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Canada Needs Foreign Spy Agency: MP
Body could target U.S. in trade matters, he says

OTTAWA (CP) - Canada needs a foreign spy agency and the United States can't be ruled out as a potential target, says the head of a Liberal caucus panel studying the question.

Bryon Wilfert, a Toronto-area MP, noted Canada is the only G-8 country without a foreign intelligence service. "Given some of the issues that have been raised, I would say we need one. The only question is how it would be structured and where it would go." Creation of a foreign spy service, an idea often considered but always rejected by past governments, has been under study again since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Wilfert, who describes himself as an economic and political nationalist, is chairman of the Liberal caucus committee on foreign affairs and defence.

That committee will hear from Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham and Defence Minister Art Eggleton behind closed doors this weekend as part of a continuing study of intelligence matters. Wilfert hopes to report to Prime Minister Jean Chretien by the end of February and expects any recommendations to get a serious hearing. "If I didn't think we would have an impact, I wouldn't be doing it," he said.

Any move to create a foreign spy service would likely spark a fierce bureaucratic battle over which department should control the new agency. It would also require a delicate political decision on which countries would be targeted. "Obviously we can't be all things to all people," said Wilfert.

"We don't have the ability or the resources to do a kind of worldwide approach like the Americans or the British or others." But Canada can pick and choose, said Wilfert, as other middle-level powers like Australia do with their spy services. "We may decide (on) certain regions of the world that are particularly of Canadian interest."

A study more than a decade ago by Peter Russell, a University of Toronto political scientist, suggested the Western Hemisphere as the natural target area for a Canadian service. Intelligence analysts have long agreed that would mean mounting operations in the Caribbean and Latin America. The big question is whether to target the U.S., the country with the greatest political and economic impact on Canada.

Wilfert said his committee hasn't reached any conclusions, but he refused to shut the door on the idea of targeting the Americans. "I wouldn't rule it out, I wouldn't rule it in at this point," he said. "I haven't got enough information . . . I think it would be premature to exclude anything at this point."

Wilfert is not the first Liberal MP to wrestle with the question. Derek Lee, who heads an all-party Commons subcommittee on national security, has long maintained that better economic intelligence would help Canadian trade negotiators in dealing with several countries, including the United States. But Lee said Friday that most of that material could be gathered from open sources, without any need for covert operations.

He is not sure a full-fledged foreign spy service is needed, or that it is affordable. "You' ve got to have a big bad enemy - and Canada doesn' t have a lot of them to warrant spending that kind of money. I' m just not convinced we would get bang for the buck."

Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, who held the foreign affairs portfolio before last week' s cabinet shuffle, has met with the committee several times. Manley launched the debate over a foreign spy service last fall, after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service already has a limited mandate to operate overseas, and it co-operates with intelligence agencies in other countries in immigrant and refugee background checks. But CSIS is essentially a defensive service aimed at countering terrorism and espionage in Canada. It does not routinely run networks of agents abroad.

If a foreign spy service is created, the key bureaucratic question will be whether to have CSIS take on the job, give it to Foreign Affairs or develop a new, independent agency.