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• (1205)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I would like to welcome the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, to the procedure and House affairs committee.

Minister Blair, you have up to 10 minutes for your opening comments. The floor is yours. You can give me back any free time, and I would welcome it.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of National Defence): Madam Chair, I'll do my best to make very brief comments. I know the committee has a number of questions.

First of all, let me begin by thanking you and the committee for the invitation to appear again on this study. As I've said, I will endeavour to be brief in my remarks.

As I have said before at this committee, no parliamentarian or their family should ever be threatened for advocating for their beliefs. It is utterly unacceptable that any member of Parliament from any party might be the target of intimidation. If there is evidence of a threat of violence or intimidation against any Canadian, it is critical that it be referred immediately to police for further action as quickly as possible, for the safety of those individuals.

As I testified in June, I first learned about the threats made against the member for Wellington—Halton Hills when they were published in *The Globe and Mail* on May 1. These were serious claims and particularly disturbing, as they named both the member and his family. It was my clear expectation, as minister of public safety at that time, that CSIS would brief me on all threats to our democratic institutions. However, unfortunately, I was never informed of any attempt by any foreign actor to harm a parliamentarian, or of threats against their loved ones.

If there was sensitive information CSIS wanted to transmit to me, my expectation was that the director or his team would request a briefing. I would then attend a secure facility, either in Ottawa or Toronto. It was the responsibility of officials who had access to the top secret network to provide information that would then be printed and presented for my review during these meetings.

If I may be very clear, there was no such secure terminal located in the minister's office. Neither I nor any of my staff had log-in credentials to that system. Any suggestion that it was a matter of simply not opening emails is, frankly, absurd, because top secret, secure information is not transmitted as an email. It is, rather, sent to

a secure terminal. The only secure terminal at 269 Laurier, where my office as public safety minister was located, was not located in the political minister's office, but rather on the deputy minister's side of the building. No one on my staff, including myself, had any access to that terminal.

To keep Canadians safe, intelligence must be shared and disseminated so it can be acted upon. The committee has heard testimony from senior officials, including the national security and intelligence adviser, who acknowledged a failure in how intelligence was shared with and among ministers and departments. To begin to address this, the former minister of public safety issued a ministerial directive to CSIS requiring them to inform the minister in all instances of threats to the security of Canada, or directed at Parliament or parliamentarians, in a timely manner. It is also why the Prime Minister created the national security council as a committee of cabinet.

Foreign interference has been a significant threat to Canadian interests since before this government was elected and has only become more serious in recent years. This is a non-partisan issue. It is why we established the public inquiry into foreign interference after reaching consensus among all parties on the terms of reference. It is my sincere hope that by looking at the hostile activities of all state actors—including China, of course, and others—this commission will provide us with recommendations to build upon the important work already under way.

We must continue to review these matters in a way that respects our national security obligations, including to those who put their lives at risk collecting intelligence on our behalf in the field.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I look forward to any questions the committee may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Blair.

Your comments came in at three minutes and 28 seconds. I appreciate your being short with those comments, so we can get to questions.

We will now have a six-minute round, starting with Mr. Cooper and followed by Ms. Romanado, Madam Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney. It will be six minutes through the chair.

As you know, we had a first hour of committee business. We all know how that went. I would just say mindfully to all committee members that you know what the expectations of this committee are, so go through the chair. Interpreters can only interpret one person at a time. We are dealing with a very important study, the question of privilege by the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other members with regard to a very serious matter. I hope we all take note of that.

Mr. Cooper, through the chair, you have six minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, when you last appeared before this committee on June 1, you made the incredible assertion, with regard to the May 2021 CSIS issues management note that warned that MP Michael Chong and his family in Hong Kong were being targeted by the Beijing regime, including by an accredited diplomat at Beijing's Toronto consulate, that "CSIS, quite appropriately, made a determination that they didn't believe it was necessary to pass that information along", which you characterized as "an operational decision".

Your testimony, Minister, is directly contradicted by the director of CSIS, David Vigneault, who on June 13 told this committee that no such operational decision had been made, that the issues management note, distinct from other intelligence memos, pertains to a matter of high importance and that, in regard to you, Minister, "I think the fact that we did an issue management note speaks to the notion that we wanted to highlight the information."

Through you, Madam Chair, Minister, can you explain why your testimony was flatly contradicted by the director of CSIS?

Hon. Bill Blair: With great respect, it was not contradicted. In fact, I sincerely believe it was the director's intent that the information be made available to me.

Unfortunately, the steps were not taken by CSIS or by the Department of Public Safety to make that information available to me. I had no way of knowing that they had a secret they wanted to tell me.

Under every other circumstance—and I was the minister of public safety for over two years—the director of CSIS would advise my office they had information they wished to share with me. I would then go to a secure room where that information was shared.

