

Pablo Rodriguez faces questions about whether he misled Commons committee on Laith Marouf

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Transport Minister Pablo Rodriguez and Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities Minister Kamal Khera respond to questions from the media in Ottawa, on Nov. 9.

ADRIAN WYLD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Federal cabinet minister Pablo Rodriguez is facing questions about whether he misled a Commons committee regarding when he was told about his department's funding of an organization employing Laith

Marouf, an anti-racism consultant who tweeted derogatory remarks about “Jewish White Supremacists” and francophones.

Mr. Rodriguez – who was heritage minister at the time – testified before the Commons heritage committee in October last year that he was not informed of Mr. Marouf’s tweets until after Aug. 22, saying he first learned about them from news reports.

But an e-mail chain seen by The Globe and Mail suggests Mr. Rodriguez was told about Mr. Marouf’s comments on Aug. 17.

The e-mails were between a small group of Liberal MPs, Diversity Minister Ahmed Hussen and his then-chief of staff, Hursh Jaswal, between Aug. 17 and 19. They were also sent to Mr. Rodriguez’s personal parliamentary e-mail account with the subject line “Laith Marouf and antisemitic hate speech.”

One Aug. 17 e-mail from Mr. Jaswal to Liberal MP Anthony Housefather copies in Mr. Rodriguez, as well as Mr. Hussen and MPs Julie Dabrusin and Ya’ara Saks.

Ms. Saks, now the Mental Health and Addictions Minister, sent an e-mail on Aug. 19 to the same group, calling for ministers to act urgently. “To say that I am frustrated, disappointed and hurt to see the length of time this is taking to have an official response from a minister is an understatement and a failure by the department and the MINO [minister’s office] to act,” she wrote. “Ahmed we can do better and must – NOW.”

Mr. Housefather had repeatedly contacted the Heritage Department in July to alert it about Mr. Marouf’s tweets and demand that something be done.

Mr. Hussen had overall responsibility for the anti-racism in broadcasting contract with Mr. Marouf’s employer, the Community Media Advocacy Centre (CMAC). But records obtained via an access-to-

information request also show that starting Aug. 17 Mr. Rodriguez's then-chief of staff, John Matheson, was sending e-mails about Mr. Marouf.

The information request by Michael Geist, a University of Ottawa law professor who questions the plausibility of Mr. Rodriguez's testimony before the committee, shows that e-mails were flying between Mr. Matheson and Isabelle Mondou, the deputy minister at Canadian Heritage. One included a letter to both Mr. Rodriguez and Mr. Hussen from Shimon Koffler Fogel, the president and CEO of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, an advocacy organization, raising serious concerns.

Conservative deputy leader Melissa Lantsman has also questioned whether Mr. Rodriguez could have remained ignorant of Mr. Marouf's tweets while they were being discussed by his chief of staff and deputy minister and e-mails were being sent to him directly about Mr. Marouf, on his personal parliamentary account.

"It raises a question of ministerial accountability, on whether he was being truthful," she said.

She said that if Mr. Rodriguez misled the committee, it becomes a matter of parliamentary privilege, and she plans to raise it in the House of Commons with the Speaker.

On Oct. 21, 2022, Mr. Rodriguez appeared before the committee, which included Conservative MP Rachael Thomas and NDP MP Peter Julian, and said he first learned of Mr. Marouf's tweets when the story came out in the media, though he didn't know the exact date.

Mr. Julian then asked: "At no point were you informed between July 19 and Aug. 22, even though Minister Hussen was consulting with the department, looking at procedural next steps and confirming the organization's project funding details. Is that correct?"

Mr Rodriguez replied: "That's correct."

Mr. Rodriguez became Transport Minister in the summer cabinet shuffle. He is understood to have been in Argentina visiting family when the August, 2022, e-mails were sent. A statement from his office denied he had misled the heritage committee.

“Antisemitism is unacceptable, and we will not tolerate discrimination in any form. This has no place in Canada,” it said. “As the minister said in committee, he learned of the comments in the media. This grant was under the responsibility of then minister Hussen and the earlier discussions in the department did not involve minister Rodriguez.”

Last year The Globe reported that the Prime Minister’s Office knew about Mr. Marouf’s derogatory tweets a month before the government cancelled the \$133,000 contract.

Mr. Marouf, whose tweets also derided francophones and Black and Indigenous public figures, is a senior consultant employed by CMAC, which has also been paid more than \$500,000 for participating in CRTC proceedings.

On Aug. 22, three days after a Canadian Press story about the contract, Mr. Hussen, cancelled it. The Heritage Department then asked CMAC for its money back, but it has not yet been returned.

Mr. Marouf, whose Twitter account was previously deactivated, has been actively posting about the Israel-Hamas war from another X account, including derogatory remarks about Israel, Israelis and “Zionists.”

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