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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: The Honourable Dominic LeBlanc

The Honourable Dominic LeBlanc was interviewed by Commission Counsel on June 27, 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. Responsibilities in Cabinet

- [1] Minister LeBlanc has held various Cabinet positions since 2015. From November 4, 2015, until August 2016 he was the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons. In May 2016 he was also appointed the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard. In August 2018 he was appointed Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Northern Affairs and Internal Trade, and held that position until the 2019 election.
- [2] After the 2019 election, Minister LeBlanc was appointed President of the then-Queen's Privy Council for Canada. This included responsibility for the Democratic Institutions portfolio. In the summer of 2020 he also became Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. He held both offices until the 2021 election.
- [3] After the 2021 election, Minister LeBlanc was appointed Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities and also retained responsibility for Democratic

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Institutions. He was appointed Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs in July 2023.

2. Democratic Institutions Portfolio

2.1. Update to the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy

- [4] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a November 19, 2020, note from a staff member in his office outlining disinformation policy options. He had no recollection of this particular note but said briefing notes from his office are typically informed by prior discussions with officials from the Privy Council Office (“PCO”). Minister LeBlanc did not remember discussing the specific policy options put forward in this note. However, he said that he had high-level knowledge of the issues associated with social media and disinformation since at least 2016 and more specifically, from conversations arising from Brexit and the United States presidential election.

2.1.1. Challenges with regulating social media

- [5] Social media has become more complex than it was in 2016. Legislation that affects social media raises, amongst other items, sensitive issues of free speech and censorship. Social media companies' ideological views may also need to be considered. Minister LeBlanc noted that social media companies, particularly large ones, are sometimes unwilling to cooperate with “relatively small” countries who attempt to regulate them further. The ability to legislate with respect to social media after the 2019 General Election was also tied to constraints in the parliamentary calendar, the pandemic, and being a minority government.
- [6] Briefings he received after the 2019 election led Minister LeBlanc to conclude that the Canada Declaration for Electoral Integrity Online had been effective and that platforms and companies had engaged with it. He thought there was pressure from larger countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom on some social media platforms while others were happy to participate. He recalled meeting with the President of Microsoft Canada about the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace. The

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Paris Call showed that private actors were trying to engage in a constructive response to maintain integrity and transparency online.

2.1.2. Options to renew the Plan

- [7] Another update to the Plan is currently in progress. Minister LeBlanc regularly has discussions with officials from the PCO Democratic Institutions Secretariat (“**PCO DI**”) about preparing policy options. This new update will be informed by the outcome of ongoing reviews into foreign interference in Canada’s democratic processes, including that of the Commission.

2.2. Engagement with Stakeholders

- [8] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to an undated memorandum addressed to him, “Protecting Democracy Unit: Priorities and Status Update.”¹ He did not remember receiving this memorandum.

2.2.1. Disinformation toolkits

- [9] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to an August 3, 2023, briefing note from his office. The briefing note identifies three items in the Protecting Democracy Unit’s work plan: Protecting Democracy Toolkits, Disinformation Guidebooks, and Engagement and Outreach with Stakeholders. Minister LeBlanc was also asked about a November 23, 2023, briefing note from his office² which offers an update on the engagement and outreach on protecting democracy measures. The topics included the roll-out of the Protecting Democracy Toolkits and the Counter-Disinformation Guidebook. The note states that “the Protecting Democracy Unit (PDU) had made significant progress on these elements and others. However, the RESIST guidebook and PD toolkits remain outstanding. Interaction with other jurisdictions in Canada also remains somewhat ad hoc.”

¹ The final version of this memo is undated but signed by Assistant Secretary Sutherland and can be found at CAN027949.

² CAN046048.