In some other circumstances, I was actually asked to attend the CSIS office in Toronto where that information would be briefed to me, but it did not take place in this circumstance.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, I understand what you are now saying, but you said it was the intent of the director of CSIS that that information be shared with you. That's not what you said on June 1.

Minister, you used very specific language, that the director—that being the director of CSIS—determined that this was not informa-

tion the minister needed to know. Those were your express words, and that it was an operational decision not to pass that information on to you. That's very different from saying that there was an intent to pass it along to you.

What you're saying now is the opposite of what you said on June 1.

Why did you use that very specific language when you evidently knew that it simply wasn't true based upon what you're saying today?

• (1210)

Hon. Bill Blair: Respectfully, Mr. Cooper, I listened to the testimony that Director Vigneault gave before this committee after my testimony. I heard him very clearly say that it was his intent. I know Director Vigneault very well. He's a very decent man. I've worked with him for many years, and I trust him. However, I would point out that he, unfortunately, notwithstanding his perhaps good intentions to share that, did not take the steps that were necessary to ensure that information was actually brought to my attention.

Under every other circumstance the director would notify my office, and he would either brief me personally or ask that I attend the CSIS office in Toronto to have that information shared. That did not take place at that time.

By the way, there's a great deal of information that CSIS comes in possession of, and they make determinations as to its validity and usefulness. I assumed that when they did not share it with me, they didn't intend to do so.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You're repeating yourself.

Minister, you said it was your expectation that matters of national security such as that impacting MP Chong and his family would be brought to your attention. It was also the director of CSIS's expectation that when a top secret issues management note on a matter of high importance was sent to you, your deputy minister, and your chief of staff, that you would have seen that.

Will you, Minister, at the very least concede that under your watch there was a colossal breakdown in communications that resulted in MP Chong being kept in the dark for two years and a Beijing thug allowed to stay in Canada for two years to continue his campaign of intimidation against Chinese Canadian citizens? Would you at the very least concede that there was a breakdown of communications under your watch as minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Cooper, there are two things that are incorrect with what you have just said.

First of all, that information was not sent to me and it was not sent to my chief of staff. You've incorrectly characterized that. It was sent to a secure terminal to which we do not have access. That was not the way in which top secret information was shared with the minister or the minister's office. It was shared more directly by the director. That did not happen in these circumstances, so your characterization that this information was sent to me is, quite frankly, incorrect.

However, I would also acknowledge, as the national security intelligence adviser acknowledged, and as I believe the director of CSIS acknowledged, that in this circumstance they did not do what was necessary to make sure that information was brought to the attention of the minister. For that, as the minister of public safety at the time, I do take responsibility. We've taken steps to remedy that mishandling of that particular information and the failure to ensure that it got into the hands of people who needed to see it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Romanado, you have six minutes, through the chair.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I'd like to welcome the minister back to PROC.

Thank you so much, Minister, for being here.

Last Thursday Mr. Rob Stewart presented at PROC with respect to the question of privilege. He testified that the issues management note dated May 2021 was not forwarded to you. He testified in that regard. We understand that while Monsieur Vigneault may have had this information, the intelligence, at the end of the day, was not provided to you. It's pretty difficult to act on anything if it's not actually provided to you.

I would like to give you a little bit more time to elaborate on this, from the time you came to see us in June to now. I know that you've changed portfolios. I want to look ahead. You mentioned some steps that are being put in place. What steps are we putting in place to make sure that this does not happen again and that in the event there is a threat to a sitting member of Parliament, it gets to the right eyes in real time?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thanks, Ms. Romanado.

First of all, I want to acknowledge and appreciate the testimony of Deputy Minister Stewart. He's absolutely correct. That information was not shared with me, as I previously testified and, I believe, the director of CSIS also testified.

We recognize that there is certain information that needs to be shared in a far more timely way. I was very concerned when I learned by reading in *The Globe and Mail* that a threat had been made against a member of Parliament and his family. The reason I was very concerned about that is I think we all share a responsibility to make sure that the people who do our important work can do it safely. Had I been aware of that information, I would have insisted that very assertive steps be taken in order to provide that member with all of the support and protection he needed for himself and his family. I think that is our first priority. Frankly, that's what most concerned me.

I can tell you that since becoming aware of this breakdown in information.... Again, I'm not making an excuse for it. It's simply an explanation.

I was not aware that CSIS had a secret they thought they should share. I was never made aware that they had that information. Frankly, the simplest remedy for that would have been for someone at CSIS or Public Safety to notify me, as the minister, that there was information I needed to see and actually get me into a secure location to do that.

The new minister of public safety who succeeded me in that role, Mr. Mendicino, issued a ministerial directive that all such information should be and must be brought to the attention of the public safety minister. That is the first step.

I will also tell you that I now work in an area, Ms. Romanado, that deals with a lot of top secret and classified information. I will tell you from my experience now as the Minister of National Defence that there is a very robust system. I am briefed by the Communications Security Establishment chief, by the CDS and by the commander of CAF's intelligence command, General Wright. I'm briefed on a weekly basis very comprehensively.

