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Chair: Mr. Ken Hardie



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• (1920)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.)): Okay, everyone, I think we'll get the formalities out of the way while the stragglers come into the room. The minister has been alarmingly flexible with his time tonight, which we appreciate, but we should get at it as soon as possible.

We'll let the minister get settled.

Substituting today, we have MP Angus for MP McPherson, Dr. Ellis for MP Seeback, MP Kazan for MP Kmiec, MP Cooper for MP Lantsman and Mr. Naqvi, of course, for Mr. Oliphant.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs): I'm substituting for Mark Holland, Mr. Chair, and David Vigneault is substituting for the commissioner of the RCMP, so nobody is here who is really here.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Yes, and I'm Anna Maria Alberghetti, so we have everybody fooled.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All right. On that note, we have Minister LeBlanc—or whoever he happens to be.

I have a few words for everybody. Let's keep answers short. Let's not keep talking over each other so that we don't make things difficult for our interpreters. Let's try to get as much ground covered as we can while we have the minister, which will be for a little less than an hour.

Let's go. You have five minutes, sir.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You're very kind, Mr. Chair.

Colleagues, good evening. Thank you for having me. Our proceedings were delayed by the vote, but I look forward to the conversation tonight. I appreciate the opportunity to appear at your committee this evening.

I'm joined by two colleagues with whom I work closely. David Vigneault, the director of CSIS, tells me he's spent more time at various parliamentary committees and public inquiries than he has at his office recently. He is always happy to be at these occasions, as am I. Sébastien Aubertin-Giguère works at the public safety department on issues of national security as well.

[Translation]

Canadian research is at the forefront of discovery and today's work is driving solutions to humanity's most pressing challenges. The evidence for this was clear during the pandemic.

Our country's research is defined by its excellence and collaborative nature. Unfortunately, it is this very openness and collaboration with international partners that can make Canada a target for foreign interference and influence.

[English]

There is no question that foreign state actors are actively targeting Canadian academic and research institutions, as well as public and private organizations, to collect sensitive personal data and scientific knowledge and gain access to technology.

The Government of Canada takes the issue of safeguarding Canada's research enterprises very seriously. To that end, we've implemented a number of initiatives in the last couple of years to encourage a research environment that is as open and collaborative as possible, one that includes the necessary safeguards.

Budget 2022 announced the creation of the research security centre at the Department of Public Safety. We will be making, over the coming weeks, significant investments in bolstering the government's ability and the security and intelligence community's ability to detect, disrupt and counter all aspects of foreign interference.

This research security centre has advisers located across Canada. The centre is the first point of contact for Canadian researchers and universities that need support protecting their research and equipping their personnel with the proper tools and awareness. That's also why, in 2021, the government implemented the national security guidelines for research partnerships, which assess all academic research partnerships with any private partner or funder to help protect their work from national security concerns.

Most recently, in January this year, we announced new eligibility criteria for grants from our federal agencies and the Canada Foundation for Innovation, through the new policy on sensitive technology research and affiliations of concern. These new rules prohibit funding for research proposals when any of the researchers are affiliated with, or in receipt of funding or in-kind contributions from, a university research institute or laboratory on the list of named research organizations.

[Translation]

Reading the publicly released documents on the National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg makes it clear that elements from a Chinese-sponsored recruitment program were involved. Your committee is better informed about this than anyone. It is well known that such programs are one way that China seeks to incentivize academics to participate in activities that exploit advancements in Canadian technologies. Through these programs, China's goals are to improve its military and intelligence capabilities, as well as its economic competitiveness, all at the expense of Canada's national interests.

[English]

The research security initiatives we've undertaken in recent years are aimed at stemming these sorts of foreign initiatives by arming Canadian research and researchers with risk awareness and tools for risk mitigation, and by removing their work from the cycle of foreign interference. Obviously, my colleagues from Public Safety and the director of CSIS can speak in more detail about these specific programs.

To conclude, the two individuals who were previously employed at the Winnipeg lab are currently under investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As the investigation is ongoing, you will understand, Mr. Chair and colleagues, that as the minister responsible for the RCMP, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to comment on any further specifics at this time.

That said, I have the impression that the questions might not be exclusively on those two individuals at the Winnipeg lab. If I'm right, I very much look forward to that conversation.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I guess we'll find out.

Mr. Cooper, the first six minutes are yours.

• (1925)

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

Minister, when was the Prime Minister first briefed about national security concerns surrounding the two scientists who turned out to be agents of Beijing at the Winnipeg lab: Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't have the specific information on when the Prime Minister was briefed on these matters.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Can you advise the committee when the former minister of public safety was first briefed?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No, I can't. I wasn't the Minister of Public Safety at the time. I have no information on that either.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You are the Minister of Public Safety now and you have ministerial responsibility. You answer not only for yourself but for your predecessors.

