



Interview Summary: The Honourable Pascale St-Onge*

Commission Counsel conducted an interview with the Honourable Pascale St-Onge on July 3, 2024. The interview took place in a secure environment and included references to classified information. The summary discloses evidence that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, is not injurious to the critical interests of Canada or its allies, to national defence or to national security.

Notes to Readers:

- Commission Counsel's explanatory notes are contained in square brackets to assist the reader.

1. Professional and Political Background of the Honourable Pascale St-Onge

- [1] Before entering politics, Minister St-Onge spent 21 years working for the Quebec daily newspaper *La Presse*. She also chaired the Fédération nationale des communications et de la culture, an affiliate of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, which represents a number of media trade unions. Minister St-Onge explained that this work experience exposed her to the crisis in the media industry and how the rise of digital giants is affecting it.
- [2] In 2021, Minister St-Onge was elected as the MP for the Brome—Missisquoi electoral district in Quebec. Upon entering Parliament, she was appointed Minister responsible for Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions, and Minister of Sports. On July 26, 2023, she was appointed Minister of Canadian Heritage. Minister St-Onge said

* Translation.

that the Department's mandate is broad and diverse [the Department's mandate is set out in the *Department of Canadian Heritage Act*]. The implementation of two laws passed in 2023 (the *Online News Act* and the *Online Streaming Act*) and the debate surrounding the role of the public broadcaster [CBC/Radio-Canada] are currently two of the most important issues for the Department.

2. The Media Landscape

- [3] Minister St-Onge explained that democratic systems are based on checks and balances. The Minister believes that, with the exception of the government's built-in mechanisms, the judiciary and the media are the two main checks and balances in a democratic society. The effectiveness and viability of these core pillars depend on the trust that citizens place in them.
- [4] Minister St-Onge added that, over the past 10 to 15 years, the Canadian media landscape has undergone significant changes and cutbacks, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs and contributing to the decline of print media. A major cause of this crisis has been the collapse of the traditional media business model, which relies on advertising revenue. Advertisers have, in fact, abandoned traditional media in favour of digital platforms. The Minister explained that approximately 80% of online advertising revenue in Canada is now monopolized by two tech giants, Google and Meta.
- [5] Minister St-Onge believes that supporting journalism is essential to building Canadians' trust in their democratic institutions, and thereby ensuring the sustainability of Canadian democracy. Governed by the code of ethics of their profession, journalists play an important role in delivering fact-based information to the public. This quality information plays a key role in combatting misinformation and disinformation, a growing vector of foreign interference.
- [6] To address this deficit in journalism, Minister St-Onge explained that the Liberal government has implemented a number of measures to support print media. The Minister stressed that these measures recognize the freedom and independence of the news industry. In 2019, as part of this effort, the federal government introduced 1) the

Canadian Journalism Labour Tax Credit [a refundable tax credit on salaries and wages paid to eligible newsroom employees] and 2) the Local Journalism Initiative [an initiative to support the creation of original civic journalism that addresses the needs of underserved communities across Canada]. The government also invested in the public broadcaster.

- [7] More recently, upon being appointed Minister of Canadian Heritage, Minister St-Onge began discussions with Google and managed to reach an agreement with the tech giant [contribution of \$100 million annually, indexed to inflation, paid to Canadian news publishers] before the *Online News Act* came into force [this law aims to ensure that dominant platforms compensate news businesses when their content is made available via their platforms]. Minister St-Onge then introduced regulations for the *Online News Act* [these regulations specify which platforms are subject to the *Online News Act* and the requirements they must meet in commercial agreements with news businesses].
- [8] Minister St-Onge added that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (“**CRTC**”) is currently working to implement the *Online News Act*, and that a decision is pending as to whether Meta will be subject to the obligations imposed by the Act. Minister St-Onge explained that Meta’s decision to block access to news on Facebook and Instagram for all users in Canada was not a consequence of the Act, but a calculated decision by the company to avoid the application of the legislation. Initially, Facebook described itself as a “news platform.” However, the social networking site has changed its algorithms to favour many other types of content. Minister St-Onge added that even before the *Online News Act* was passed, less than 3% of content available on Facebook was news content.
- [9] In response to Meta blocking news from Canadian sources on its platforms [such as Facebook and Instagram] and the effect this had on young Canadians [an effect brought to light by Communications Security Establishment Canada (“**CSE**”) in its 2023 report on Cyber Threats to Canada’s Democratic Process¹], Minister St-Onge reiterated the importance of the principle that dominant platforms must meet the criteria of the *Online*

¹ CAN036429, p. 15

News Act and compensate news businesses. However, Minister St-Onge believes that the news media and professional associations of journalists also have a role to play in raising awareness about the intrinsic cost of quality information. To do so, they must work to strengthen the relationship of trust they have with the Canadian public. The Minister also noted that, following Meta's ban of news from Canadian sources, Quebec has seen an increase in traffic on news websites.