In addition to that, if there is other information that needs to be brought to my attention, the CDS, the deputy minister, the chief of CSE or even their CRO—employed at CSE—deliver those documents to my office in a secure environment. That information is being shared in a very robust and very regular way. Most importantly—God bless the military—they are meticulous about their record-keeping. Every document that's put before me is recorded with the date and time, what was shared and who shared it. That makes us all responsible for it. I think it also remedies a situation that previously existed with CSIS.

Finally, I would also point out that the Prime Minister has now created a national security council. It's a cabinet committee that will be very routinely briefed on top secret and classified material, not just so that the government can be aware of it, but so that action can be taken.

I think that's ultimately our responsibility in dealing with this classified material. It needs to be appropriately shared so that appropriate actions can be taken in response to it, such as the threat that was made against a member of Parliament. That needed to be actioned immediately. It's important that that situation be remedied. We've taken some very significant steps.

As you know, over the past several years, our government has taken a number of steps to improve the oversight and accountability of national security matters. We've seen very significant progress in the past few months.

• (1215)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

As you know, Minister, my son is an intelligence officer with the Canadian Armed Forces, so I'm very well versed in how intelligence is gathered and the importance of keeping issues of national intelligence in a confidential manner.

You mentioned the fact that in your new role in National Defence, you have the facilities necessary to be briefed appropriately on top secret matters.

Would you recommend going forward...? You mentioned that in your previous portfolio of public safety, the minister's office did not have such facilities in being able to be briefed. They didn't have access to the terminal, and so on and so forth.

Would you recommend that perhaps the Minister of Public Safety also have something similar?

Hon. Bill Blair: On the one hand, I believe in the security of such information. It's highly sensitive in its nature. It can affect our national interest and our national security.

I would also be concerned.... Frankly, when I read about leaks of top secret information, I'm deeply concerned by them because they can, if done as recklessly as they have sometimes been done, compromise and undermine the ability of those who risk their lives every day to collect information for us. Their safety and the security of that information are also a priority for me.

• (1220)

The Chair: Minister, thank you. Her first question was quite short, and the answer was quite long. I feel it's only appropriate that I move on to Madam Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister, thank you for appearing before our committee again and for your time. This gives us the opportunity to see where we are.

I'm going to ask my question slowly, and I'll ask you to respond in kind, to assist our interpreters, who are doing an exceptional job.

I wonder whether all my colleagues read the press review in French this morning. Minister, did you see the proposal by the Bloc Québécois to table a bill to create a foreign agents' registry?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I apologize, Madam Gaudreau.

First of all, thank you for the reminder to speak slowly. I will endeavour to do so, because we do want to take care of the translators, who do such an exceptional job for us. I apologize. I was in cabinet this morning, and we've been rather busy since very early, and I have not yet seen the papers.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Minister, I'm asking you the question because, like you Madam Chair, the Bloc Québécois is concerned that it'll never happen.

In light of all the recommendations in the previous months, we expected a registry to be created. We determined it was essential to act and to find solutions. Minister, given your expertise, what do you think about a foreign agent registry?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: There are a couple of things.

First of all, I'm aware that a number of our allies also have foreign agent registries, and I know their value. I believe that Canada would benefit from such a registry. I'm also aware that this is something the public inquiry that has now been called will also look at, and I expect that there will be recommendations.

I'm reluctant to comment on the Bloc bill, but I really look forward to reading it. I think we all believe and agree that a foreign registry would help protect Canada's interests, but it's also important that we do it in a thoughtful way.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

A number of experts gave top priority to several recommendations. How come the Bloc Québécois has to table a bill to ensure progress? Talks are currently underway, but there is still nothing official. Why is there still nothing?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, the work that is being done and continues to be done is important. What you speak to, Madam Gaudreau, is the importance of Parliament and the important role of opposition to continue to strongly advocate, to bring forward and to bring pressure, quite frankly. I think it's entirely appropriate that it's how government works, because I think we all are here to act in the best interest of Canadians. I will tell you that this is a priority for our government.

I know that the public safety minister has indicated his intention to bring this forward, but, frankly, we welcome the advocacy of the Bloc, and if you have recommendations for a path forward, I look forward to reading them.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's reassuring and confirms that it's important for me to be here, even if the Bloc Québécois is eager to focus on our affairs in Quebec. In the meantime, Quebecers are also among the victims here.

From what I gather, you haven't been given a date in relation to the work done proactively by your predecessor. Furthermore, you aren't prepared to table a bill while waiting to see what the Bloc Québécois, namely, is going to propose. There's no date because the process is ongoing. Is that correct?

