

Fergus regrets the creation of the Border Services Agency

By Antoine Trépanier, Le Droit

October 11, 2023

Original article (in FR) [here](#)



The MP for Hull-Aylmer believes that the Canada Border Services Agency is not accountable enough. (Justin Tang, The Canadian Press/Justin Tang, The Canadian Press)

Greg Fergus, MP for Hull-Aylmer and Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons, believes that the creation of the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) in the early 2000s was "a mistake" and that the government should consider transforming it.

In a recent interview with Le Droit, Mr. Fergus stated that "[favoritism] is more prevalent in agencies than in government departments", in part "because agency executives are not subject to the same accountability system found in government departments".

The MP for the Outaouais region was responding to allegations made by Luc Sabourin,

a former public servant who blew the whistle on harassment at the CBSA in the 2010s, when he made these comments. The civil servant also denounced irregular actions in the agency's National Documents Unit, including the destruction of foreign passports and the creation of false documents. Several sources who have worked in this unit have testified to Le Droit that there has long been a "toxic" work climate and culture in this agency.

"Honestly [the situations of Luc Sabourin and other public servants], it completely changed my view of agencies," confided Mr. Fergus. The Border Services Agency has not commented on the Quebec MP's comments, but has been saying since last week that "all allegations of misconduct are taken very seriously".

In addition to the CBSA, Mr. Fergus also believes that the federal government should reflect on the future of the Canada Revenue Agency, which was also created in the early 2000s.

This interview took place before Mr. Fergus was elected Speaker of the House, a non-partisan position that requires him to remain neutral in parliamentary debates. At the time, he was Parliamentary Secretary to Treasury Board President Anita Anand. He did, however, say that he was expressing his own personal opinion.

In a new interview a few days after his election, Mr. Fergus did not back down on his comments. "What I have expressed in the past remains the same. I'm not going to deny what I've said," he said during the interview, which took place in his new West Block office.

A new entity

The CBSA was officially created in December 2003 by the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien, which wanted to bring together the customs function of the former Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA), the enforcement function of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and a section of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The Agency, which is headed by a Commissioner, reports to the Minister of Public Safety, but is not part of the department. A department is administered by a Deputy Minister who works closely with the Minister.

At the time of the agency's creation, Mr. Fergus was a government political attaché.

In an interview, he recounts that in the 1990s, the government wanted to find "efficiencies" and believed that the creation of the CBSA and the Canada Revenue Agency, in particular, would better protect the privacy of Canadians and limit abuses in information sharing within departments.

"After 20 years, almost 30 years, I've come to the conclusion that it wasn't a good thing," says Fergus.

The government has not formally committed to restructuring the CBSA, but in 2022 introduced legislation to create a review body for the agency. Bill C-20 is still before the House of Commons.

Antoine Trépanier, Le Droit

Antoine Trépanier has been a parliamentary reporter in Ottawa since 2021. Previously, he was a reporter for Radio-Canada in Ottawa and Moncton. Antoine is co-author of "Ce que j'aurais voulu dire à mes enfants", the memoirs of former Supreme Court of Canada Justice Michel Bastarache.

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