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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 fédérales

In Camera Examination Summary: René Ouellette, CSIS' Director General of Academic Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement

Commission Counsel examined Mr. Ouellette, official from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**” or “**the Service**”), during *in camera* hearings held in July and August 2024. Counsel for the Attorney General of Canada appeared on behalf of the Government of Canada and had the opportunity to examine the witness. The hearing was held in the absence of the public and other Participants. This summary discloses the evidence that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, would not be injurious to critical interests of Canada or its allies, national defence or national security.

Notes to Readers:

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

1. Examination by Commission Counsel

1.1 Introduction

- [1] Prior to serving in his position as Director General of Academic Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement as of November 2019, Mr. Ouellette held various positions at CSIS.
- [2] Mr. Ouellette testified that the academic outreach portion of the program began in 2008. CSIS reached out to experts across civil society, for example subject matter experts in universities, to help inform their understanding of emerging issues and threats. This sometimes involved commissioning research from subject-matter experts, having them

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provide lectures to CSIS staff, or facilitating discussions between internal and external subject-matter experts to help challenge some of the Service's biases or assumptions.

- [3] He explained that while core staff in the analyst sectors are primarily focussed on immediate concerns related to priority areas, the academic outreach program is able to look over the horizon at emerging issues to gain an understanding of what might become a concern or priority in five or ten years.
- [4] Mr. Ouellette testified that in 2019 the stakeholder engagement program was added to the academic outreach branch because of that group's experience engaging with experts and others outside of CSIS. He described this addition stemmed from a recognition that the Service needed to have an ability to speak more transparently, openly and proactively with a wide variety of organizations across civil society, the academic sector, the private sector, Indigenous partners, advocacy associations or NGOs at more strategic levels about policy issues.
- [5] He further testified that part of the impetus for the creation of the stakeholder engagement program was so that someone's first encounter with CSIS would not be with an intelligence officer seeking to collect information. Instead, the stakeholder engagement program is one where CSIS can be more transparent and proactive in providing expertise, advice, and information to these stakeholders rather than always seeking it from them.
- [6] Mr. Ouellette testified that there are four pillars of stakeholder engagement: (1) research and academia, (2) industry and private sector, (3) indigenous partnerships, and (4) advocacy associations.

1.2 FI related initiatives

- [7] Mr. Ouellette testified that the impetus for part of the stakeholder engagement program was to address concerns from community organizations regarding some approaches that were taken in the context of counterterrorism operations. He noted that a lot of community organizations felt that CSIS may have overreached in some of its

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operational activities and felt that the Service hadn't been sensitive enough to some of the organizations' cultural or community concerns.

- [8] Mr. Ouellette further testified that the issue of foreign interference arose in the context of the work they were doing with some community organizations, based on CSIS' investigations or operations. He noted that community organizations are often at the receiving end of foreign interference. He explained that the work done by his branch takes the form of both formal meetings and informal interactions that build over a longer period of time. He explained that there is value in formal meetings, but trust is built over time. He explained that building trust requires caring about the success of a relationship and caring about the person that you are interacting with more than simply engaging in a formal setting with an agenda and a meeting.
- [9] These informal interactions can take a variety of forms, for instance, sending holiday greetings, checking in on people for no particular reason to see how they are doing, and responding to issues in the news. They can take the form of text messages, emails, phone calls, and other similar means of communication. Mr. Ouellette testified that not all of these types of interactions are tracked but they do allow CSIS to establish a foothold and create, within a partner or stakeholder, a willingness to talk with the Service.
- [10] Mr. Ouellette testified that there are a small number of employees doing this work within his branch.
- [11] Mr. Ouellette testified that it is a challenge to deal with classified information in the stakeholder engagement environment because classification can limit CSIS' ability to get into the specific information a stakeholder may want to hear. That said, he explained that in a lot of cases you do not need to use classified information in order to speak more broadly about CSIS' mandate and what it does, or to demonstrate an understanding of the geopolitical situation and the interests of a foreign state and then to demonstrate empathy and a willingness to listen to the concerns that a community is expressing.

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[12] Mr. Ouellette testified that while the classification issue is not too much of a concern in the earlier stages of building trust with a stakeholder, it can become a challenge later on when CSIS wants to give stakeholders a reason to build or continue a reciprocal engagement. He noted that Bill C-70 would allow them to take the next step to share more detailed and classified-level information with some stakeholders, when necessary and appropriate.

1.3 Evaluation of the program

[13] Mr. Ouellette testified that it is difficult to put performance metrics on his branch, however, he highlighted some indicators of success. For instance, many organizations that CSIS now has relationships with participated in the public consultations for Bill C-70. Mr. Ouellette explained that many organizations expressed their support for the new CSIS authorities provided under the new legislation, which, he believed would have been unthinkable five years ago.

[14] Mr. Ouellette was taken to a 2023 email from an individual who represented a community organization that was addressed to Mr. Ouellette and employees from Public Safety. The email notes that distrust of security agencies exists in some racialized and marginalized communities. Mr. Ouellette agreed that there exists a general distrust and testified that this why one of the bigger challenges in working with community organizations is getting that first meeting or first conversation. Mr. Ouellette noted that CSIS has since had much more favourable interactions with this individual over the last year, including regarding Bill C-70.

[15] Mr. Ouellette noted that while he is confident that CSIS has made a lot of progress with some community organizations, there is still mistrust that needs to be overcome. He testified that CSIS could do community engagement work forever and never be done.

[16] He testified that one thing that CSIS learned early on in this program was that it takes a long time and a lot of patience and humility to establish these relationships.

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- [17] Mr. Ouellette further testified that in response to a suggestion from a particular organization and other similar organizations, CSIS has set up a hotline on its website for foreign interference and non-threat-to-life activities.
- [18] Mr. Ouellette explained that CSIS had taken the advice of the National Security Transparency Advisory Group that conducted a study on how intelligence organizations deal with racialized communities. In response to this study, CSIS detailed how organizations and community groups could get in contact if they wanted to report something or speak to CSIS more generally. He testified that these groups do get in touch in various ways. Sometimes reports are made via emails to CSIS media relations, to the public 'stakeholder engagement' email address, or to the hotline. Mr. Ouellette testified that it is his understanding that unfortunately the hotline isn't used frequently.
- [19] Mr. Ouellette testified that the advocacy community is very well connected with each other such that when something goes well in an organization's meeting with CSIS it tends to ripple through the community and lead to more engagement. The opposite is also true.

1.4 Coordination with other government departments on stakeholder engagement

- [20] Mr. Ouellette testified that Public Safety is the main department that his team coordinates with. He noted that there is not a lot of formal coordination but who does what is primarily based on which government agency has the best relationship with a particular stakeholder or community.
- [21] As for engaging on issues of FI and disinformation with members of the public who are not part of a diaspora community, Mr. Ouellette testified that this is primarily done through engagement with universities and university administrators, including those that deal with life on campus, given the foreign interference faced by international students and faculty.

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[22] Mr. Ouellette testified that his branch does research before engaging with an organization, and tailors its approach accordingly.