• (1225)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Gaudreau, to be very clear, that's work that's going on under Minister LeBlanc at Public Safety, working very much in collaboration with a number of others. I have not been involved with that. Unfortunately, I'm not able to share with you either a date or the progress on that work, but I can tell you that I've been part of a number of discussions that talked about the importance of bringing forward a foreign agent registry and the legislation that would be required to do so.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Naturally, I am concerned to hear that. I don't know much about the role of the minister responsible for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Everything I've learned about the matter demonstrates that, in Canada, our intelligence culture is weak. We may have made great strides; however, when I go back to my riding, I cannot provide my constituents with anything that says we've got this under control.

It's sad that, today, we have to push for what we all know need to be done. It isn't a lack of ability, but I wonder whether you have too much work or whether this isn't important enough.

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Oh, no, that's not it at all, ma'am. We're busy, of course, but this is a priority. It's also a priority that we do it right, and so we're looking at the experience of other jurisdictions. There are extensive consultations.

We're also aware that as a result of an all-party consensus, we have now appointed a public inquiry that's also going to be able to examine this issue and make recommendations.

We think there's value in that public inquiry. We think there's value in what we have all agreed is the right thing to do, and it will inform the decisions that are made around all of our next steps including creating a foreign agent registry.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, you have six minutes, through the chair.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the minister's being here today and I congratulate him on his new role.

As the representative of 19 Wing, I will also remind him that I have a lot of things to talk to him about, through the chair, and I really look forward to having those discussions to support some truly amazing people who serve our country.

I appreciate, through your testimony, that the first you heard of this incident was when you read about it in the *The Globe and Mail*. I think probably what is even more shocking and horrifying for me is that Mr. Chong read about it for the first time in *The Globe and Mail*. I can't imagine finding out that my family and I were under some sort of reality that was not clear at all, and reading about it in the news is not the best way moving forward.

You said as well they had a secret to tell you and that you had no idea. Then you also talked about some of the things that are being done to remedy that.

I know you have talked about it before, but could you talk about what you feel was done to start to remedy that and let us know what you left to the new minister and what you left behind to be completed so that this doesn't happen again.

Hon. Bill Blair: We didn't leave it completely behind, Ms. Blaney. Let me assure you first of all that each successive minister, I think, has taken important steps, and we will continue to take important steps to make sure that our national security establishment is robust and properly governed and subject to oversight, and that it is effective in providing for and protecting Canada's national interests.

First of all, when I was first made aware, you may recall that I sent a letter out in 2021 to all parliamentarians bringing to their attention issues that, frankly, CSIS had brought to my attention about foreign interference and particularly about the role of China. There was a 12-page letter that I tabled in Parliament and sent directly to all parliamentarians making sure that this issue was brought to their attention.

I was also advised by CSIS that there were a number of unnamed members of Parliament who could potentially be targeted. I asked CSIS at that time about the importance of providing those members of Parliament with enough information so they could be protected from the risk of being interfered with or being subject to interference.

They advised me that they were undertaking a number of defensive briefings. They did not tell me who they were briefing or what they were briefing them on. I did not receive that information.

I subsequently learned after the information appeared in *The Global and Mail* about Mr. Chong that CSIS had conducted a deep defensive briefing, but I understand that some of the information that was made public in *The Globe and Mail* was not shared with Mr. Chong, and that was wrong.

I also think it was very important that if there were threats against any members or their families that action had to be taken to make sure they were safe and protected.

In response to that, the then public safety minister, Mr. Mendicino, issued a ministerial directive to CSIS that all such information had to be shared.

Additionally, there were steps taken—

• (1230)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Minister. I really appreciate that, and I understand that Mr. Chong did get a defensive review. It did not give him the information about his family. I think it's important that we don't confuse the two.

He's also been very clear that he feels this is something that all MPs should receive, because having that information about how to be perceptive of how you might be targeted really allowed him to have some tools in his tool kit to notice things, but it did not give him the information that he so desperately needed which was poignant to him and his family actually being targeted.

I know that foreign interference in our elections is an ever-expanding reality. Figuring out how to secure sharing processes, how to make sure the information is getting where it needs to get and when it should get to that place is all changing rapidly. I respect that, but I am also very concerned that MPs could be targeted in a very personal way and not know that. That means there's no capacity—when you don't know, you don't know—to actually deal with the issues.

You talked about how, in your new role as Minister of Defence, you receive information a lot more frequently now, because of the work that you do. You talked about having information coming and doing a “date received” and a “date read”, so that is calculated, and there's some way of tracking information, which I think is lacking in the study that we're doing right now on the question of privilege motion.

Is it important for us to look, with this new reality, at having a more secure location for the Minister of Public Safety in order to get this information in a more secure way, but more rapidly, and have that accountability of a “date received” and a “date read”?

