

Toward a foreign spy service

DAVID PRATT

Ottawa Citizen
October 29, 2010

In 1848, Lord Palmerston told the British House of Commons that England has no eternal friends and no eternal enemies, only eternal interests "and those interests it is our duty to follow."

Recently, our national interests were brought into focus when Canadian Security and Intelligence Service's watchdog, the Security and Intelligence Review Committee, raised the issue of whether Canada should have a "dedicated" foreign intelligence service.

Thirty years ago, the McDonald Commission Report led to the creation of CSIS. But the report also commented on the question of a Canadian foreign intelligence agency. The commission asked how much more security and intelligence information Canada would receive from its allies if it contributed more to the common pool. The answer was: "it is not unreasonable to suppose that the amount of intelligence available to Canada would increase."

For more than 60 years, Canada has had a close intelligence relationship with key allies including the U.S., Britain, Australia and New Zealand. It also shares intelligence with NATO allies. Our current intelligence product comes from various government departments, but the two most important agencies are CSIS for domestic security intelligence and the Communications Security Establishment for electronic communications.

Overall, Canada has been a weak sister when it comes to producing intelligence, primarily because we lack a fully developed and discrete foreign intelligence capability. Canada is the only country in the G-8 without a separate foreign intelligence agency. In the last decade, however, and largely because of our counter-terrorism efforts, CSIS has been slowly increasing its intelligence collection activities abroad. This is starting to cause more than a little angst in official Ottawa because CSIS was never intended to morph into a combined foreign and security intelligence agency. The McDonald Commission warned that if Canada ever got into the foreign intelligence business, "it would be extremely important to keep such an agency separate from the security intelligence agency."

The reason for this is simple: a bona-fide "spy" agency must sometimes violate the laws of other countries to obtain information vital to Canadian interests. The commission concluded it would be "unwise" to combine very different intelligence collection methods in a single agency. It also offered another piece of advice. It said a foreign intelligence agency should not be created "in the surreptitious fashion in which such agencies have been established in other countries." But, in fact, that appears to be what is happening.

Canada is slowly and stealthily moving in a largely ad hoc manner toward one agency combining foreign and domestic intelligence similar to "the KGB model." While CSIS bears absolutely no resemblance to the KGB, this "quiet evolution" flies in the face of the experience of many democratic countries. International practice has been to separate foreign and domestic intelligence and ensure they operate under clear and well-understood legislative mandates. Indeed, most Canadians would want to know that our spies aren't involved in political interference in the affairs of another country or engaged in paramilitary activities.

How could Canada benefit from such an agency? Today, foreign intelligence is critically important for our counter-terrorism and counter-espionage efforts, economic intelligence and how, when and where we deploy our military. Good intelligence can protect Canadian lives and Canadian jobs.

If we rely primarily on our allies for foreign intelligence, we have no way of ensuring that questions vital to our national interests are being fully addressed in the information we receive. Intelligence produced by Canadians for Canadians is an essential ingredient of good public policy. Also, if we stop being net consumers of other people's intelligence and start producing more of our own, we could get more in return -- again a benefit to Canada.

Canadians might see the establishment of a foreign intelligence agency as somehow unsavoury and alien to our national character. We should remember the words of French poet Charles Péguy who wrote: "People who insist on keeping their hands clean are likely to find themselves without hands."

David Pratt is a senior research fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.