



Interview Summary: The Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence

The Honourable Bill Blair was interviewed by Commission Counsel on June 24, 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 hearings held *in camera* in July and August 2024. It discloses the evidence 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.

Notes to Reader:

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

1. Witness

- [1] Minister Blair was appointed as the Minister of National Defence in July 2023. Prior to this appointment, he held several other Cabinet portfolios: Minister of Emergency Preparedness and President of the Queen's Privy Council (October 2021 – October 2022), President of the King's Privy Council (October 2022 – July 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 and Attorney General of Canada (December 2015 – July 2018).

2. A Warrant

- [2] Minister Blair answered questions about a warrant timeline. These questions were asked further to his March 6, 2024, *in-camera* hearing testimony and to obtain his comments in light of further information obtained by the Commission.
- [3] Minister Blair was presented with a chronology relating to the warrant prepared by the Attorney General of Canada. The chronology is dated March 13, 2024. Minister Blair said that he was not aware of the date of the letter from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) Director David Vigneault requesting authorization for the warrant. Minister Blair did not see that date (or month) on any of the materials placed before him when he authorized the warrant. Similarly, Minister Blair was not aware that CSIS had given a secure oral briefing to his former Chief of Staff, Zita Astravas, and other Minister’s Office and Public Safety (“**PS**”) officials about the warrant until he learned of this through the Commission’s investigation. This briefing was provided 13 days after the warrant authorization request was received by Public Safety and 41 days before Minister Blair was briefed and signed the warrant application.
- [4] Minister Blair explained that it would not have been unusual for his former Chief of Staff to meet with CSIS to be briefed on warrant applications. He had every expectation that staff in his office, the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, and the CSIS Director would engage in conversations to ensure that a warrant package was correct and complete before it was brought to him. He was not aware of any particular conversation that may have occurred with anyone at Public Safety or CSIS with respect to this warrant. He recalled that there were concerns at the time relating to the Service’s duty of candour obligations, in the aftermath of a Federal Court decision.¹ This could have been a subject of discussion between Ms. Astravas and CSIS, although he had no knowledge of this.

¹ The Attorney General of Canada undertook to provide to Commission Counsel the date CSIS received the confidential Federal Court decision that discusses CSIS’ duty of candor. CSIS received the decision on May 15, 2020.

- [5] Minister Blair was asked about the summary of Ms. Astravas' interview with Commission Counsel. In her interview, Ms. Astravas recalled that during the briefing she asked questions concerning whether the threshold was met with respect to the warrant. Minister Blair explained that he could not comment because he was not aware of the contents of the briefing. He noted, however, that insofar as the legal threshold in respect of a warrant is concerned, it is a matter within the remit of the Federal Court judge hearing the application for the warrant.
- [6] Minister Blair confirmed that his expectation would be that warrant applications would be dealt with properly and promptly and that this expectation would have been communicated to his staff. When asked if the overall period of time from the receipt of this warrant application at Public Safety to when it was brought to his attention [54 calendar days] concerned him, Minister Blair said he was not in a position to comment as he had no knowledge of what occurred during that period. He reiterated that he had no knowledge of the warrant application before the date on which he was briefed and signed the warrant application. Minister Blair reflected that what constitutes an appropriate delay for approving a warrant application depends on each case and, in particular, on its time sensitivity. He noted that he had had a number of discussions with both Mr. Vigneault and the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, Mr. Stewart, during that 54-day period and said neither of them raised the warrant with him during these conversations. He would have expected that if either of them had been concerned about the timing of the warrant, they would have brought this to his attention. They did not.

3. Mandate as Minister of Public Safety

3.1. Government of Canada's Intelligence Priorities

- [7] Minister Blair explained that he was briefed by Mr. Vigneault and Mr. Stewart on the Government of Canada's 2019–2021 intelligence priorities when he became Minister of PS. Mr. Vigneault was very clear about his concern regarding China as a hostile state actor. Minister Blair noted that he already had some background on these given his previous role as Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction. He

emphasized that the briefing included not only hostile state actors, but also their proxies.

- [8] Minister Blair remarked that FI has continuously been an intelligence priority for the Government of Canada since 2019, as demonstrated by its inclusion at the top of the list in the 2019–2021, 2021–2023 and the 2023–2025 intelligence priorities. Minister Blair clarified that the intelligence priorities are not ranked in order of importance, but that the identification of FI as a top priority reflects its importance. In recent years, FI was identified as a stand-alone priority. This marks a shift from the previous intelligence priorities and reflects the increased importance of this issue for the Government of Canada.
- [9] Minister Blair explained that the 2021–2023 Ministerial Directives he approved for the different agencies under the PS portfolio had been prepared by Mr. Stewart, in concert with the **Security and Intelligence (“S&I”)** community. He acknowledged that these Ministerial Directives had been approved during the caretaker period, but said that this was not an issue since Ministerial Directives are cyclical requirements, internal documents, created in the public interest and reversible if needed.