Can you undertake to provide those dates to the committee?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I would be happy to ask the department to determine when my predecessor may have been made aware of this.

Mr. Michael Cooper: What about the Prime Minister?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I can't speak for the Prime Minister, but I am sure somebody has taken note of your question.

Mr. Michael Cooper: What about the former minister of health?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't speak for the Minister of Health.

Mr. Michael Cooper: No, but can you undertake—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No. I don't undertake for the Minister of Health.

Mr. Michael Cooper: On March 23, 2019, PHAC received a fact-finding report that said Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng violated multiple security and intellectual property protocols and were collaborating with the Beijing regime, including the People's Liberation Army.

Why did it take three and half months—until July 5, 2019—before they were finally marched out of the Winnipeg lab, which is a level 4 lab?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I have taken note of the testimony of my colleague, the health minister, who was here a week ago. He can speak for the Public Health Agency of Canada. I can't.

Maybe the director has some information on that specific sequence for Mr. Cooper's question.

Mr. David Vigneault (Director, Canadian Security Intelligence Service): Thank you, Minister.

In my testimony last week, I provided some key dates for the engagement between CSIS and PHAC that led to PHAC hiring a private company to do the investigation. I think that sequencing has been provided to the committee.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, as of March 23, 2019, PHAC knew that these scientists were collaborating with the People's Liberation Army. This is a level 4 lab. It is supposed to be Canada's highest security lab. It deals with some of Canada's most sensitive biological secrets.

Again, why did it take three and a half months before they were finally marched out? Shouldn't they have been marched out the very next day?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I appreciate the question, Mr. Cooper, but I'm not the employer of those particular individuals. You had the health minister and officials from PHAC here. I can't speak to the sequence of the employment relationship between the Public Health Agency and those particular individuals.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Is it acceptable that there was a three-and-a-half-month gap between PHAC knowing that these scientists were connected to the People's Liberation Army and finally having them removed from what is supposed to be Canada's highest security lab?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I take the legitimacy of that question, Mr. Cooper, but I would want to understand what information these officials at PHAC had at what particular time and what they knew of that relationship.

I take your question at face value, but I think one of the interesting and innovative things is that, by making a lot of this documentation available, Canadians have had a chance to see the sequence of events. However, I'm not comfortable speaking for the Public Health Agency's employment—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, would you at least concede that what happened at the Winnipeg lab constitutes a major national security breach and a major national security failure?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think the whole government has acknowledged that within those two individuals lies an example of the kind of work that needs to be done.

In my briefings with the director and officials of the public safety department, I noted that in many respects—and the documentary evidence bears a lot of this out—the role that CSIS played with the Public Health Agency in many cases can be a best practice of how these things should—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, my time is limited.

Mark Holland testified that there were no scientists working in the Government of Canada's labs who were part of the Beijing thousand talents program. Can you confirm that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't want to revisit what Mark Holland's testimony here—

Mr. Michael Cooper: He was unequivocal in his testimony, so I'm asking you. As Minister of Public Safety, can you confirm that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: What would you like me to confirm, Mr. Cooper?

Mr. Michael Cooper: That there are no scientists working in Government of Canada labs who are part of Beijing's thousand talents program.

• (1930)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't know those details, but perhaps the director can answer that question.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Before he does—and I would like to hear his answer—I'll expand the question to also seek confirmation or clarification as to whether there are any scientists employed by the

Government of Canada who are in any way involved in PRC recruitment programs.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. David Vigneault: CSIS has been working with PHAC on these issues for a few years now. If there were any individuals engaged in any way who represented national security issues, I would be working with PHAC to make sure they have the information to take the proper measures.

I cannot confirm the specifics of our investigation, but I understand the concern raised by Mr. Cooper. I share the concern about the threat this represents, and I can tell you that it will be—

Mr. Michael Cooper: On Beijing's thousand talents program—

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, I'm sorry, but you are out of time.

We'll go now to Mr. Naqvi for six minutes.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi (Ottawa Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Minister, welcome. Thank you very much.

I will start with the director of CSIS for my opening question.

I'll build on Mr. Cooper's line of questioning around the chronology of events that took place from the moment a patent was discovered. I believe this started around October 2018, and the two Canadian scientists were fired sometime in the middle of 2019.

Mr. Vigneault, looking at the chronology, your testimony when we last met was, "my expert colleagues have told me that...it was a fairly expeditious process." Are you still of the opinion that the process followed during the investigation, the CSIS briefing and the steps that PHAC and the lab took were expeditious given the circumstances?