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, the actual facility.... There are a number of what we call SCIFs around the city and across the country. These are secure locations where classified and even top secret material can be shared. There's a difference, by the way, between those levels. Even within a top secret realm, there are a number of levels, and who has authority to see them. However, there are secure facilities that can be done. There is a secure facility, by the way, at 269 Laurier. It's a SCIF on the public service's side of that building. It's located on the 16th floor.

Fairly routinely, I would be asked to go to that room to be briefed, usually by the director, or almost always by the director of CSIS and a senior staff. So the facility is an issue, but I think more importantly, it's appropriate vigour, making sure—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to go to the next round.

I would remind everyone to try to keep the questions and answers about the same length of time. It would minimize your needing to hear my interactions. I have no problem interacting should that be the case. With that, I would appreciate our keeping on time, so we can get through the whole second round.

[Translation]

Mr. Berthold, you have five minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Blair, when Canadians watch a committee meeting, they see a ping pong match between you, the director of the Canadian Secu-

rity Intelligence Service (CSIS), and your then deputy minister. No one wants to take responsibility for what has happened.

I have here a memo dated May 31, 2021. It clearly states that its intended recipient was the then Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. It concerns namely Michael Chong and another MP, Kenny Chiu. I'm going to table it so that everyone will recall that it was already provided to all members of this committee.

You say that you only learned two years later, in May 2023, that MP Chong and MP Chiu had been targeted by the Communist regime in Beijing. Do you have confidence in the director of CSIS, Mr. David Vigneault?

• (1235)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Do you have any information that would cause you to question his credibility?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I have a great deal of respect for Director Vigneault.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: On June 1, you told this committee, “It was authorized by CSIS to be shown to me but they determined...that it was not necessary to inform me...”. Do you remember saying that?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I assumed that if the director did not share information with me, then he didn't require that I see it.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Yet, you were very specific in saying on June 1, 2023, that CSIS “determined...that it was not necessary to inform me.” Now, you're saying that you assume it said that.

On June 13, 2023, Mr. David Vigneault, director of CSIS told this committee:

As I mentioned a little earlier, CSIS and I conveyed the information to the Department of Public Safety along with the very specific directive to forward it to the minister.

Are you calling into question Mr. Vigneault's testimony?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: All I can say with absolute certainty is that it was never shared with the minister—me—at the time.

Again, I don't question what Director Vigneault's intention was, but the execution was unsuccessful because the information was never shared with me.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Once again, no one is responsible for anything, Mr. Blair. However, Mr. Vigneault was extremely clear in his statement and you were very clear in saying that he had determined that it wasn't necessary to provide it.

Your then deputy minister, Mr. Rob Stewart, testified recently before the committee. He said that the minister was always briefed by the director, that the minister and the director were the ones who determined the subjects and concerns at that time, that he was present, but that he was not responsible for that task.

I asked him to confirm if I had correctly understood what he had just said, and that it was up to the minister to determine which briefings he wished to get or not. He gave me a one-word answer, "Exactly".

Mr. Blair, why did you refuse? Why didn't you agree to the briefing by CSIS director Mr. David Vigneault? If you aren't calling his credibility into question right now, why are you denying your responsibility in this whole affair?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Monsieur Berthold, again you're mis-characterizing what happened. I was never offered a briefing from the director on this matter. That information was never shared with me. Unfortunately, I learned about it when it was reported in The Globe and Mail.

Although I don't question at all the credibility of the director of CSIS, I can tell you absolutely and unconditionally that the information was never shared with me. I was never aware it even existed.

Finally and most importantly, it was not a question of.... If the director had secret information that he felt I needed to see, frankly, it was his responsibility to alert me to that. He could have called me. He could have sent me an email. He could have come over to see me as he had done in every other case, but that did not happen in this case. That information was never shared with me.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: So, you are criticizing his work and his judgment by saying that he didn't provide you with the information and didn't ask to give you a special briefing at that time. You're blaming the director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service for not keeping you informed. That's exactly what you said.

Madam Chair, since I got the floor, all I've been doing is quote the witnesses who have appeared before this committee. I'm quoting the minister, the director of CSIS and the deputy minister of Public Safety.

Minister, all these quotes show us that one individual is responsible for not getting the briefing: you, or someone very close to you in Cabinet. Why did you fail so dismally at getting this information, which was harmful to our colleague Mr. Chong?

The Chair: Minister, you have 30 seconds to respond, without interruptions.

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Berthold, just about everything you said was incorrect.

The bottom line is that I had no idea this information existed. The director of CSIS did not tell me he had information he wanted to share with me. I did not have an opportunity to make a decision whether I would be briefed on it because I did not know it existed until it was reported in the paper.

CSIS has a lot of secrets in its possession. It decides what the minister needs to see. In this case, it may have intended it, but it did not take the steps necessary to bring it to my attention.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Lauzon, you have five minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

It's nice to see you here, Minister.

I used to speak to you in English, but today I will ask my questions in French. I will speak slowly.

