



Opening Statement before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Mario Dion – Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner

Ottawa, Ontario, May 28, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to appear as you consider the Office's submission for the 2021-2022 Main Estimates.

GOALS GOING FORWARD

As many of you were not involved in the Committee until last year, I will quickly describe the goals of my Office since its creation 14 years ago.

Our primary goal is to help regulatees, that is public office holders and Members of the House of Commons, know and follow the rules in the *Conflict of Interest Act* and the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons*.

In order to help the individuals subject to the rules, we continually improve how we communicate and engage with regulatees. This not only supports our primary goal, but also helps build trust in the Office and in turn shapes the expectations of Canadians for their elected and appointed officials. It is important that a continuous dialogue take place to avoid breaches as much as possible. There must be trust between elected and appointed officials and their advisors in the Office based on mutual respect and professionalism.

Over the years, a solid information management system has been created as it is key to the provision of consistent advice. It also improves our efficiency by not having to reinvent the wheel each time advice is sought. Our already established movement towards a digital office helped us tremendously when we moved to a virtual office in spring 2020 due to the pandemic. The process was nearly seamless for us.

Finally, we seek to build the skills and talents of our people, because the success of the Office's mission is supported by its people.

STAFF RESOURCES

We operate with a total of 51 indeterminate positions. Most of the Office's resources are dedicated to our primary goal, helping regulatees meet their obligations under the Act and Code.

These resources are not just in our Advisory and Compliance division, although that is where almost one third of our employees work, including your advisors. The Communications, Outreach and Planning division provides educational documents and develops presentations for regulatees. The Legal Services and Investigations division offers the legal opinions we rely on and, of course, conducts investigations. Finally, our Corporate Management division handles blind trusts.

In the past two years, the number of reporting public office holders has increased by 7%, including 5% in the past fiscal year alone. The Office helps them, through email and telephone—which was the case before the pandemic—as they go through their initial compliance and annual review processes, and we provide them with ongoing advice.

Requests for presentations dropped through 2020, both those we provide to regulatees and to external organizations, but requests for advice were up through the pandemic, particularly in the last two quarters. Requests for presentations have again started to slowly rise. In our proactive planning for presentations, we place greater emphasis on specific subject matters (such as recusals, outside activities, post-employment) that reflect the most common concerns for regulatees.

Over the past two years requests from the public for information have also increased, including a jump of 27% in the last fiscal year. There has been a steady interest from the media in the work of our Office. Given the restrictions placed upon me by the Act, we have worked hard to ensure we are as open and transparent as possible with both the public and media. Our approach has included more active use of Twitter to share information and updates. While some of the expansion of social media growth is attributable to the two high-profile investigations in July 2020, the change in Twitter handle in June 2020 to be “at Ethics Canada” (@EthicsCanada) also benefited the number of followers, along with 52% more tweets being sent.

INVESTIGATIONS

Since I was last before you in May 2019, I issued nine investigation reports under the Act and four under the Code. We have always been able to complete our analyses and conclusions in less than one year as I had set out to do after my appointment in 2018 and I hope you share my view that we have produced quality work each time.

Our work proceeded well during the pandemic, and at present there are no ongoing investigations under the Act. But we have been busy. In the last fiscal year, the Investigations team has worked on 62 case files, and over 100 case files since I last appeared in May 2019.

BUDGETARY REQUIREMENTS

Finally, our Office will be able to implement its mission in 2021-2022 with a budget of \$7.67 million. That is up just over \$500,000 from when I was last here regarding the Main Estimates. Last year we used it to fund three positions and maintain our IT system. Going forward, it will be used for economic revisions and to replace electronic equipment.

Hastened by the pandemic, we have adjusted human resource policies and programs to support our employees. We spent \$28,000 to support telework, but found this was offset by a decrease in other administrative costs such as printing and postage. Moving forward, employees have expressed a desire to continue to voluntarily work from home, and we are updating our policies to be as flexible as possible for them. We have also continued to nurture a positive work environment with purposeful open discussions on well-being and access to resources for those who require additional support for themselves or their families.

Our sound internal management framework will help ensure the funds are used efficiently to support our mandate. We have sufficient resources to carry out our mandate and I have complete confidence in the quality of work and the integrity of all members of the Office.

I would be pleased to answer any detailed questions you may have.