

THE BERNIER AFFAIR: ABANDONED DOCUMENTS

Books offered insight into Afghan mission

Papers left at girlfriend's would have had classified details on key topics at NATO summit

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OTTAWA, TORONTO -- The briefing books that Maxime Bernier abandoned at his ex-girlfriend's home were designed to prepare him for a crucial NATO summit, and as such, would have offered confidential insight into the war in Afghanistan, U.S. plans for a missile shield and efforts to expand the military alliance.

These were key topics at the April summit of North Atlantic Treaty Organization leaders in Bucharest, and would have figured prominently in the briefing books for Mr. Bernier, along with analyses of the positions of other NATO allies.

Failing to recover these documents for five weeks cost Mr. Bernier his job as foreign affairs minister. The error is a major blunder, because cabinet ministers are supposed to treat confidential documents like ingots of gold.

Security officers tell cabinet ministers at the outset of their tenure that any documents taken outside the office must be in locked briefcases, which should be opened only when nobody is looking.

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"No one else can see it and no one else can know they even have it - it's that closely guarded," one federal official said. "You don't take documents like that out to read on a plane or a bus or a train."

Ministers who bring classified documents home are supposed to squirrel them away. Defence Minister Peter MacKay, for instance, had a safe installed at his house.

Even in Ottawa, behind layers of security guards and closed-circuit cameras, the penchant for secrecy is strong, and classified documents must be locked up nightly.

Security teams sweep the offices at Foreign Affairs and International Trade in the evenings. They look for classified documents left on desks and test the locks on cabinets where files are supposed to be sealed away.

Unsecured documents are confiscated, and the offending Foreign Affairs staffer is slapped with an "infraction" note marking the transgression. Too many of these will result in a staffer being sent to a refresher course on document security.

The federal government reserves its most careful scrutiny for documents marked "secret" or the very rare "top secret" records that are usually not doled out to ministers.

Security staff are supposed to keep track of all documents rated "secret" or higher that are checked out by cabinet ministers, including how long they have them. Cabinet-level documents bear serial numbers and even barcodes sometimes.

This tracking system is not an insignificant undertaking, with security officers regularly checking the location of documents.

But Michel Juneau-Katsuya, a private consultant and former agent with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, said document follow-up security procedures regularly fail, in large part because of the huge volume that must be monitored.

"We've got literally millions of documents that are sort of moved around and sometimes people cut corners," he said. "People are supposed to sign those documents, but of course who's going to do a check on the minister?"

Despite all this fuss about secrecy, several federal officials said the "secret" designation is sometimes overused for innocuous documents. They say briefing books are often circumspect texts that rarely impart stunning confidences.

"Bureaucrats are careful in their writing ... if there's a screaming secret it's not necessarily going to be in there," another official said.

The security ratings of documents within a department such as Foreign Affairs vary depending on how closely the government wants to guard the secrecy of their contents.

It is believed the NATO briefing notes Mr. Bernier left at his ex-girlfriend's house are no more sensitive than "secret."

Even though the Foreign Affairs minister is the head of the department, some individuals there have a higher security clearance. For example, the head of the department's foreign intelligence division is cleared to see more sensitive information.

Depending on exactly which documents Mr. Bernier left at his ex-girlfriend's, there may be grounds for an RCMP probe. But a Mountie spokeswoman refused to say whether the force will investigate.

LEVELS OF SECRECY

Protected/Confidential

These classifications are usually reserved for less sensitive information, such as Question Period briefing notes, and could be applied to virtually any government document.**Secret**

The lowest end of secret documents can include briefing notes to cabinet. Although more sensitive than classified documents, secret documents are not considered all that secret.

Top Secret

Security procedures become far more stringent at this level, which can include documents such as intelligence intercepts. Top Secret documents are usually kept in safes.

Top Secret, Special Access

The most sensitive documents, such as intelligence and communication intercepts, are sometimes designated "special access," and subject to even more stringent regulations.

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