[Translation]

Mr. Blair, we're familiar with the Conservative's questions, which seek to undermine your credibility. We know full well that it's impossible to request a briefing before finding out that information even exists.

I'd like to ask some questions about your experience serving Canadians. For 39 years, you served the public as the chief of police of Toronto. You started as a constable and then became the chief of police. You have held other positions since then. I met you in 2010. You have always been a leader in maintaining public confidence. That's our experience of the honourable Bill Blair.

In light of the allegations relating to this intimidation campaign, could you explain to members how your commitment to transparency and public service have guided your actions since you learned this information on May 1, 2023? Could you tell us about your experience and transparency?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lauzon.

First of all, just as a point of clarification, I was not the chief in Toronto for 39 years; it was only for 10. I actually began as a constable, and I held every rank in the Toronto Police Service before becoming its chief in 2005.

I appreciate your remarks, and I thank you for that.

I have spent most of my life trying to keep Canadians safe. I did that in various jobs I have held not only as the chief of police or as a minister of this government but also in a number of other fairly significant roles that dealt with national security issues and organized crime matters. I've had to deal with very confidential, secret information.

I've also been one of the people involved in collecting such information, so I know some of the risks that people who do that work face every day.

It has always given me an appreciation of the importance of intelligence work, but I think it's important to recognize what intelligence is.

First of all, there's just an enormous amount of information that people can have access to. Some of it is open source, and some of it is online. Some of it is from human intelligence sources, and some of it is maybe signals intelligence. There's just a cacophony of information.

The role of an intelligence officer is discernment. It's to look at that information and to analyze it to assess the credibility of its source—how it was collected, or what the motive of the person providing that information might be—and then to determine through analysis what they believe is happening.

The purpose of intelligence is to inform action. It really is to help decision-makers determine whether a criminal investigation should be done, or whether there should be action taken, for example, to address a security concern or a public interest concern.

That's the work I've been involved in for most of my life. I think it's important to acknowledge not only the importance of that intelligence function but also the limitations of it. It's not evidence. It's not proof of what's happening. It's just a really strong indication that governments, police services and the public need to be able to act on.

I've also always believed that, though I've lived in, and worked on the edge of, a secret world for a very long time, we should always err on the side of being as transparent with the public as possible, and our first priority has to be the safety of Canadians.

All of that is to say with respect to this information that I thought it very regrettable that the information about a threat to a parliamentarian was not shared with me when it was first collected. I would have, quite frankly, insisted that very assertive action be taken in order to provide that individual with all the information and the support they needed to be safe and to protect their family from that concern. We've subsequently taken steps to make sure that action will be taken.

I think there are real opportunities for Canada to improve its response to foreign interference and to the threat of hostile activities of state actors and non-state actors, and to better utilize national intelligence security information. We have extraordinary people, really credible and great people, working for us, but it is our responsibility to make sure that we create the best public value for that huge investment in the collection of that intelligence, and that we use that intelligence in an appropriate way to take the actions that are necessary to look after Canada's interest and to protect Canadians.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Earlier, we were talking about the culture of information and measures recently taken. However, our media are the ones keeping us informed on the issue.

Again yesterday, they told us that the Canada's rapid response mechanism had intercepted deepfake videos to manipulate Canadians on social media with false statements by the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition, among others. Are we equipped to deal with this?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Just to be clear, I'm sure you read it in the media and so did I, but the information actually came from Global Affairs Canada and from the minister of global affairs. That was the source of that information. It was the result of a release that came out of GAC in order to inform Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I stand corrected and I congratulate you.

Now, are we equipped to deal with deepfakes?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I would suggest to you we are subject to misinformation, disinformation, illicit cyber-activity. There are constant attacks on Canadian systems, Canadian values, Canadians.

We need to continually get better at this. We see these attacks. Some of them are denial of services against government institutions. There are attacks on media. There are attacks on our academic institutions, on critical infrastructure in this country. I think we work very robustly. I think in many areas of Canada our response is quite appropriate and adequate. The bad guys are innovating constantly, which means we have to innovate constantly as well in order to be ready to respond.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I quite agree with you, it is evolving rapidly.

Indeed, you talked about measures in relation to artificial intelligence. Could you identify some of the measures that have been put in place since last spring?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Just to be clear, do you mean work that we have been doing?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm referring to measures to counter foreign interference.

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Of course, there are a number of things. I will tell you that one of the areas I'm responsible for is the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, which is run by the Communications Security Establishment. I was over to see them yesterday. They're doing some really outstanding work in order to protect Canadian interests and to thwart the constant attacks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Bill Blair: There's also legislation before Parliament we can talk about another time.

The Chair: We look forward to it.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's a start. Perhaps the minister can table the measures—

[English]

The Chair: Madam Gaudreau would like your team and you to provide us a list of the measures that we're taking, and we would welcome that within our binder at a time convenient.

Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

Minister, since you are now Minister of Defence, could you share with us what you carried from this experience to this new role that you play? What steps have you taken to ensure that intelligence from DND is properly disseminated to Global Affairs Canada?

Hon. Bill Blair: Actually, the relationship is between not just DND and Global Affairs, but includes, obviously, Public Safety. There are a number of different areas of government involved. I might even suggest there are whole-of-government implications for the work they're doing.

I'm briefed, as I've already mentioned to you, quite robustly and vigorously by our intelligence people, by the chief of the defence staff and by the chief of the Communications Security Establishment. We look through all those briefings with a lens about what everyone else needs to know and what we can make public in order to protect Canadians.

For example, just on the weekend, I had asked for a very robust analysis of some information. I asked CFINTCOM, the Canadian Forces Intelligence Command, to do an analysis and to produce a public-facing document so we could share information with Canadians that, frankly, Canadians needed to know, and they needed to know from a credible source. They needed to know from a trusted source. I asked them to produce that information. I released that publicly, or had them release it. I commented on it, but they released it, because I wanted that information to be made available to Canadians and to every department of government so that all of us could have the same basis of information from which decisions can be drawn.

● (1250)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Those are all my questions.

The Chair: I know people don't say it often, but you're wonderful, Madam Blaney. Thank you so much for that.

We will now head to Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Gerretsen, before we let the minister go on his way.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, did your chief of staff, Zita Astravas, read the issues management note, which was also sent to her?

Hon. Bill Blair: No. My understanding is no. I wouldn't testify for her, but I asked, and she said no.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much.

Minister, through you, Madam Chair, you have had a history, over the last two meetings you've appeared before this committee, of providing inaccurate testimony.

On June 1, you said that the issues management note was withheld from you as part of an operational decision by CSIS, which you now concede is not the case but that there was an intent that you see that issues management note. You said, in answer to a question that I posed to you, that the issues management note had not been sent to you, even though I have a redacted copy of the issues management note that clearly indicates it was sent to you. The fact that you didn't read it, the fact that it went into a big black hole, is an entirely different matter, Minister.

Minister, you seem to make a big deal about accessing a secure terminal. You cited that this would have been transmitted to a secure terminal in the deputy minister of public safety's office.

Can you confirm that your office and the deputy minister's office at which this secure terminal is located are on the 19th floor of 269 Laurier?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't know where the secure terminal is.

Mr. Cooper, if I wrote you a letter and wrote your name on the letter and then put it back in my briefcase and never told you the letter existed and never showed it to you and didn't give you access to my briefcase, I think we could assume that you didn't know that I had written you the letter.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, do you mean to tell me that you don't know where the secure terminal is on the same floor as your office, in the deputy minister's office?

Is that an answer that lends itself to confidence on the part of Canadians that you had a grip on fulfilling your responsibilities in receiving information, in this case, on a matter of high importance involving a member of Parliament who was being targeted by Beijing? Really, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, really, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper, that terminal is on the other side of the building. I do not have access to it. I do not have any access to it, and I don't know precisely where it's located because, frankly, if I knew where it was located, I might have been given access to it.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, I'm glad you've now discovered where it is.

Minister, had you not thought to go down the hall? You talk about this expectation that led to this issues management note's going into a big black hole. Had you directed your officials to bring to your attention issues management notes on matters of high importance that were addressed to you? Did you ever instruct them to bring those memos to your attention? Do you have to be told to read documents that are sent to your attention? Do you have to be told by officials before you bother to do so?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Cooper, just to be really clear, I have to be advised that there is a memo that needs to be read. In this case, I was not.

The director did not advise me. I've been in the job for two years, and in every other circumstance, the director would notify my office that he had top secret information that he needed to convey to me. He would convene a meeting that I would attend in a secure facility, and that information would be shared. That did not happen in this case.

There were a few other occasions—twice, by the way, in that month—where I was actually asked to go down to the Toronto office.

Again, that information was not shared. I have no way of asking or demanding to see a note that I don't know exists.

• (1255)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, do your staff have to tell you to read your emails? Do your staff have to tell you to check your text messages? It says right here that it was sent to you.

Minister, do you accept—

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Cooper, you're confused—

The Chair: I'm pausing.

I don't know about the intentions of any member. However, I will tell you that I am the child of immigrants, and when we're talking about the security of our country and are giving addresses and information, I question some of what we're doing right here.

I'm here on a question of privilege, chairing the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, because one of my fellow colleagues, who I might not share a political stripe with, was concerned about their safety. The Speaker of the House of Commons sent this to our committee to do this work, and I take this very seriously. You can hear it in the tremor of my voice.

I have experienced stuff in this country that I hope nobody else has to. I would just ask that we, as honourable members—and, by default of being elected, we are honourable members—be mindful as to the work we are doing and why we are doing it.