- [10] The Minister concluded by identifying some of the long-term challenges that the government will need to tackle to ensure the protection of Canada's media ecosystem. These include the responsibility that digital giants hold for the content published by their users [the Minister made reference to the legal immunity that allows US-based technology companies to deny any responsibility for content published on their platforms] and the rise of artificial intelligence.

3. The Minister and Classified Information

- [11] Minister St-Onge explained that she does not regularly have access to classified information in the course of her duties, as she does not have a "need-to-know" [the principle that even if a person has the necessary security clearance and indoctrination to access information, they can only do so if they require the information to perform their official duties]. She does, however, have access to all publicly available information. Specifically, with regard to combatting misinformation and disinformation, her role is to better understand the phenomenon and support Canadian content creators, not to decide what is "true" or "false," or what is legitimate or illegitimate. Nevertheless, the Minister noted that, in exceptional cases, she may be exposed to intelligence while attending meetings regarding the *Investment Canada Act*.

4. Digital Citizen Initiative

- [12] Minister St-Onge explained that, to fulfill its mandate, the Department of Canadian Heritage works with a wide range of partners from civil society and research backgrounds. The Digital Citizen Initiative (the "**Initiative**") is one such partnership. The

Initiative aims to reinforce citizen resilience to misinformation and disinformation through activities and programs focused on civic, news and digital media literacy.

- [13] The Minister said that she plays a role in setting the priorities for the Digital Citizen Contribution Program (“**Program**”) [this Program supports the priorities of the Initiative by providing time-limited financial assistance for research], as the final approval of these priorities falls within her ministerial authority. However, she places considerable importance on the judgment of the steering committee, made up of academics and civil society representatives, and on that of the advisory body, made up of representatives from other departments of the Government of Canada. These two committees are consulted on the Initiative’s new funding priorities whenever new funding is planned.
- [14] The Minister explained that the strength of the Initiative and the Program lies in their ability to adapt to changing conditions. For example, the Minister noted that in the Program’s most recent call for proposals, Priority #7, to develop and publish tools to build the resilience of diaspora communities in Canada to misinformation and disinformation from foreign governments, reflects a topical issue in Canada.²
- [15] The Minister explained that she was currently working on issues surrounding the status of the public broadcaster. However, Minister St-Onge was not in office when the *Evaluation of the Digital Citizen Initiative 2018-19 to 2020-21* was published. In her view, it is necessary to reflect on how to measure the Initiative’s effectiveness and, more specifically, to question whether the complex task of measuring its impact on society is the best indicator of success. To ensure the success of the Program, the Minister suggested better equipping civil society organizations and strengthening the bond of trust between the public and the research community, with the overall aim of fostering critical thinking and curiosity among the population. She inevitably turns to other countries for examples of how best to develop this trust [the Minister made reference to Iceland and its digital literacy program]. The Minister also stressed the importance of information sharing between the government and the range of partners it

² CAN044734.

funds through the Initiative (civil society organizations, researchers, etc.). According to the Minister, the Initiative is still young and should be renewed for an extended period.

5. Countering Misinformation and Disinformation

5.1 International Collaboration

[16] Minister St-Onge has been discussing the issue of online misinformation and disinformation with her international counterparts, and she intends to continue this work at the next G7 Summit. In her view, in order for national initiatives against misinformation and disinformation to be successful, different democracies must be consistent in the approaches they adopt. For example, Canada drew inspiration from a foreign approach when shaping its *Online News Act*, specifically by adopting a market-based approach aimed at restoring the balance of power between news businesses and digital giants. The Minister noted, however, that Canadian legislation is much more transparent. While she advocates for the adoption of internationally consistent guidelines for combatting misinformation and disinformation and supports holding online platforms accountable for the content they host, the Minister added that Canada's approach must be adapted to its multicultural reality. Therefore, the tools developed to build resilience among Canadians regarding these issues must be accessible to and used effectively by all communities across Canada.

5.2 Intra- and Inter-Governmental Relations

[17] The Minister and her department maintain formal and informal relationships with various bodies within the federal government (Public Safety Canada, Global Affairs Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Justice Canada, etc.). For example, the Department of Canadian Heritage worked closely with the Department of Justice in drafting the Proposed Bill to address Online Harms [Bill C-63].