Mr. David Vigneault: Yes, I continue to hold the belief that it was a very expeditious process.

In August 2018, when we first engaged with PHAC to give them an insider threat briefing, they raised a concern with CSIS about the two scientists. That led us to share some information and some advice with PHAC.

They undertook their administrative review, and the results of that review were shared with CSIS. What you see in the chronology and in the documents that have been produced to the committee is that at the time of the first briefing to CSIS, we did not have a lot of information, but at the second briefing, we presented the results of our investigation. At that point, you could see that in this short period of time, we carried out a very extensive investigation that led PHAC to take quick administrative measures to protect the lab and Canadians.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: That's great. Thank you.

As we always learn, things can always be improved. I believe you were going to provide some written recommendations to this committee as to how that process could be improved.

Minister, I'll come to you. From your ministry's perspective, what lessons have been learned? What advice has been given to you on how we can improve the process when it comes to sensitive institutions like the national microbiology lab and ensure that these types of incidents do not happen again?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Naqvi, I think that question is a very important one in the sense that the Government of Canada and the security and intelligence apparatus for which we're responsible are very much focused on what lessons can be learned from this particular circumstance.

When the director, the deputy minister and I had a discussion about it last week, it struck me that if six years ago, CSIS decided to talk to governmental partners that run vulnerable institutions like the national microbiology lab—or pick your other particularly sensitive federal institution.... CSIS meets with them and gives them a threat assessment briefing or identifies potential threat vectors. The organization itself then looks at their particular personnel and particular circumstances and comes to the conclusion that there may be a vulnerability in a particular case. CSIS then works with that federal partner in detail to get the information necessary for them to make, in their judgment, the appropriate decisions. As I said, I believe there's an RCMP investigation with respect to this that's still ongoing.

In many ways, Mr. Naqvi, this is a good example of where federal security partners, like the RCMP, CSIS and border services—pick your particular security partner—should work with federal partners to help them understand this risk and help them manage what is necessary to ensure that the risk is contained or mitigated in the case that it turns out to be a real risk.

That's one of the reasons the director, my cabinet colleagues and I have been talking about potentially putting before Parliament amendments to the CSIS Act. One of the real limitations now is that when the director wants to talk to people outside the family of federal institutions, governmental institutions, he's very limited by law as to what he can say.

The threat doesn't only exist in federal institutions. It may be in provincial institutions or non-governmental research institutions. I think there's a conversation we can have about how we use some of the skill and experience at CSIS to share, in the appropriate way, with other vulnerable institutions, because we all have, I would hope, the same objective of limiting the risk to our nation's security from incidents like this particular one in Winnipeg.

• (1935)

The Chair: We have time for a short question and a short answer.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: You mentioned the modernization of the CSIS Act and the consultations you've been doing. Hopefully one of my colleagues will ask what you've heard in those conversations and what changes we can expect in potential legislation that would address this particular issue.

I think I'm out of time.

The Chair: We'll hopefully get to that answer in a subsequent question.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Nobody hopes more than I do, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm cracking the whip because I want to make sure everybody gets their fair amount of time.

Mr. Villemure, it's good to have you back with us. You're up for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here with us today.

Minister, you've been in the government for a long time now and you are, if I may put it that way, one of Mr. Trudeau's closest confidants.

I've been wondering when, in our relations with China, we became naive. Apart from what happened with the Winnipeg lab, we know that China has been active for a long time. It used to be called espionage rather than interference, perhaps. And yet for a long time, we had close relations with China and were definitely keen on developing partnerships. When specifically do you feel we were naive in this process?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you for your question.

I'd also like to thank you for your interest in matters of this kind, because it's in our country's best interest to understand threats to its national security. As I said earlier, the federal government is not alone in facing this threat. We have partners in the provinces and territories who are affected, and we've found all kinds of other institutions that may be subject to interference of this kind.

I'm also ready to believe that we're not the only country in this situation. Based on my conversations with my British and American counterparts, there is no doubt that many other western countries, like the Five Eyes and other Canadian partners, have seen a change in their relations with China. Thirty years ago, when I was a young assistant in Mr. Chrétien's cabinet, we sent trade missions to China that included all the provincial premiers. That's unlikely to happen today, precisely because of actions taken by the Chinese government.

The director has publicly stated that China is engaging in interference and he reported instances of interference that are completely unacceptable for Canada's sovereignty, and affecting our institutions—not just our democratic institutions but also our economic and security institutions. The government has publicly acknowledged this interference. It's a situation that's getting worse, and that's also true in other countries.

China's hostile actions are those of an acknowledged world economic power. That's the problem that confronts us in terms of appropriately shouldering our national security responsibilities, by which I mean recognizing that country's economic power. It's a challenge for other countries too.

