Elections Canada organizes these meetings to gather opinions from the parties regarding various proposals and ideas for possible reforms to the electoral system. Mr. Desquilbet mentioned that at the September 2023 annual meeting, Elections Canada had addressed, among other things, processes around nominating candidates and issues related to foreign interference.
- [30] Mr. Desquilbet also mentioned that during this meeting with Elections Canada, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) had delivered an unclassified presentation on foreign interference. He also stated that in June 2024, CSIS had delivered essentially the same presentation to the BQ caucus.
- [31] Mr. Desquilbet also spoke of having met with the Security Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (“**SITE TF**”) in connection with the 2023 by-election in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount electoral district. Mr. Desquilbet also noted that, during the last general election in 2021, the BQ did not designate a representative to the SITE TF because invitations to participate in SITE TF meetings had been lost in a flood of emails received during the election campaign.
- [32] When asked to comment on the usefulness of the foreign interference meetings with these government agencies, Mr. Desquilbet felt that these sessions were more akin to awareness-raising, and that the information and advice provided was “basic” and a matter “common sense.”
- [33] Mr. Desquilbet also stated that the BQ had recently received an information package on foreign interference for its election candidates from Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs. This package was distributed to BQ candidates and political staff, but not to BQ MPs. Mr. Desquilbet said that the BQ was considering requiring candidates to read the foreign interference information package in order to be approved.
- [34] Mr. Desquilbet also mentioned that he had had a meeting with the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (“**CCCS**”) during the September 2023 meeting with Elections Canada,





and that he was aware of an emergency hotline that the CCCS offered to political parties during elections, in the event of a cyber attack. He added that the BQ has not needed to contact the CCCS in this regard. On the subject of cyber attacks, Mr. Desquilbet noted that the BQ had implemented measures to secure its digital infrastructure and that, to his knowledge, the BQ had never been the victim of data leaks or hacking.

[35] Mr. Desquilbet also mentioned that the BQ had not had to contact any law enforcement officials regarding foreign interference since the last general election.

[36] Continuing on the subject of the BQ's interactions with the Government of Canada, Mr. Desquilbet discussed the obtaining of a "secret" or "top secret" security clearance by BQ party leader Yves-François Blanchet, for the purpose of viewing the unredacted version of the NSICOP report. At the time of the interview with Mr. Desquilbet, the process of obtaining a security clearance for Mr. Blanchet was still underway, and he had not seen the unredacted version of the NSICOP report.

## 2.4 Measures Taken by the Bloc Québécois

[37] Commission counsel asked Mr. Desquilbet to detail the various measures that the BQ had taken so far to counter or prevent foreign interference.

[38] Mr. Desquilbet began by mentioning that the BQ was finalizing the drafting of a code of ethics that would be adopted by the NO and submitted to members for approval at the next BQ national convention. According to Mr. Desquilbet, this code of ethics takes a broad approach to conflict-of-interest issues and thereby addresses matters of foreign interference. This code of ethics, which is intended to apply to all BQ members, arose from a desire on the part of the BQ and its youth wing to adopt an anti-harassment policy.

[39] Another measure mentioned by Mr. Desquilbet is the introduction of additional security measures on the BQ website. These new parameters aim to restrict access to BQ membership and individual donation forms to Canadian IP addresses. Mindful of the fact that the BQ risked losing some international members by introducing these



measures, Mr. Desquilbet nevertheless noted that the BQ's priority was to strengthen the security of its digital infrastructure.

[40] Mr. Desquilbet also noted that the BQ's internal processes for detecting anomalies in donations or membership card purchases were an important tool to counter foreign interference threats. To illustrate his point with an example, he mentioned that the purchase of a large number of membership cards in a riding over a short period of time would inevitably attract the attention of the NS's registry department.

[41] Mr. Desquilbet also mentioned that the BQ carries out checks on its donors, attempting to identify them on the electoral list provided by Elections Canada. He explained, however, that there were limitations to these checks, since the electoral list does not contain the date of birth of registered voters, and is not necessarily up to date following a voter's change of address. Specifically, 0.74% of BQ members cannot be identified on the electoral list, though this does not necessarily mean that they are not Canadian voters. In addition, the BQ's under-18 members, who make up 0.12% of the total number of members, are not included on the electoral list. Mr. Desquilbet expressed the BQ's desire to be given more data by Elections Canada to allow checks to be carried out more accurately.