3.2. Minister Blair’s Priorities during his Mandate

- [10] Two priorities oriented his tenure as Minister of PS: countering Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (“**IMVE**”) and Hostile Activities by State Actors (“**HASA**”).
- [11] With respect to IMVE, Minister Blair said that PS started listing various IMVE groups as terrorist organizations during his tenure.
- [12] Minister Blair explained that Mr. Vigneault and Mr. Stewart briefed him on the HASA file when he became Minister of PS. A lot of work had already been done on developing a whole-of-government strategy for countering HASA before he became Minister of PS.² Intent on building on this foundation, Minister Blair asked his department to keep developing the countering-HASA strategy. He recalled reviewing and approving the next steps suggested by Mr. Stewart. When asked about the pace of developing the HASA

² Minister Blair stated that the document titled “HASA File Timeline” highlights the numerous efforts in developing the countering HASA strategy undertaken before his tenure as Minister of PS. CAN011948.

strategy, Minister Blair cited the COVID pandemic, which caused a drop in pace and productivity at PS, as one reason for the length of time it took to develop the strategy. He noted that PS was also dealing with a number of other pressing issues during his tenure as Minister, including the development of new firearms legislation.

[13] With respect to the HASA threat landscape, Minister Blair recalled that Mr. Vigneault had repeatedly expressed his growing concern with the People's Republic of China ("PRC")'s foreign interference ("FI") activities in Canada. For context, Minister Blair recalled that Sino-Canadian relations were tense at the time given the imprisonment of the two Michaels and concerns of PRC FI during the 2019 General Election. Mr. Vigneault suggested that, to counter PRC FI, the Government of Canada increase its public attribution of PRC FI activities. Minister Blair agreed with this approach, which led to a series of initiatives. Minister Blair gave two examples of initiatives to better inform Canadians about the nature of the threat:

- On December 18, 2020, Minister Blair sent a letter to all 338 Members of Parliament ("**MPs**"), describing the threat of FI, including explicitly identifying the PRC as the most significant threat actor, and what the Government of Canada was doing to actively address FI-related threats. This was part of an effort to educate all MPs and, by extension, the Canadian public about these issues.
- Throughout Minister Blair's tenure as Minister of PS, Mr. Vigneault participated in public conferences and made numerous public statements explicitly identifying PRC FI activities as a threat to Canada.

[14] Minister Blair recalled that Russia and Iran were also known FI-threats, although not as significant as PRC's FI activities. Russia had sophisticated cyberattack capabilities, while Iran was known to have targeted Canada-based relatives of Flight PS752 victims to discourage them from criticizing the state.

4. Reaction to Media Leaks

[15] Minister Blair explained that in May 2023, he and three colleagues took the lead on FI issues. The four colleagues attended a series of briefings organized by the National

Security Intelligence Advisor, the CSIS Director, the Communications Security Establishment (“**CSE**”) Chief, PS officials and Privy Council Office (“**PCO**”) officials.

- [16] Minister Blair stated that the briefings provided some clarity to the group. They learned that defensive briefings had been given by CSIS to a number of MPs, although the identities of these MPs were not revealed.
- [17] Minister Blair recalled that, around the same period, Minister Mendicino [who was Minister of Public Safety at the time] drafted a Ministerial Directive on briefings to parliamentarians. Minister Mendicino also tabled the countering-HASA strategy that had been in the works at PS for a long time.
- [18] Minister Blair was shown a document which provides the distribution lists for certain CSIS intelligence products about the PRC’s targeting of MPs, including Michael Chong and Kenny Chiu, in 2021. [Minister Blair is a named recipient on distribution lists on many of these intelligence products, through delivery to a Public Safety employee at the “PS Intel” CTSN address.] Minister Blair explained that he never received any of these intelligence products and he was unaware that intelligence reports were sent, marked for his attention, over CTSN to Public Safety officials. He further noted that he had since been advised that when some of the intelligence products listed in the document were sent, the individual to whom they were delivered no longer worked at PS. He did not receive any secret or top secret material from the individual whether that was while the individual was still at PS or after he left. Minister Blair also explained that during the COVID pandemic the usual flow of paper from PS staff to him largely ceased. However, he continued to get briefings as necessary from Mr. Vigneault when he needed to be made aware of key intelligence, and relied entirely on the Director to brief him from that point forward. When asked whether he would have expected to have been briefed about the intelligence relating to the targeting of MPs such as Michael Chong and Kenny Chiu at the time, Minister Blair stated that he would have been expected to be briefed on intelligence if there was a threat that required his attention as Minister. For any such information, he wanted to have it and would have acted on it. He was not briefed with respect to these individual MPs.