I believe that we have to stop being naive. We can no longer assume that these players are always acting in good faith. It's not just China, which is only one country among others, but it comes up often in discussions with my colleagues.

● (1940)

Mr. René Villemure: We've heard a lot of testimony, including at meetings we attend on the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, which conducted its investigation into interference, and we know that Canada is not the only country affected: France and Australia were among the other targeted countries.

Is it a matter of before and after Xi Jinping, or did that not make a difference?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'm trying to come up with an answer to your question.

I am anything but an expert in international politics, and I'm not particularly knowledgeable about how these things work. The Department of Foreign Affairs probably has a more accurate view of things than mine. Nevertheless, based on discussions with my counterparts in national security about threats of foreign interference, the impression is that the situation isn't going to disappear all that soon.

I don't know what the Chinese regime's plans are, but I get the impression that there is a degree of stability missing from our governments. The predisposition of the Chinese government is therefore not about to soften, and as you put it rather well, Canada is not the only country concerned. Their approach is probably also not headed in a different direction. That's my view, but as I was saying, I'm not really a foreign policy expert.

Mr. René Villemure: To give you an idea of what we're dealing with, the Chinese Communist Party will still be in power in 50 years.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: So you're not confident that we will be too?

Mr. René Villemure: You never know; there might be some changes.

Mr. Vigneault, if we were to look at the situation retrospectively and were asked to draw a rising curve, would the arrival of Xi Jinping mark a significant change in the shape of the curve, or would it not affect it at all?

Mr. David Vigneault: Thank you for the question.

As the minister mentioned, if we were to look back to 30 years ago, we would see that there were prospects and opportunities in China as well as optimism that might have led us to believe China might join the global economic system and eventually move towards democracy. Not only that, but at the time, China's aggression towards its neighbours was perhaps somewhat different.

When Xi Jinping took over as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party at the end of 2012, it was a turning point. It's clear to us now that things have changed since 2013. At my last appearance here, I mentioned certain events, including the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the South China Sea Arbitration. Knowing what the decision would be, China totally rejected the authority of international law and decreed that it was a matter of its own interest and that it was going to decide what would happen.

We raised several points in recent years. Like many of its allies, countries like Canada rely on international law and international business standards to protect their prosperity and security. Unfortunately, under Xi Jinping, we saw the Chinese regime move in a direction that ran counter to our interests.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

Now we'll go to Mr. Angus for six minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

Many concerning and disturbing facts have come forward, and we don't have all the facts, not having been invited to read the documents that were provided.

I'm really concerned about the March 2019 incident, when Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng were implicated in a shipment of live Ebola and henipavirus on a commercial Air Canada flight. How the hell did that happen?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Angus, when I saw that reported publicly, I had a reaction similar to yours. Again, the Public Health Agency of Canada is the organization that can speak to those particular things, unless the director wants to.

I don't have any information. I had the same reaction as you, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Can we hear from CSIS then?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Perhaps the director wants to respond.

Mr. David Vigneault: The minister is right. For the specific details, I think PHAC is better placed to answer.

What I would say at the more strategic level is that the approach of the thousand talents program, the approach of the economic espionage of the PRC, is to acquire material, know-how and data that will enable them to pursue their objectives. I testified last week to the fact that there's also a very well-integrated military-civilian fusion system.

● (1945)

Mr. Charlie Angus: I get all that. What I don't get is.... Am I reading from this that they walked out with vials of Ebola and got on a plane?

When did the agency find out? Why were they not immediately arrested? How is it possible that you can get on a commercial plane with deadly viruses and carry them?

Number one, how do you get through? This is a level 4 laboratory. Was anyone fired?

Tell me what the investigation was. This is very concerning.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I certainly understand the tenor of Mr. Angus's question, but these questions are properly for the Public Health Agency of Canada. Neither the public safety department nor CSIS is dealing with these employees' actions.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I would suggest that this is a question for CSIS. I don't know; maybe you don't watch sci-fi movies like I do. If you've ever watched *12 Monkeys*, you'd know what happens to the world. You're thinking that's a crazy movie, but here I am reading down all the many things that went on. They walked out of a laboratory with live Ebola and it took another three years to fire them. They weren't charged.

How does a lab have level 4 accreditation if someone can pick up a vial of Ebola, stick it in their pocket, hop on a flight to China and give it to them?

I think all this blame on China right now is misdirected. The blame has to be that they walked out of a lab carrying very deadly viruses. If something had happened on that plane or they had wanted to do something with them, people would have been hurt.

Surely to God, CSIS investigated this. Isn't this a major threat?

