
CASE STUDY

Serving Under Suspicion: Insights of a Racialized Former Intelligence Officer on Belonging and Power

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Every morning, as I neared the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Canada principal intelligence agency, the rush of Ottawa's capital-city traffic slowly dissolved behind the tall green trees that insulated the complex. The grey building, with its long panes of green-tinted glass, shimmered subtly in the morning light. In those early years, making this daily journey filled me with pride. I saw service as a privilege, and as a refugee-turned-public servant, crossing that threshold felt like the ultimate act of giving back to Canada.

My commitment to protecting Canada remained steadfast, but my sense of belonging at CSIS did not. As the only visibly Muslim woman in the organization during the war on terror, my race, gender, and faith marked me as an outsider. Eventually, I was unjustly perceived as an insider threat, not because of my actions, but because of who I was. This experience fundamentally changed my understanding of how identity is wielded within structures of power and belonging within Canada's national security community.

My experience was not just personal: it reflected a pattern documented repeatedly across federal oversight bodies. One of the clearest examples came from the Canadian Human Rights Commission. In 2014, the CHRC conducted an Employment Equity Audit of CSIS and concluded that, despite some improvements, the Service remained less successful than comparable federal agencies in achieving equitable representation. The audit found persistent gaps in the hiring, retention, and advancement of visible minorities, especially in management and senior professional roles, and noted that representation for these groups in several occupational categories fell far below their availability in the

Canadian labour market. It also warned that CSIS needed to strengthen bias-free selection processes and embed employment equity into its human-resources systems. In 2019, the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) reported that Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities remained underrepresented at CSIS, especially in executive, middle-management, and professional roles. While general workforce representation began to match workforce availability, the most influential positions continued to show stark gaps. These findings affirmed what many racialized employees already knew: exclusion was structural, not individual.

Exclusion was sometimes blatant. In top-secret settings, every detail of your life must be disclosed, and internal security can scrutinize your finances, associations, and behavior. In my case, I was questioned about how often I prayed and why I attended Muslim community events, queries that suggested suspicion rather than objective security checks. More often, though, exclusion manifested in subtler ways: when my perspectives were labeled “biased” due to my ethnicity or faith; when colleagues’ judgments were accepted without question while mine needed validation; when mentorship predictably favored others; and when some received the benefit of the doubt after mistakes, while people like me had to continually prove our reliability. The institution appreciated my skills, but it had yet to decide whether it valued my presence. These dynamics did not define every colleague or supervisor, but they were persistent enough to shape the culture.

In 2017, a story shared with me revealed the emotional cost of these dynamics. A retired Asian Canadian man who had served CSIS for decades returned to headquarters seeking a simple apology for the racism he had endured. He did not want compensation or public attention; he wanted only acknowledgment. He was turned away at the door. I could not shake the image of him standing outside the building he once entered in service to the country. And I realized that if I stayed silent, I could one day be in his place, asking for recognition that might never come. Speaking up was no longer a choice; it became essential to preserving my integrity. When I finally named the realities I had experienced, broader institutional patterns became impossible to ignore.

My experience aligns with decades of scholarship documenting how racialized Canadians are often treated as conditional citizens, especially within institutions tied to national identity and security (Abu-Laban, 2002; Razack, 2008; Thobani, 2007). These scholars show that belonging in Canada is stratified: some enjoy unquestioned citizenship, while others must continually prove theirs. In national-security settings, these dynamics become even more pronounced. My race, gender, and faith did not operate in isolation; rather, they combined to shape how my loyalty was scrutinized and how my expertise was interpreted.

Sunera Thobani’s **Exalted Subjects** (2007) articulates this experience. She describes how Canada constructs an “exalted national”: implicitly white and unquestionably loyal. Racialized and Indigenous people are positioned outside this category, rendering their belonging conditional. Intelligence agencies

may recruit racialized employees for their cultural knowledge and language skills, yet these very identities can also trigger suspicion. Thus, belonging becomes both an asset and a liability.

This dynamic is not new. From the 1950s through the early 1990s, thousands of federal public servants, RCMP officers, and Canadian Armed Forces members were targeted in what is now remembered as the “LGBT Purge.” Driven by Cold War anxieties, national security policy presumed that LGBTQ2+ government employees posed a security threat, not because of any wrongdoing, but simply because of their identity (Kinsman and Gentile, 2010). The RCMP Security Service compiled databases of suspected homosexual employees, subjected them to surveillance, interrogations, and pseudoscientific tests, and forced many from their careers. Identity, rather than behavior, became the foundation of suspicion. This logic did not remain limited to how institutions treated their employees; it inevitably shaped how entire communities were viewed within the national-security landscape.

This perspective shapes how I view Canada’s current debate on foreign interference. The threat is real, just as the terrorism threat was real after 2001, yet the way we frame these dangers risks reviving the same patterns of suspicion that targeted Muslim communities two decades ago (Razack, 2008). After 9/11, public discourse rapidly created categories like the “moderate Muslim” and the “extremist Muslim,” casting some as acceptable and others as inherently suspect. Today, a similar pattern is emerging for Chinese Canadians: the “good diaspora citizen” is defined by vocal criticism of China, while those who do not align with dominant geopolitical narratives are viewed with suspicion. Though the details differ, the underlying logic remains the same: identity becomes a stand-in for threat.