I'm going to resume this committee, but I will say that we need to remember why we're here and to not be short-sighted.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, do you accept the principle of ministerial responsibility?

Hon. Bill Blair: Absolutely.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Absolutely, and consistent with that, do you accept that the buck stops with you as minister—not your officials, not the director of CSIS, with you?

Hon. Bill Blair: I believe in responsibility, and I believe taking responsibility means fixing things that don't go well in your department, and in this case, that information was not shared and it should have been, so steps have been taken now to remedy that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You have spent this entire meeting throwing the director of CSIS under the bus, throwing your deputy minister under the bus. Everyone is responsible but you, Minister.

Minister, you failed, and you failed colossally.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Cooper, I simply disagree with your characterization. I am not throwing anyone under the bus. I'm explaining what happened and, in this case, what did not happen that should have happened.

The Chair: Members, the beep didn't happen, but the time did come up. We are going to do the last five-minute round.

For anybody who helps in the functioning of the House of Commons, we'll go about four minutes past one o'clock.

Five minutes go to you, Mr. Gerretsen, through the chair.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Allow me to read what Mr. Blair said on June 1 in the PROC meeting, because it differs wildly from the characterization the Conservatives are trying to attribute to Mr. Blair.

He said:

Allow me to clarify that the information was not shared with me. It was authorized by CSIS to be shown to me, but they determined.... I would leave that question as one that perhaps you might want to put [out] to the director. The director determined that [it] was not information the minister needed to know, so I was never notified of the existence of [the] intelligence, nor was it ever shared with me.

That's what Minister Blair actually said, despite the fact that Mr. Cooper would like to suggest that there is something else going on there.

Minister Blair, when you say, "I was authorized for it to be shown to me", but it's not something that you actually looked at, put this into context for us. How many documents are you authorized to see versus how many you actually see?

Hon. Bill Blair: It's impossible for me to give you an answer to that, unfortunately, Mr. Gerretsen, but in these circumstances, I only became aware.... Actually, Mr. Johnston showed me a document when I went and spoke to him that had my name on the address list. It was the first time I was ever aware of the existence of the document—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm sorry, but is it safe to say that you're authorized to see a lot of stuff that you don't end up seeing? Is that not a safe assessment?

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, it's stuff, but let me be really clear, because I'm sure my name gets put on a lot of things. But this is a top secret document. This is a top secret document, and it's not just a mail list. It's who is authorized to see something, but there's a difference between the director determining that the minister is authorized to see this and then taking the steps that would have been necessary to actually make that possible.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm not going to lie to you. At the last meeting we had, the characterization from the Conservatives about you was that you lost the password or you forgot a password to an email address—

Hon. Bill Blair: That's silly.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen—and that's why you didn't see it.

That's silly? Is that what you're saying?

• (1300)

Hon. Bill Blair: That's just silly.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I want to go back to something else that you talked about previously. I don't know if it was in your opening statements or was something in response to a question, but you said that you sent a letter to all MPs in 2021 about possible threats.

Can you expand on that quickly, on what the letter was about?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes. First of all, it was in response to an issue that was tabled before Parliament and, in response, I responded with a 12-page document. In that document.... I also was concerned because I was talking about foreign interference and, particularly, I wanted to be very explicit to warn my fellow parliamentarians about the threat that the People's Republic of China actually represented. In that document I actually referenced the PRC seven different times, because I thought it was really important that all parliamentarians have that understanding.

I was concerned, obviously, about foreign interference, and I think we all now have become concerned with it, but at that time, I—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You brought it to people's attention. You were trying to signal it.

Let me ask you, Minister Blair, how many MPs replied to that, or how much correspondence did you receive back as a result of that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, I actually mailed a copy to everyone, because I didn't—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You mailed a copy to every MP.

Hon. Bill Blair: Every single one—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: How many MPs replied to you?

Hon. Bill Blair: None.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: None: You sent out a letter as minister warning MPs—to all 338 MPs—and not a single one replied to you?

Hon. Bill Blair: That's correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister Blair, I want to say to you and your team that, when the committee determined who needed to come for this final round of witnesses on this question, your team was one of the first to respond. I really appreciate your availability and your efforts.

I see Madam Gaudreau's hand up.

Be very quick, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I would simply like to ask that the documents been provided to us as soon as possible.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will get those, and we've already spoken.

We would like the requested documents from you, and that would be greatly appreciated.

Go ahead, Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Further to that, Madam Chair, perhaps it would be helpful if we table with the committee the letter of December 18 that members seem to have not responded—or didn't—respond to. It would be helpful for the members to have another copy of that.

The Chair: Do we want to have the letter added to our binder?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We'll have that added in.

With that, have a great day, Minister Blair.

To all members, I will see you on Thursday. Keep well and safe.

We will have the Honourable Erin O'Toole joining us for two hours of testimony, as members have requested.

Thank you, and have a good day.

This meeting is adjourned.

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