Mr. David Vigneault: I think the question is absolutely legitimate. However, as I said, CSIS is not in the business of running the lab. That is why we went to them with our concerns about national security in 2018 and to share with them our expertise. This is our job. We share with them our expertise. Then they reacted by telling us about a number of issues.

I believe PHAC has testified, as the documents that have been shared with the committee demonstrate, about how those vials of ingredients were transported. There are international rules for this. The problem is the authorization. My understanding—and again, PHAC should speak to those details—is that it was not a security issue with those vials. It was an authorization issue, which speaks more to the potential espionage concerns.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You spoke to them in 2018, because we know that in 2017, the Chinese national institute filed a patent for an inhibitor for the Ebola virus that included one of the doctors as a key contributor. Was she taking research that she had done in Winnipeg and being allowed to file a patent? She got the Governor General award for innovation the next year.

Again, I'm not the brightest guy on the planet, but my red flags are going off. We know that an employee came forward and raised serious questions about this in 2018. You said you went to the lab in 2018. Was it about these two or was it just a meeting about things in general?

Mr. David Vigneault: The documents I think provide a level of clarity about this. In my testimony last week and this week, I spoke to the fact that we went to the Public Health Agency and the lab to share with them our concern about an insider threat specifically

about the type of environment they're in. It's at that point that they raised specific issues with those two individuals. We launched our investigation at that point.

In response to Mr. Naqvi, I mentioned that from that time until the moment we were able to provide very clear indicators of significant national security concerns, it was done in a fairly tight time frame.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I get that. My time's running out.

I realize that you have to be fair with people. You can't just hold them up and jail them or whatever. However, when we go back to the fact that serious virus threats were removed and carried on commercial airliners, the fact that they were still able to go back to work the next day, once it was found out, to me is a massive breach of obligation.

How do we reassure our international partners and the Canadian public that we are going to protect them from the deadly viruses out there?

The Chair: That's a question that perhaps we can get answered on Friday, because PHAC will be here. You're all invited back.

Let's go to our second round.

For five minutes or less, we have Dr. Ellis.

Mr. Stephen Ellis (Cumberland—Colchester, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Vigneault, you were here with us last week. I have some more questions around the talent and recruitment programs.

How can you reassure Canadians that no further PRC-based scientists are part of talent or recruitment programs working at government labs in Canada?

● (1950)

Mr. David Vigneault: One of the elements I've talked about is the work of this committee and the work that we've been doing with Public Safety, ISED and specifically CSIS to make sure that we talk about these issues. It's very important, because it's only through the knowledge of ourselves and other people that we'll be able to address the concerns expressed.

By definition, these approaches are covert. The PRC is trying to obfuscate their approach. The more we talk about it, the more the PRC is adapting their methods. I talked about the fact that this is a cat-and-mouse game. The better we are, the better they are changing, and they're obfuscating their approach.

The best way forward, to answer the question, would be to say that we can never rest on our laurels on this. I think it's a good thing that we were collectively able to identify these two people. My concern as the director of CSIS is that it's a relentless effort on the part of the PRC. They are using all methods to acquire technology know-how and data.

From that point of view, I'm not sure anyone can provide a level of one hundred per cent clarity on this, but from CSIS's point of view, in terms of transparency, we are absolutely focused on the issue of talent programs. That's why we've been talking, writing and publicizing about it and engaging directly with the organizations that are susceptible to being infiltrated by the talent programs.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Is it fair to say that you still have some ongoing investigations at the current time?

Mr. David Vigneault: Unfortunately, I will not be able to speak about our ongoing investigations.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Is it fair to say, Mr. Vigneault, that CSIS provides security background, but the president of PHAC has the opportunity to provide a security clearance? Is there a way to circumvent that program?

Mr. David Vigneault: The government policy is quite clear that it's the deputy head of any organization who has the authority to grant and revoke a clearance based on the security advice the deputy head receives. I mentioned last week that the Treasury Board Secretariat, which was in charge of that policy, is modernizing it as we speak.

To Mr. Naqvi's question earlier about advice, I will not be providing advice to anyone. I will just say that there will be an opportunity here, through the work of this committee, to speak to this issue. How government clearances are issued is being reviewed as we speak. I think there's an opportunity here.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Is it possible that at the time these scientists were working at the national microbiology lab, someone could have circumvented that process? The executive director, for instance, could say, "You can work at this lab without the completed work by CSIS."

Mr. David Vigneault: If I understand the question, if someone allowed a person to do work that required clearance without that person having clearance, that would be a serious violation of policy. I would say this would be, of course, of real concern.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Minister, why was a private security firm, Presidia, engaged to undertake the original investigation and not the RCMP in this particular case?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I was not the public safety minister when these decisions were made, and I don't understand the precise delineation of the authorities of the Public Health Agency.

