

CSIS intended for Blair to read memo on Chong, director says

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David Vigneault, Director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in Ottawa, on June 13.

JUSTIN TANG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

CSIS director David Vigneault said the spy agency deliberately sent a May, 2021, note warning about China's targeting of a Conservative MP and his relatives to then-public safety minister Bill Blair's office and intended for this information to reach the minister because it was considered of high importance.

The testimony from the head of CSIS appeared to be an effort to defend the spy agency as a Commons committee probes why Conservative foreign affairs critic Michael Chong wasn't warned of the 2021 intelligence collected by CSIS for two years.

China was targeting Mr. Chong and his family in 2021 after he spearheaded a parliamentary motion condemning human-rights atrocities by Beijing, as The Globe first reported in May.

"The Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and specifically me, shared the information with the Minister of Public Safety given the very specific directive to share such information with the minister," Mr. Vigneault told the Commons procedure and House affairs committee Tuesday. He said the information was contained in what's called an issues-management note sent in May, 2021.

Mr. Blair told the committee last week he didn't receive the note and said it would have been up to Mr. Vigneault to bring it to his attention.

"I have no doubt the minister did not receive it. His comments were very clear. But I think it is important for the committee to understand that we did share the information," Mr. Vigneault said.

He said CSIS briefs the public safety minister in two ways: either in person or by secure video conference, or second, through documents sent to the minister's attention.

Mr. Vigneault said the issues-management note is reserved for "when we see something of high importance" that needs to go up the chain.

"These notes have been created by CSIS to draw attention" to an issue for particular people, he said.

Mr. Vigneault said there was an apparent failure of the system to deliver the issues-management note to the minister. "It means the process that was in place, the support he was receiving from us or from Public Safety, did not in this case work," he said.

He said a better tool needs to be put in place to ensure “critical information” is seen by the minister.

The government has defended its failure to notify Mr. Chong two years ago by noting he was given defensive briefings on foreign interference in June, 2021. But the Conservative MP has said they were general and did not reveal that he and his relatives, who live in Hong Kong, were being targeted by China.

Mr. Vigneault said CSIS never told Mr. Chong of the targeting by China because the service was constrained in what it could tell him because of secrecy requirements.

“The limits we have to brief classified information have been clearly highlighted in the case of Mr. Chong.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last month changed the rules, and ordered CSIS to inform elected officials about all targeting of MPs. Mr. Vigneault told MPs Tuesday evening that more briefings with MPs are planned. He did not release any names of the MPs involved or specify exactly how many briefings are still to come.

Two other MPs, former Conservative leader Erin O’Toole and NDP immigration critic Jenny Kwan, have also been informed by CSIS they were targeted by Beijing – and remain targets – for their criticism of the Chinese Communist Party. Both were told in the wake of the revelations about Mr. Chong.

Last week Mr. Blair told MPs that he never received any “specific information about interference targeting any individual MP.” He also said he first learned of China’s targeting of Mr. Chong and his relatives when The Globe published the story.

He said intelligence information is brought to the attention of the minister only if the director of CSIS determines the minister needs to see it.

“The information was not shared to me. It was authorized by CSIS to be shown to me,” he said. “But the [CSIS] director determined this was not information that the minister needed to know and so I was never notified of the existence of that intelligence and nor was it ever shared with me.”

Mr. Vigneault was also asked about the apparent contradiction between former special rapporteur David Johnston's report on foreign interference that said misinformation campaigns against MPs could not be traced to a "state-sponsored source" and Mr. O'Toole's revelation to the Commons that CSIS briefed him that "my party, several members of my caucus and me were targets of misinformation and voter suppression that was orchestrated by China before and during the 2021 election."

The CSIS director said he was limited in what he could say in a public setting, but he noted that the intelligence shared with Mr. O'Toole included intelligence that is still being verified, while the information shared with Mr. Johnston was only what has been verified. He suggested that information shared with Mr. Johnston had a higher level of certainty.

In the CSIS briefing with Mr. O'Toole, "we provided all of the information we had," Mr. Vigneault said, adding that the service would be careful in sharing evidence that still needed to be "fully validated" with Mr. Johnston's fact-finding probe that would be drawing conclusions.

Stephanie Carvin, a former national security analyst and associate professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, said Mr. Vigneault's testimony is the first instance where CSIS is trying to defend its conduct in the foreign-interference controversy that has engulfed Ottawa for months.

"What the service is saying here is there was an intention to inform the minister."

Earlier Tuesday, former national-security adviser David Morrison acknowledged he read a separate July, 2021 CSIS memo flagging China's targeting of a Conservative MP and his relatives, but said he didn't brief Mr. Trudeau because he did not regard the document as a call to action.

"It was not a memorandum for action. It was a report for awareness," Mr. Morrison, now deputy minister of foreign affairs, told the committee hearing.

Mr. Trudeau and his ministers maintain that they were never informed of this targeting and only learned about it after The Globe's May 1 report, which also identified Zhao Wei as a Chinese diplomat working on the matter.

A week after this came to light, Canada announced it was expelling Mr. Zhao.

Mr. Morrison was asked why Mr. Chong was never notified of this targeting and he defended his actions, maintaining the “system did function according to the protocols that were in place back in 2021.”

He said the July, 2021 intelligence assessment by CSIS in his opinion was a “deep dive” and “not intended to spur action by me” as acting national-security and intelligence adviser.

“It was certainly not something that I would have rushed to brief up the Prime Minister on,” Mr. Morrison told MPs.

He said it was understood that others would have been taking measures as required.

Mr. Morrison told MPs that he didn’t initially read the CSIS report because he was busy coping with the evacuation from Afghanistan after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

He acknowledged that the foreign interference that Mr. Chong was subjected to “goes well over the line.”

“There was no physical threat. There was some alarming information,” Mr. Morrison said, but added that “it’s up to others in the system to determine how loud that alarm is ringing and what actions are required to be taken.”

Opposition MPs met his testimony with skepticism. Conservative MP John Nater said after listening to one of Canada’s most senior bureaucrats, he feared that Mr. Morrison had watched the British comedy *Yes Minister* and “taken that as a training guide rather than as a comedy.”

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