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- [10] Minister LeBlanc encouraged PCO DI officials to engage further with their provincial and territorial counterparts. Minister LeBlanc observed that PCO DI officials and the Clerk had ongoing conversations with provinces. He has seen promising improvements on that front over the past six months but the system is sometimes slow to implement new initiatives.
- [11] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a December 20, 2023, briefing note.³ The briefing note says that “[a]t the moment, PMO has not given the go-ahead to launch the Toolkits.”
- [12] Minister LeBlanc did not recall this memo and could not remember specific conversations about the toolkits in December 2023. PCO DI does not need PMO’s formal approval to launch the toolkits, but this was a collaborative process between officials and PMO was kept informed. Minister LeBlanc believed that he would have approved the toolkits and asked that they be issued in January 2024. He was of the view that they were intended to be released in 2024.
- [13] The approval of initiatives coming from Deputy Ministers (i.e., from the public service) is more formal, whereas the approval that Minister LeBlanc gives to staffers in his office can be provided by more informal means, including verbal approval.
- [14] PCO officials have reported to Minister LeBlanc that the feedback about these toolkits and the federal government’s increased engagement with provinces and territories has been positive. Minister LeBlanc said that subnational governments appreciate the federal government’s efforts to increase public engagement on FI. He indicated that diaspora communities and parliamentarians are also anxious to be informed and increase their ability to resist foreign interference (“FI”).
- [15] Minister LeBlanc was referred to a PCO memorandum, “Protecting Democracy Toolkits.” The memorandum indicates that “[a] separate toolkit on foreign interference could be considered but the development of such a product would fall to Public Safety

³ CAN036486.

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Canada (“**PS**”) given its broader responsibilities on foreign interference.” He did not know to what this referred.

2.2.2. Engagement with Subnational Governments

- [16] Minister LeBlanc was asked about a memorandum that recommended sharing the toolkits with provinces, territories and municipalities across Canada.
- [17] Minister LeBlanc said that the toolkits were shared and that FI was the subject of ongoing discussion with premiers and big-city mayors. Minister LeBlanc encourages officials with the Democratic Institutions Secretariat and the Intergovernmental Affairs Secretariat to engage with subnational government partners.
- [18] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a report he co-signed with the then-Clerk of the Privy Council, “Countering an Evolving Threat: Update on the Recommendations to Counter Foreign Interference in Canada’s Democratic Institutions.”⁴ The Report recommends that Canada “establish regular mechanisms to work with sub-national levels of government and law enforcement organizations, including to provide necessary security clearances.” Implementing these mechanisms remains a priority.
- [19] Minister LeBlanc identified Bill C-70 [Bill C-70 received Royal Assent on June 20, 2024, as *An Act respecting countering foreign interference*⁵] as an example of such implementation. The Bill gives the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) an enhanced ability to engage with provinces. Minister LeBlanc also believes that the *Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act* (“**FITAA**”) [enacted by Part IV of Bill C-70] will help address FI affecting provincial officials.
- [20] The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (“**RCMP**”) has long-established mechanisms to cooperate with provincial and territorial counterparts. Following the recent enactment of Bill C-70, CSIS is in the process of developing protocols for sharing classified information with subnational levels of government. Minister LeBlanc has instructed CSIS

⁴ COM0000048.

⁵ S.C. 2024, c. 16.

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to do so expeditiously. When asked whether sufficient physical infrastructure exists for sharing classified information through these channels, he noted that CSIS has offices in every province.

[21] Minister LeBlanc observed that Bill C-70 was enacted very quickly and with the approval of all parties represented at the House of Commons. This illustrates that FI is an issue transcending party lines.

2.2.3. International partners

[22] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a PCO memorandum, “Canadian Co-Leadership of Paris Call to Action Community.” He received a briefing about the Paris Call to Action in the fall of 2019 shortly after being named as Minister of Democratic Institutions. The initiative’s objective was to further the Prime Minister’s commitment to protect elections and cyberspace by collaborating with private sector companies. The Paris Call built resilience and put malicious actors on notice. At a virtual conference in the spring of 2020, Minister LeBlanc had a panel discussion with Microsoft’s president about how to build resilience in online spaces.

[23] The PCO memorandum states that “Global Affairs Canada (GAC) initially expressed some hesitation in Canada taking on a prominent role within the forum.” Minister LeBlanc was unfamiliar with this particular reference and this issue.

[24] Minister LeBlanc’s formal and informal exchanges with Five Eyes counterparts increased after he became Minister of Public Safety. Transnational repression is a focus of the Five Eyes community. The countries share best practices and the Five Eyes partners increasingly recognize Canada as a leader.

[25] Minister LeBlanc is not aware of any structured discussions about international move towards regulation of mis- or dis-information in the electoral context as opposed to a voluntary system. However, international partners are engaging in discussions about further regulation of security in cyber space, hate speech, terrorism and other national security issues.