My understanding is that they had initially... Again, the director spoke to me about this last week, Dr. Ellis. I don't want to avoid the question. The director will correct me if I'm wrong, but the Public Health Agency, of its own motion, retained a private firm to do an initial review—an administrative review, not a police investigation, obviously. That administrative review then led it to make the decisions that are properly within its purview to make. CSIS was obviously working with other partners, and the RCMP, as I think has

been confirmed, is investigating this now in a potential criminal context.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: For you, Mr.—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ellis. Your time is up.

We'll go to Madam Lalonde for five minutes.

• (1955)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I know that some of my colleagues were not here last week. I don't want to single out anyone in the room, but for clarification, maybe to frame this, I'll say that in my view, comments were made by one of my colleagues regarding... This was spoken about last week by the minister and PHAC quite extensively. They mentioned that the shipment of Ebola and Henipah was authorized and that there was no unauthorized shipment or removal of any pathogens. It actually all went through the proper process.

I know, Minister, that you were not there. This is clarification for those who were not here last week.

[*Translation*]

I'm going to ask you a question related to the one asked by my colleague Mr. Naqvi.

[*English*]

Minister LeBlanc, your department, as mentioned, recently completed public consultation on the modernization of the CSIS Act. I know that you wanted to engage.

We were looking for your feedback. What feedback did Public Safety officials receive, and when can we expect to see updated legislation introduced?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you for your question, Ms. Lalonde.

In response to your colleague's question, I wanted to point out that I became Minister of Public Safety last summer. In my initial discussions, within the department and with the director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, I was struck by the fact that the act establishing CSIS had been adopted when the late Brian Mulroney was prime minister. Forty years ago, the technology and the threats were very different.

We heard the CSIS director talk about the change of direction in China, one of a number of countries that CSIS monitors to protect our national security. I believe that this bill is an opportunity for Parliament, and that parliamentarians should pay close attention to it. We have to be sensitive to the protection of privacy and need to make sure that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is always complied with. At the same time, I think the time has come to discuss the modernization of the powers given by Parliament to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service with respect to intelligence technology and exchanges of information.

[English]

I was surprised in my conversations, for example, with the Premier of British Columbia, who, following the killing of Mr. Nijjar in his province last June, was understandably interested in having a sense of the threat landscape and what the various national security nexus points might be with respect to this incident. The director met with Premier Eby, but under the specific legislation, he was very limited in what he could share with a partner government in our federation, which is as important as the government of your province.

It struck me that if you have a partner in our federation that wants access in the right way to information about protecting their citizens in their particular province or territory... I had conversations with the Premier of Yukon on the issue of the balloons that were flying over northern Canada.

There's an opportunity for us to give CSIS, in my view, modernized authorities from a technology perspective for sharing information. Business leaders have asked for the ability to work with CSIS. The Canadian Council of Chief Executives and other organizations have advocated for the right way to share the right information. I think there's an opportunity for us to modernize an institution that in my view has served the national security interests of Canadians very well for 40 years.

I've said this to the director and I've said it publicly: I'm impressed with the remarkable work that CSIS does. Much of it, by its very nature, is not public.

You can see the vicious circle. I have a chance to work with the director and others and to see and hear about the work they're doing. It's obviously—understandably—not as public as we might like, if only to celebrate some of the successes, but there's an opportunity to give them authorities for 2024-25 and not 1988.

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Mr. Villemure for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have some more questions for you, Minister. I have only two and a half minutes, which is not very long. So if possible, please keep your answers short.

I'm getting back to the topic of our naïveté. When did the government realize that things were not right? Was it in 2019, because of the incident at the National Microbiology Laboratory in Win-

nipeg? Or was it rather because of the controversy over the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation? Could it have been because of another incident? Where was the tipping point signalling that the times and the relations had changed?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I understand the question and I've given it considerable thought, given China's pre-eminent role. For example, I could mention its election interference last spring. I agree with what Mr. Vigneault was saying about the arrival of the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, and how he restructured the Chinese government in order to extend the country's influence around the world and consolidate China's economic and military power.

It's really a good question to ask a foreign policy expert.

Mr. René Villemure: What I'd like to know is when the warning light came on for the government, of which you are a member. I know what Mr. Vigneault said because I read it. I know that after the fact, the change was blamed on Xi Jinping, but when precisely, when you were part of the government, in the circle of ministers, did the warning light come on for you?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: At the time, I was the minister of fisheries or minister of intergovernmental affairs. So I wasn't really dealing with issues of this kind. However, based on what I recollect from various conversations with my colleagues, there was no specific moment that led to a flash of insight. It was more a series of circumstances that heightened awareness, including the Two Michaels incident, with both men being held in a totally arbitrary and illegal manner, along with some other incidents. It was because of the increase in threatening and aggressive behaviour. I'm not speaking on behalf of other countries, but based on my conversations with other ministers of the interior, including the United States Secretary of Homeland Security, they were noticing the same things as we were: an increase in attempted interference, clandestine activities and the manner in which China was attempting to obtain economic information.