The Foreign Interference Inquiry highlighted this danger. Justice Marie-Josée Hogue, commissioner of the inquiry, stressed that while confronting foreign interference is critical, it must not come at the cost of stigmatizing entire communities (Hogue, 2024). Such stigmatization is not only unjust but also erodes trust, ultimately empowering foreign states intent on dividing Canadians. Acknowledging insider threats and the need for rigorous screening is not in question; the challenge lies in assessing risk without turning to identity-based shortcuts that compromise analytical accuracy.

Despite these warnings, the government’s recent approach risks repeating old mistakes. The creation of a Foreign Influence Transparency Commissioner, mandated by Bill C-70, was presented as a commitment to openness, yet the appointment process has been opaque. A transparency mechanism created through non-transparent means undermines its own legitimacy. This pattern extends beyond intelligence agencies into the central machinery of government. A 2024 internal report from the Privy Council Office documented systemic racism, microaggressions, and the exclusion of Black and racialized employees from major policy and intelligence decisions. When such patterns occur at the centre of Canadian governance, they reflect structural, not isolated, issues.

Exclusion is not only harmful to racialized professionals; it is operationally limiting. Canada's security

challenges are complex and diverse. Homogeneous teams produce homogeneous thinking, and groupthink becomes a national security vulnerability. Exclusion also erodes public trust. Communities that feel profiled hesitate to collaborate with security agencies. In addition, exclusion wastes talent. Intelligence officers represent years of training, clearance, and experience. When racialized professionals leave due to stalled advancement or discriminatory cultures, Canada loses irreplaceable knowledge. Moreover, exclusion fractures Canada's national narrative. We tell the world that Canada is a multicultural democracy, but when our security institutions fail to reflect that ideal, the resulting gap becomes a vulnerability that foreign actors can exploit. To address these issues, it's imperative to consider concrete reforms: implementing transparent promotion processes and establishing robust, independent oversight mechanisms. These actionable steps are critical to ensuring our national security agencies reflect the diversity and values that are core to Canada's identity.

Looking ahead, I feel both urgency and hope. Democracies worldwide are facing similar challenges as they strive to modernize their security institutions. For years, Canada worked closely with the U.S. intelligence community. However, our relationship with the Americans has cooled, particularly in intelligence and military information-sharing. Now, Canada recognizes the need to reduce reliance on traditional allies and to cultivate a broader range of partnerships, mirroring our efforts to diversify the economy. Eventually, Canada will require its own foreign intelligence agency. We remain the only Five Eyes country without one; CSIS continues to function mainly as a domestic service, with only a few satellite offices abroad. Building a modern, resilient security posture will require a more diverse and globally capable intelligence community.

As Canada embarks on modernizing its security culture, reforms must be structural, not merely symbolic. First, institutions need true transparency in how individuals are promoted, evaluated, and trusted with responsibility. National security careers should not depend on informal networks or unspoken assumptions about who "belongs." To achieve this, specific mechanisms can be implemented to operationalize transparency and equity. For example, establishing independent panels that oversee promotion decisions and developing published criteria for evaluation can help ensure fairness. Promotion processes must be transparent, equitable, and subject to scrutiny, especially at senior levels where power is concentrated.

Second, security practices must return to foundational principles: prioritizing evidence over identity. Risk assessments should be based on behavior, not background. History, from the LGBT Purge to the war on terror, demonstrates the dangers of conflating identity with loyalty. Today's national security work demands analytical precision; identity-based assumptions undermine both accuracy and ethics.

Third, institutions need independent oversight mechanisms that go beyond the limitations of traditional review bodies. Equity and inclusion should not be relegated to internal goodwill projects. It took years for CSIS to acknowledge these shortcomings, and only recently did the organization establish an

Ombudsperson to investigate employee complaints. Effective oversight bodies must possess several key features: independence from the organizations they monitor, clear and direct reporting lines to elected officials or the public, and enforcement powers to ensure that findings are addressed. Such external mechanisms must have the authority to examine systemic patterns, address concerns without fear of reprisal, and issue public findings. Without robust oversight, even well-intentioned reforms risk being diluted or quietly abandoned.

Finally, trust with communities must be actively rebuilt. This cannot be accomplished through sporadic outreach or defensive messaging; it requires sustained engagement rooted in respect rather than suspicion. Offering examples of effective practices, policymakers can consider forming advisory councils that include representatives from diverse communities to facilitate ongoing dialogue and input. Regular consultations and community forums can serve as platforms for transparent exchanges, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. Furthermore, establishing long-term partnerships with community organizations can foster trust and collaboration. New initiatives, like the Foreign Influence Transparency Commissioner, must be transparent in their design if they hope to earn public trust.

Canada's security future depends on more than identifying threats abroad. Its success hinges on whether those within the system and the communities outside it believe that true belonging is possible. Real reform starts by recognizing exclusion as a national security issue and committing to meaningful, measurable action. To track progress in inclusion and belonging, we could implement metrics such as leadership diversity ratios, employee retention rates, and the frequency of inclusive policy revisions. Additionally, conducting regular trust and belonging surveys, both internally within security organizations and externally with community partners, can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of reforms. By establishing these indicators, policymakers can better monitor, communicate, and adjust their strategies to foster an environment where every individual can see themselves as part of a shared Canadian identity.

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