[18] The Minister also mentioned that she is working with the provinces and territories. Last spring, she attended a meeting with her counterparts in the Yukon to discuss online misinformation and disinformation in the age of artificial intelligence. The Minister stated

that participants had agreed to create an artificial intelligence task force to explore how the provinces and the federal government could collaborate on this issue while respecting their areas of jurisdiction. In her view, one of the best ways to combat online misinformation and disinformation is to share information across different levels of government. The Minister noted, however, that the willingness to act on this issue varies across the provinces, and that some elected officials are highly critical of the media.

5.3 Represented and Visible Diasporas

- [19] Minister St-Onge stressed the importance that diaspora communities feel represented and visible in the media space, as it contributes to cultural identity and builds trust in the Government of Canada and its democratic institutions. If these communities are to feel represented in the messages conveyed by the media, there must be Canadian journalists from these communities. It is essential to create common points of reference and promote social cohesion. To achieve this goal, many of the initiatives funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage include diversity and inclusion criteria. The Minister also made reference to the *Online Streaming Act*, which preserves Canada's cultural sovereignty and diversity, namely by allowing Canadians to feel represented in what they see and hear online, and to discover Canadian content.

5.4 Legislative and Regulatory Tools

5.4.1 Proposed Bill to address Online Harms [Bill C-63]

- [20] Minister St-Onge explained that the Proposed Bill to address Online Harms aims to ensure the safety of Canadians and hold online platforms accountable for the harmful content on platforms they host. She believes the bill regulates the most harmful content online. The Minister stated that explicitly designating online disinformation as harmful content was considered [disinformation is not one of the seven types of harmful content targeted in the bill]. She believes that, in the current political context, where every step towards increased regulation of the digital space is fought tooth and nail, including online disinformation in the bill would have slowed its progress. The bill essentially aims

to tackle the “worst” of what is found online, i.e. behaviours considered offences under the *Criminal Code*.

- [21] While online misinformation and disinformation is a serious issue, it can be polarizing when regulated, as there is often a fine line between misinformation, disinformation and freedom of expression. In addition, regulating a platform such as WeChat, along with the private exchanges that take place on it, is a challenge for governments and, according to the Minister, a challenge for all democracies. Furthermore, the government can only move as quickly as the public trusts it to. The government must therefore work to foster the public’s acceptance of even tighter regulations on the content hosted by online platforms. The Minister noted that, in the near future, we must maintain an interest not only in the content published on online platforms, but also in the power held by their owners and the actions they take to influence public opinion.

5.4.3 The *Broadcasting Act*

- [22] The Minister explained, in general terms, the CRTC’s role in applying the *Broadcasting Act*. The CRTC is an administrative tribunal that regulates and supervises broadcasting and communications in the public interest. Its mandate includes issuing broadcasting licences to Canadian channels based on precise and objective criteria. The CRTC is also the organization responsible for authorizing foreign broadcasters to distribute their programming in Canada, adding them to the list of non-Canadian programming services and stations authorized for distribution. Although the CRTC is an administrative tribunal with the authority to assess whether foreign broadcaster programming complies with the policy objectives of the *Broadcasting Act*, the Minister explained that the role of this organization is not to make judgments on the nature of foreign broadcaster content. The Minister therefore questions whether the CRTC is the appropriate authority to determine which content is (or is not) considered misinformation or disinformation. The Minister added that the *Broadcasting Act* was modernized last spring to include certain practices by digital giants.

6. Closing Remarks

- [23] The Minister said that in order to counter efforts made by foreign countries to interfere in Canada's democracy and institutions, it is essential to have a resilient population. The Minister believes that this resilience depends on the viability of our public broadcaster, the public's trust in it, the success of legislative tools such as the *Online News Act* and Proposed Bill to address Online Harms, and regulation on the development of artificial intelligence. The Minister said there will also need to be a greater interest in the inner workings of digital platforms, although this will be complex to implement, and in the fact that they cannot be held responsible for the content they host. In short, the focus will need to be as much on the tools used to propagate foreign interference as on the foreign interference itself.
- [24] Lastly, the Minister reiterated that in order to combat the threats facing our democracy, it is crucial to support journalism, which is under attack not only from foreign interests, but also from domestic interests. The Minister noted that we are not competing on equal footing with countries that are not committed to democratic principles, and that there is much to be done to ensure that technology serves the interests of Canadians, instead of the other way around.