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Profile in Public Integrity: Robert Lafrenière

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Profile in Public Integrity:

Robert Lafrenière

Commissioner

Permanent Anti-Corruption Unit of the Province of Quebec



Robert Lafrenière is the Commissioner of Quebec's Permanent Anti-Corruption Unit (*l'Unité permanente anticorruption*, or UPAC), which he has led since its creation in 2011. In early 2016, he was appointed to a second five-year term. Prior to UPAC, Lafrenière served for two years as Deputy Minister of Quebec's Ministry of Public Safety (*ministère de la Sécurité publique du Québec*, or MSP). Earlier in his career, Lafrenière served in Quebec's provincial police force (*Sûreté du Québec*), and taught policing at the *Collège de Maisonneuve* in Montreal.

UPAC was created in 2011 as the first office of its kind in Canada. What challenges did your team face to establish this unique oversight body?

The creation of UPAC generated several challenges! I was named first commissioner in the fight against corruption in March 2011. At that moment, my main concern was to put in place an office and its administrative aspects in order to be able to fulfill the immense—but nevertheless noble—mandate that I was entrusted with, regarding the fight against corruption.

So I conceived of an original structure for this unique organization that would prevent, detect, and investigate corruption, collusion, and fraud in public affairs throughout the whole province.

At that time, I only had one employee, an administrative assistant, to get the organization off and running. Today, five years after the creation of UPAC, we have 325 employees and extraordinary operational results. But I must admit that the stress of that first year of UPAC's creation was enormous: Quebec's citizens were cynical and losing confidence in their public institutions and their directors.

Which of your office's achievements are you most proud of?

My greatest pride is certainly to see the strength of my teams in action. We see it in how they carry out their work. In fact, the power of UPAC's actions comes largely from how the different teams that make up the organization can exchange intelligence information with each other. Indeed, when we explore all of the possibilities that the law offers us, we realize that in investigating individuals for criminal infractions, we often find simultaneously, through auditing, that they have defrauded citizens of large sums of money.

Police officers and civilians work in concert and that's an invaluable advantage, since this joint work is a way of optimizing action—and I am very proud of this.

Also, I believe that because we attack the problem of corruption from three angles—prevention, inspection, and investigation—we are able to work on issues upstream. This strategic work permits us to address past issues, through investigation, address present issues, through inspection, and address future issues, through prevention, in order to ensure that cultures change and the values of integrity remain at the heart of the concerns of citizens and governments.

Earlier this year, you were granted a second 5-year mandate as head of UPAC? What are your main priorities for your second term?

In the coming years, it will be essential to find the means to hold citizens' interest in fighting against corruption and giving them back the confidence they have lost in our institutions and public administrations. It's the citizens who are our central priority; it is for them, thanks to their input (through more than 4,000 citizen reports) that we exist.

Looking toward a long-term vision, we want to pursue and intensify our existing efforts to identify integrity risks in the implementation of administrative plans in all agencies, local councils, and governmental organizations.

We want to make UPAC even more independent and become a policing body. This is an ongoing, ambitious legislative project. Acting as an independent police agency will permit UPAC to be more effective because it will facilitate certain aspects of our operations. But equally important, UPAC would obtain exclusive authority to investigate corruption, collusion, abuse of trust, and fraud by being linked to a public post.

Finally, we want to continue to improve our national and international network, since we are convinced that it is through the exchange of best practices that we can evolve, adapt, and become ever better in the services we perform for the benefit of our citizens.

What advice do you have for a city considering creating a watchdog office like yours?

First, it's important to stress that UPAC is the guard dog of Quebec. The province of Quebec consists of more than 8 million inhabitants distributed in 1,100 local councils. Our field of intervention is therefore very large, and our mandate is aimed at all of these municipalities, along with all of the departments and public organizations in Quebec (all of the public administrations in the province). Together, they grant more than 33 billion dollars in public contracts every year.

Good governance and high standards of integrity shouldn't be optional.

I am convinced that it is in the best interests of local governments, like town councils, to equip themselves with the tools to investigate and prevent corruption, targeting their gaps and weaknesses, particularly in the management, adjudication, and completion of public contracts. By reviewing these processes, we are able to identify important problems, like governmental overspending, that cost citizens a lot of money. Poorly managed public projects should be given all of our attention.

For these reasons, I believe that the initiatives aimed at surveillance, prevention, and detection are good and should be put in place; at stake is the healthy management of public goods and public business. Good governance and high standards of integrity shouldn't be optional.

What can CAPI do to support offices like yours to more effectively prevent corruption and investigate abuses?

CAPI represents an opportunity to weave connections with independent anti-corruption organizations at local and international levels. In fact, it's through exchanges, lessons taken from a diversity of experiences, learning, and innovation that we can strive to improve our own processes, strategies, and tools in order to best achieve our mission, for the benefit of a healthy democracy.

The studies and research that CAPI does will certainly be a source of motivation and inspiration, since it's also thanks to research like this that so many ideas have been born and integrated into the system, pushing organizations down new paths.