My impression is that it was over a specific period—

[English]

I hear a podcast. What is Charlie listening to?

The Chair: Somebody was trying to tell you that your time is up, Minister LeBlanc.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Charlie, was that the alarm that my time was up?

Mr. Charlie Angus: That was me. I was like, come on, I love my colleague, but...

The Chair: All right. Get the kids to put their phones down.

Mr. Angus, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Chair.

I'm very interested in the question of foreign interference through the use of AI and quantum computing.

We know that Congress led the way in trying to investigate the role of bot sites and Russian disinformation, which spread extremism during Canada's convoy crisis. Facebook was asked to testify. Congress identified fake sites out of Romania, Bangladesh and particularly Russia. The role of Russian disinformation in creating the chaos and deplorable conditions that we saw out of the convoy in Canada had a huge impact.

What steps are you taking as a government to deal with these issues of foreign interference through online threats, AI and deep-fakes?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Angus, it's a very good question. I certainly share the concern that you've expressed about the potential damage that this technology, in the hands of hostile actors, could reap upon Canadians.

I've worked with your former colleague, Daniel Blaikie, on some changes to the Elections Act to deal with the use of this technology in the electoral context. Imagine the impact, in a 35-day election period, of one of these deepfakes. We're all alert to what we've seen in other countries. I totally share your concern.

At my briefings with the director of CSIS a few weeks ago at CSIS headquarters, they showed me how quickly and how easily that technology can create something that would leave a huge security gap.

I know Sébastien has some specific answers to Mr. Angus' question on Russian disinformation and AI.

● (2005)

Mr. Sébastien Aubertin-Giguère (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, National and Cybersecurity, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): We know the Russians are using disinformation to sow chaos. They are sending competing information, different news and divisive information. They are very active in that space. Their technological capabilities are evolving. Now that AI is cheap and widely available, we can know for sure the Russians are going to continue to use it, as will other known powers.

It's not a simple space to counter because of the sheer volume and capacity that this will generate. At the same time, our investments are really about the integrity of the information space and making sure that audiences have the tools to discern what is real and what is not. Also, working with—

The Chair: Thank you, sir. We'll have to call the time there.

Can we impose upon you for 10 more minutes?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, I was going to meet a group of parliamentary colleagues on another issue. I wanted leave at 7:30, but the vote delayed us. A group of people have been waiting since 7:30. It's not our fault; we had these votes. They are parliamentary colleagues.

The Chair: Okay, let's do four and four.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Do I have Chong for four?

The Chair: It's Chong for four.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: What about five?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Let's do four and a half. I went to the University of Toronto with Michael. We were in the same residence for four years.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: What's one more minute?

The Chair: You're arguing and just using up your time.

Go ahead, Michael.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you are responsible for exercising leadership under the act at the national level relating to public safety—in other words, relating to national security. The act says, “The Minister shall coordinate the activities of” the RCMP, CSIS and other entities that you're responsible for and “establish strategic priorities for those entities”.

In light of the fact that two government scientists at PHAC were found to be clandestinely and corruptly participating in a PRC recruitment program and collaborating with the PLA and the PRC, I want to ask you a question. I'm not asking a question about a specific investigation, a specific intelligence assessment or a specific intelligence product produced by CSIS. I'm talking about general activities, under your direction as minister, in establishing priorities in your portfolio.

My question is, have you coordinated and established as a priority any initiatives to review or to look at—whatever you may want to call it—any reviews or any initiatives of general application to ensure there are no other Government of Canada employees clandestinely and corruptly co-operating with the PRC in areas of espionage or foreign interference? I ask that in the context of the 2022 chief science adviser's report. According to the report, there are 1,021 health scientists within the Government of Canada.

Have you established any priorities or initiatives relating to a review of general application to ensure that we don't have other government employees clandestinely and corruptly engaging in espionage or foreign interference activities in the Government of Canada?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chong, that's a very good question. The short answer would be yes, obviously, as we learn of these circumstances.

Hon. Michael Chong: Could you tell us the general nature of this initiative and what time frames we're looking at?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: As we've heard from the director and others—and not just at this committee but at other fora as well—there is a sense that there's an increasing aggressivity from some of these hostile state and non-state actors. Obviously the Government of China is one of the best examples of this sort of escalating or increasing interest.