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2.2.4. Political parties

- [26] Minister LeBlanc is aware that some review bodies have identified political party processes as vulnerable to FI. This issue is the subject of active discussions. The Government has recognized and acted on this vulnerability in several ways: by activating the Security and Intelligence Threats to Election Task Force, enabling it to brief cleared party representatives, and by allowing Members of Parliament (“MPs”) with the requisite security clearance to review the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians’ report on FI.
- [27] As an example, Minister LeBlanc learned of some intelligence reports of FI involving an opposition political party. He told CSIS to inform the leader of that party, in line with the overarching objective of the Ministerial Directive on Threats to Safety of Parliament and Parliamentarians.
- [28] Party processes present a particular challenge because political parties are private entities. Accountability for them lies with the parties’ boards or offices, not with Parliament or the government. Minister LeBlanc said that when he first ran for office, the nomination process was not regulated at all. Parliament has since passed legislation to govern the funding of nominations; this reflects an understanding that there is some space to regulate party processes.
- [29] However, legislation about party processes remains a delicate matter and it would be difficult to get Parliament to legislate the internal affairs of the parties. The parties are and need to be accountable to their members, the public and the media.

2.2.5. Other stakeholders

- [30] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to two memoranda:
- a) an undated memorandum from PCO, “Ministerial Engagement Roundtable on Protecting Democracy,” which recommends that Minister LeBlanc host two advisory roundtables with experts and stakeholders about protecting democracy; and

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b) an undated memorandum from PCO, “Update on Engagement Opportunities (Winter 2024).”⁶ The memorandum “follows up on the recommendation that was sent to [Minister LeBlanc] on the possibility to create a ministerial roundtable on issues related to protecting democracy. [Minister LeBlanc’s] office indicated that there was no interest to move forward with such an initiative at this point.”

[31] Minister LeBlanc did not recall the discussion of roundtables mentioned in these notes. He then stated that his preference throughout his tenure has been to engage with stakeholders less formally, but more actively, because this allows him to reach a broader and more diverse audience. Roundtables, while useful, have limited participation.

[32] The federal government also seeks to actively engage with MPs and diaspora communities. As Minister of Public Safety, he encourages CSIS and the RCMP to pursue engagement opportunities, including through media communications. The attention devoted to FI has also increased markedly in Parliament, including in its committees. This has helped to raise awareness in the Canadian public, even if the conversations sometimes become partisan.

3. Portfolio as Minister of Public Safety

3.1. Canada’s Counter-Foreign Interference Strategy

[33] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a memorandum seeking his approval for the public release of Canada’s Counter-Foreign Interference Strategy (the “Strategy”).⁷ The release of this strategy was ultimately overtaken by subsequent events—the work leading up to the Strategy fed into what became Bill C-70 and other initiatives. These include the consultations leading up to Bill C-70 and the creation of the Commission.

⁶ CAN033269.

⁷ CAN026476.

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3.2. Consultations on Bill C-70

- [34] Commission Counsel referred Minister LeBlanc to a March 23, 2023, memorandum to the then-Minister of Public Safety on consultation with stakeholders about *FITAA*. He was also asked about an August 3, 2023, memorandum advising him that PS would launch additional consultations about what became Bill C-70.
- [35] Minister LeBlanc was not Minister of Public Safety in March 2023 and as such could not opine on why the initial consultations were only on *FITAA*.

4. Conclusion

- [36] Minister LeBlanc is satisfied that he receives all information and materials necessary for him to carry out his responsibilities under his Intergovernmental Affairs, Public Safety, and Democratic Institutions portfolios. He is very confident that he is provided the information he needs by departmental officials who triage key information and give him advice. The public understanding of the threat landscape has also increased and that is positive.
- [37] Minister LeBlanc did not agree with the suggestion that the three portfolios under his leadership needed to be more integrated but believes it has been effective. His ability to engage with subnational governments as Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs is also useful. Given how the threat landscape has changed in recent years, it is useful to be responsible for both Democratic Institutions and Public Safety. The situation might have been different ten years ago. Minister LeBlanc noted that the appointment of Ministers is at the discretion of the Prime Minister.
- [38] Minister LeBlanc is of the view that the National Security Council, a Cabinet committee created and chaired by the Prime Minister, is another coordination mechanism in national security matters. It has a very broad focus, much broader than just FI, and was created to develop strategies and facilitate information sharing on issues that have impacts across government. It ensures that relevant Ministers have knowledge of issues and avoids siloes.