5. Mandate as Minister of National Defence

- [19] Minister Blair discussed how classified intelligence flows to him in his current role as Minister of National Defence. He explained that he receives two to three briefings a week from the CSE Chief and her staff and regularly from the Canadian Armed Forces, and at least weekly from the Chief of Defence Staff and the Deputy Minister. In addition, he may receive *ad hoc* briefings when needed. Briefings can easily be provided to Minister Blair in a sensitive compartmentalized information facility (“**SCIF**”). For security purposes, he never takes notes in a SCIF. Minister Blair stated that record keeping within CSE is very robust. He explained that all intelligence products are dated, and he signs to indicate when he has received and read intelligence reports.
- [20] Minister Blair described the process he uses to authorize both defensive and active CSE cyber operations. The CSE Chief always briefs him before he authorizes such operations. Further, CSE clearly indicates within the authorization documents the restrictions under the authorization and the expectation that the CSE Chief report back to the Minister, as well as to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He noted that the *CSE Act* is very clear about when ministerial authorization is required.
- [21] Minister Blair said he found it interesting that CSE produces public reports on cyber hygiene. He noted that CSE’s education mandate is mostly focused on engaging with organizations rather than with individuals.
- [22] Lastly, Minister Blair mentioned that CSE had briefed him comprehensively about Indian FI during the 2021 General Election. He was not aware of any update on the matter.

6. Concluding Remarks

- [23] Minister Blair welcomed the Bill C-70 amendments to the *CS/S Act*. In particular, he was in favor of changes to section 16, given there were known limitations to CSIS’s ability to collect certain information under this provision. He also welcomed the increased ability of CSIS to share certain information with decision-makers.

[24] Minister Blair shared his thoughts on what is known as the “Intelligence to Evidence” (“I2E”) challenge [Broadly speaking, this issue has two aspects. First, intelligence is often inadmissible in court proceedings due to its sensitivity and the nature of its collection. Second, the Canadian court system is not well-equipped to deal with classified information in an efficient manner that also protects the defendant’s rights under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*]. He explained that I2E is a longstanding and significant challenge for investigations and prosecutions of national security-related matters. He recalled that the Air India Inquiry had worked on the issue. He further recalled his own experience with this challenge during the “Toronto 18” case, when he was Chief of the Toronto Police Service. He said CSIS and the RCMP were conducting parallel investigations: CSIS was collecting as much intelligence as possible, while the RCMP was investigating in the hopes of obtaining evidence for prosecution. As Chief of Police, Minister Blair was focused on keeping Toronto safe. The agencies limited their contacts to avoid triggering disclosure obligations if a criminal prosecution occurred. Minister Blair noted that the end result was successful: a terrorist act was prevented and individuals were prosecuted. Minister Blair also noted that it is important to recall that not all CSIS intelligence is intended for direct action; rather, much of it is intended to inform policy-making.

[25] Minister Blair also commented on the current RCMP structure. He said that the RCMP’s Contract and Indigenous Policing mandate takes too many resources to the detriment of its Federal Policing mandate. He raised the idea of these two mandates being given to different agencies, similar to the US. He noted that, unlike the RCMP, the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not perform front-line policing work.

[26] Lastly, Minister Blair stated that good governance is paramount to countering FI. Minister Blair suggested that, as security and intelligence agencies receive increased powers and authorities to counter the FI threat, corresponding enhanced governance and accountability mechanisms should be created. In this regard, he reflected on the value of civilian oversight of policing, and queried whether it might be possible to have civilian oversight of national security matters as well. He recognized the important work of NSIRA and NSICOP, but said they are limited to offering after-the-fact review.

Minister Blair opined that the new National Security Council could potentially provide a form of real-time oversight.

[27] Minister Blair remarked that to prevent FI, FI activities have to be harder to do and easier to detect. This is complicated in an open society, as the steps taken to protect ourselves may seem to run counter to our values. Minister Blair added that Canada is not alone – these are challenges faced by democracies worldwide.