

CSIS turning to natives in search of information

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Canadian spies are trying to recruit informants on a Quebec Mohawk reserve, telling their targets they're probing the national security threat posed by radical native groups and gathering intelligence on the murky, lucrative trade in contraband tobacco and online gambling.

Over the past 18 months, CSIS agents have approached several people with ties to the Kahnawá:ke Mohawk reserve south of Montreal and invited them to clandestine meetings.

According to the Mohawks who spoke to CSIS, the spies wanted information on native groups leading blockades in Ontario and were trying to assess the strength of political and religious factions within Mohawk communities. The spies said they did similar work in native communities across the country, raising the possibility that dozens of aboriginal groups are being assessed as potential threats to Canada's national security.

Former CSIS director Reid Morden said he was surprised to hear the spy agency is targeting natives. Such an initiative would have to have been approved at the ministerial level or higher, he said.

"If they want to operate in what people would say are sensitive areas like churches or universities or, for that matter, the native community, unless it's changed dramatically since I was around, and I don't think it has, the service would have had to put up to the minister, or higher, the rationale for why they wanted to do this, because it obviously has attendant political risks," Mr. Morden said.

A Mohawk graphic artist said CSIS asked him what he knew about the blockades over land disputes in the Ontario communities of Caledonia and Tyendinaga. A young chief was asked about the possibility of a violent native uprising before last year's national aboriginal day of action. A youth worker was asked to identify a young man photographed in front of a cache of weapons in a Kahnawá:ke longhouse. Each of them spoke to The Globe and Mail because they wanted to make it clear that they were not collaborating with the spy agency. They said that if the federal government wants to know what Mohawks are up to, it should engage in a nation-to-nation dialogue, not secret intelligence gathering.

"The best way to solve issues with native peoples is government to government. You don't have to send your spies after us," said Thomas Deer, 32, the graphic artist who was approached by CSIS this month. "I felt I had a civic responsibility to my community and to my nation to let people know that CSIS is doing this, that CSIS is watching native people."

CSIS said it would not comment on specific cases or operational practices.

"We do not collect information about specific communities in Canada," a spokeswoman said in an e-mail. "We interview individuals to solicit facts, views and opinions in order to become better informed on potential threats to the security of Canada."

Mr. Deer, a frequent contributor to websites that promote indigenous sovereignty, said a CSIS agent telephoned him at work on Nov. 3. The woman said he should not be afraid, but that she would like to meet with him and lay out her mandate at a Montreal café.

Two days later, after consulting with a clan elder, he declined the invitation.

"They expressed their disappointment in me not meeting them, and then they turned to being a little threatening," he said. "They said, 'We've read your writings..How do we know you're not a threat to Canada?'"

The agent then changed tactics, praising him as a level-headed person, someone to whom CSIS felt it could turn for advice, he said.

"After she tried to smooth me over she did say she was interested in talking about Ontario . 'Concerning the protests and blockades by certain people,' she said, 'we don't need to mention any names. You know who we're talking about.'"

"I think she was referring to Shawn Brant," Mr. Deer said. Mr. Deer has never met Mr. Brant, a Mohawk activist from Tyendinaga who led protests that blocked major roads and rail lines in Ontario last year. She also said she wanted to talk about the contraband tobacco trade, and guaranteed that he would leave the meeting with a smile on his face.

"I suppose that meant I would be rewarded for whatever information I gave them. Some kind of payoff," he said.

The experience was unsettling, and Mr. Deer contacted the Kahnawá:ke newspaper, The Eastern Door, to report that CSIS was poking around the community.

Mr. Deer's story is not unique.

In the spring of 2007, when tensions between natives and Ottawa were rising before the national aboriginal day of action, two other young men were contacted by CSIS, and both met with agents.

John Dee Delormier, at 26 the youngest council chief ever elected in Kahnawá:ke, was initially reluctant to talk to CSIS. But after consulting his fellow chiefs, who wanted to know what CSIS was up to, he agreed to meet an agent at a Tim Hortons in suburban Montreal.

She wanted to talk about factions in the Mohawk community, including the three longhouses that act as a kind of parallel form of government to the band council on the reserve, and about the cleavage between supporters and opponents of the band-council system. She also asked about the sectarian differences of Catholics, Protestants and those who follow native spirituality.

CSIS said they wanted to know about contraband tobacco, a subject of long-standing interest to the RCMP, and Internet gambling. Mr. Delormier estimates that two-thirds of the world's Internet gambling sites are hosted by Web servers located in Kahnawá:ke, a practice Ottawa considers illegal but has been reluctant to tackle. He refused to discuss those subjects, he said.

She also asked him whether he thought a violent native uprising was possible.

"I said I don't understand that question. I don't know why you would ask that," he said. "At that point she knew she wasn't going to get much from me and that was it. It's a little scary. Why would the intelligence agency of Canada be so interested in my community? What are they planning?"

In the same period, Katsenhakeron, a former Native Youth Movement organizer who asked to be identified by his Mohawk name, was working at the native friendship centre in Montreal when two women walked in, asked for him, and flashed CSIS identity cards. They wanted a confidential meeting, they said, and he met them later at a St. Hubert restaurant.

"They were both very attractive. I was like, man, you guys are good spies. Playing right into my libido."

They spent most of the meeting asking about threats to Canada, he said.

When they brought out a photograph, taken from the Internet, and asked him to identify a Mohawk man standing in front of more than a dozen automatic weapons and rifles, he refused to say any more.

With a report from Colin Freeze