My conversations with security officials in the Government of Canada are always about whether we're doing everything necessary to detect, disrupt and ultimately eliminate these different risks to our national security. My sense is that we are well served by the national security community, and again, I'm learning what is in the public domain.

Maybe the director could provide details, because there's some stuff that I know specifically with respect to China that we're doing, to use that example, but I don't know how much of that is in the public domain.

● (2010)

Mr. David Vigneault: The specific set of circumstances you're talking about—the infiltration and the potential recruitment or espionage activities of the PRC or others vis-à-vis the science-led research of the federal government—is not just because of the Winnipeg lab issue, but because of other cases that we know of. This has been something of importance to the government.

When the late Ian Shugart was clerk of the Privy Council, he put together a task force on research security across the government to essentially try to do exactly what you were saying needed to be done, Mr. Chong, which was to bring together security and bring together the research institutes of the federal department, these two ecosystems. They need to be talking to each other much more, because as you know, unfortunately you often have silos. The research takes place on one side, and then you have national security on the other side. Now, through the work that was led by the late clerk, we have put together procedures that are more robust.

That might be something that could be shared with the committee.

Hon. Michael Chong: Let me ask you—

The Chair: Thank you. We're now out of time, Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, you have up to five minutes—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, we will check, and if we can share, for example, what the late Ian Shugart... I'd be happy to undertake to share as much as we can on what is, I thought, a very reasonable question.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: All right. We have Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all of you for being here.

My question is on the dialogue that could be taking place between us and, let's say, Five Eyes allies or other allies to learn from this experience and see whether or not there are other ways we could ensure this doesn't happen again from the experiences of other countries. Obviously, they won't be exactly the same, but there might be advice or actions we could take based on their experiences.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Sébastien and David have a longer perspective on these issues than I would, having just arrived at this particular portfolio last summer, but the Five Eyes ministerial meet-

ings that I've been in.... They're fairly regular now, probably monthly. There's a Five Eyes in-person meeting in early September. I've travelled to the U.K. and Washington to meet my counterparts, and what strikes me is how very similar their experiences are. I had a conversation with the U.S. Homeland Security secretary, who has, I think, 260,000 employees in his department alone, about what they are doing and how they are managing the obvious risk to their national security from people who, as David said, might be compromised or who might represent a particular threat.

We certainly share the Five Eyes countries' best practices and their experiences. I was struck by how my U.K. counterpart, the Home Secretary, is facing circumstances very similar to what we talk about here around foreign interference. Some of the same countries are doing some of the same things in the U.K. that we're seeing happening here, and it struck me that maybe that's the success of this particular community of countries, which are geographically very different. They have the same democratic values, the same basic rule of law. I had not realized the extent to which there are similarities and very complementary circumstances among those five particular countries.

● (2015)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Do you have thoughts on how we can, in our own country, deal with the silo effect you have?

Mr. Vigneault, I brought up universities last week when you were here. How do we propel a meaningful dialogue forward on best practices with post-secondary institutions? Government can set policy and make sure that policy is where it needs to be in terms of government, but universities have a huge role to play in this. There are established practices that have been under way for many years at the university level that might not fit with the needs of the current moment.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: The question is very good. Modernizing the CSIS legislation is part of being a good partner to post-secondary institutions, businesses and other partners in our federation. I've encouraged the director and others to speak publicly at every opportunity they can about the work they're doing, and to talk to Canadians about the nature of these threats and citizens' resilience. These institutions are great examples, and are absolutely part of what I think can be a constructive mandate.

Peter, with respect to post-secondary education, Sébastien may have specific answers that will be more fulsome than mine.

Mr. Sébastien Aubertin-Giguère: We have a very fruitful dialogue that's been established for many years now with the universities. It's led by ISED, and Public Safety and CSIS participate. It's the perfect platform for educating academics and universities on the threat landscape. It's been a slow evolution, but we're seeing some tangible results, and universities are investing much more in the security of research.

We also have the research security centre up and running, and we have antennas of it all across Canada in large university towns. It provides good, direct access to the main universities to educate them on the threats, and it builds programs with them to better combat the threats. In this case, the more they understand the threat landscape, the more they know about the methods being used by foreign actors and the better they will be able to defend themselves. We're always there; our door is open if they want to ask questions. If they want to learn more, we have, through the centre, established these connections.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Pass on our thanks to your guests for their patience, and thank you for making the time for us tonight under unusual circumstances.

I'll note that a notice of meeting has been issued, so last Friday's panel, including PHAC, will appear this Friday. That pretty much covers the initial list we had when the motion was brought forward. If there are further witnesses proposed, they should be identified and passed on to our clerk.

With thanks to everybody for their support, the meeting is adjourned.

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