### 3. Bloc Québécois Recommendations on Foreign Interference

[42] At the end of the interview, Mr. Desquilbet outlined some of the BQ's recommendations regarding measures to help political parties more effectively counter and prevent foreign interference. He also offered his opinion on some of the options for reform presented to him theoretically by Commission counsel.

[43] From the outset, Mr. Desquilbet said that the BQ is prepared to improve its practices to protect itself from the risks of foreign interference. To this end, it is important for all federal political parties to continually improve their internal processes, as foreign interference tactics by nefarious actors are also constantly evolving. He believes that the Government of Canada must continue to support political parties in their efforts to



protect themselves against foreign interference, and must develop measures to strengthen the resilience of Canada's democratic institutions.

[44] However, the BQ's position is founded on a desire to preserve party autonomy. Thus, while the BQ is open to recommendations from the Government of Canada, from its agencies and from the Commission with regard to foreign interference, it is important for the BQ to retain control over the management of its internal affairs and the implementation of any such recommended measures, should the need arise. Mr. Desquilbet also indicated that, as far as he understood, the other federal political parties were equally reluctant to have external regulations imposed on them by government agencies.

[45] Mr. Desquilbet commented on some of the proposals put forward by Commission counsel regarding the regulation of political party nomination and leadership contests. In general, the BQ opposes increased regulation of its internal processes by Elections Canada, citing the significant bureaucratic and regulatory burden already in place. The following are examples of the BQ's position on a number of specific measures:

- The BQ would be in favour of possibly restricting the voting rights of permanent residents in federal political party nomination and leadership contests, provided that the implementation of such measures is left in the hands of the parties. Mr. Desquilbet reiterated the BQ's desire to obtain more voter information from Elections Canada in order to carry out these checks. However, he expressed reluctance to regulations that would prevent the BQ's under-18 members from participating in the party's internal voting processes.
- Regarding the possibility of being required to publish the rules governing nomination and leadership contests, Mr. Desquilbet stated that while the BQ was in favour of providing such transparency to the public, the party was opposed to introducing legislation or regulations that would require the rules to be published.



- Mr. Desquilbet expressed a similar view when asked about the introduction of measures requiring the disclosure of full voting results for nomination and leadership contests. He also noted that the BQ already discloses its contest results, which are expressed in percentage points.
- Regarding the management or organization of nomination and leadership contest ballots by independent public servants, such as Elections Canada or the OCCE, Mr. Desquilbet expressed the BQ's opposition to such measures. Similarly, the BQ would be opposed to any external body monitoring nomination and leadership contest rules.
- Regarding the current prohibitions on intimidation, fraudulent voting, undue foreign influence and other items under the *Canada Elections Act*, Mr. Desquilbet indicated that he agreed in principle with the proposal to extend these prohibitions to nomination and leadership contests. However, he expressed concerns about how these regulatory measures would interfere with the BQ's internal processes.
- With regard to standardizing and regulating the background check process for candidates in nomination and leadership contests, Mr. Desquilbet stated that the BQ is open to suggestions, but is not in favour of outside agencies imposing additional measures or carrying out these checks.
- On the subject of Elections Canada implementing additional regulations regarding the financing of nomination and leadership contests, namely requiring candidates to file a full financial report with Elections Canada, Mr. Desquilbet expressed doubts about the appropriateness of such measures. In his opinion, Election Canada's existing regulatory framework and the BQ's internal rules on the matter are sufficient.
- Finally, regarding the possibility of prohibiting the mass purchasing of party membership cards, Mr. Desquilbet noted that such purchases would already be detected by the BQ's internal compliance processes and would lead to



additional checks. He also noted that online purchases were easier to monitor than cash purchases. To conclude on this topic, Mr. Desquilbet raised the issue of other parties not charging membership fees to prospective members, which could encourage mass membership. Mr. Desquilbet noted that such practices can be an interesting strategy to counter attempts at foreign interference in political parties.