

Police State Investigation



Ethan Cox

Secretive intelligence firm with Alberta government contract spying on journalist Brandi Morin

Welund has an active contract with the Alberta government to provide “multi-issue intelligence and risk-assessment,” and has worked with various arms of the federal government

February 2 2024



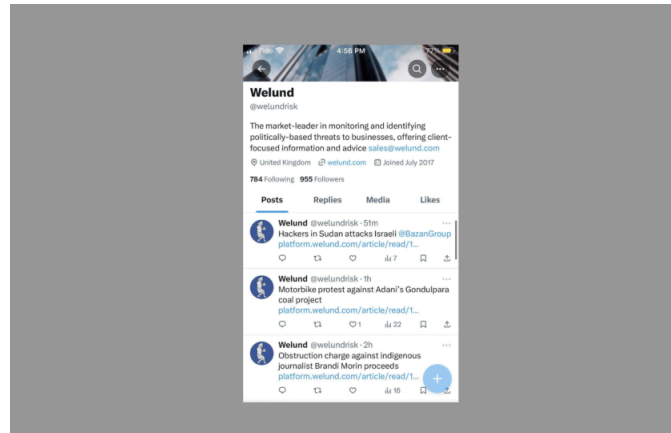
n Thursday, February 1 a strange tweet was sent from the Twitter account of Welund, a secretive multi-national surveillance company run by former law enforcement and intelligence operatives with a track record of spying on activists and public figures.

“Obstruction charge against Indigenous journalist [Brandi Morin](#) proceeds,” read the tweet, linking to an article on Welund’s intelligence platform — an article that can only be accessed by corporations, law enforcement agencies and governments who pay huge sums to access Welund’s “intelligence.”

UPDATE: [Information commissioner finds feds withheld details of relationship with private spy agency that surveilled Indigenous journalist.](#)

The government of Alberta has two publicly disclosed sole source service contracts with Welund North America Limited, a Calgary-based Canadian subsidiary of Welund that was incorporated in 2016. Both contracts are listed as being with the Ministry of Justice and the Solicitor General, and both list Edmonton as the location of the contract. One contract ran from 2018 to 2021, with the other running from

two contracts is over \$170,000.



A secretive multi-national surveillance company run by former law enforcement and intelligence operatives with a track record of spying on activists and public figures posted, then deleted, a tweet about journalist Brandi Morin.

Both contracts specify that the payments are for a “subscription service that supports government-wide multi-issue intelligence and risk-assessment capability of the Provincial Security and Intelligence Office (PSIO).”

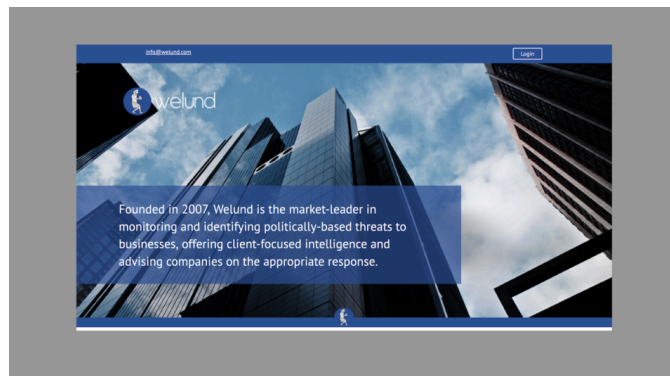
PSIO is itself a secretive organization, with no web presence or public contact. However, references in several reports, and declassified documents released as part of the work of the Public Order Emergency Commission (which looked into government response to the Trucker Convoy) show that a man named Bill McAuley is a director of PSIO, and PSIO is an arm of the Alberta government.

McAuley is a CAF veteran, with a PhD in strategic studies from the University of Calgary’s Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies. Declassified emails show he was briefing dozens of senior members of the

crossing borders and other projects across Alberta and Canada in February of 2022.

At least three arms of the federal government, including the Canada Energy Regulator, Natural Resources Canada and the National Research Council Canada, have publicly disclosed contracts with Welund or its subsidiaries in the past.

In an emailed statement, the Canada Energy Regulator told Ricochet “the CER, then NEB, has not had a contract with Welund North America Ltd since 2017.”



What the Welund main landing page looked like before it was locked down.

The National Research Council of Canada told Ricochet in an email that they had a one year contract with Welund in 2016 to provide risk assessments, but never engaged with the company regarding any individuals and never contracted with them again. Natural Resources Canada did not respond by publication time.

Requests for comment asking whether they had received any intelligence on Brandi Morin from Welund, or had any communications with Welund regarding Brandi Morin, were sent to the Alberta Ministry of Justice, the Solicitor

Intelligence Office (and Bill Morley via Fero). None of them responded by publication time.

Welund also did not respond to a request for comment sent last night, but within minutes of our request being sent the tweet referencing Brandi Morin was deleted from their Twitter feed.

Then, after we sent comment requests to the government bodies this morning, their entire site was locked down. Instead of the landing page detailing their services that previously greeted visitors, their site now leads only to a secure login portal for clients.

What visitors of the Welund site currently see.

Screenshots taken before the site went offline show that they advertised themselves as “the market-leader in monitoring and identifying politically-based threats to businesses, offering client-focused intelligence and advising companies on the appropriate response.”

international and domestic campaign groups, we assess their impact, and advise our clients about how to manage this risk.”

The site notes that their clients include law enforcement as well as industry, and “We send clients a commission in-depth reports into all of the threats to their business from activist and campaign groups.”

‘Outrageous’

“If it was a legitimate business, they wouldn’t have taken down the tweet and shut down their website and made it inaccessible to the public,” notes David Matsinhe, Director of Policy, Advocacy and Research with Amnesty International Canada. “What do they have to hide? It sounds like there’s something really nefarious behind the curtains taking place.”

Alex Neve, an adjunct professor of international human rights at both the University of Ottawa and Dalhousie, said “we have known for many years now that government and policing and intelligence agencies [in Canada] have regularly been keeping activists and journalists under surveillance simply because they are defending human rights, because they are Indigenous activists defending their land or territory, environmental activists concerned about the impact of pipelines, and also journalists who are, as we would want them to, reporting on all of the issues arising around that.”

“It’s a complete intrusion into privacy. It’s a complete disregard for the fundamental precepts of media freedom, and the right to defend human rights, and it should be stopped. This only adds so much more strength to the call that has been made right across the country for these scandalous charges against Brandi Morin to be dropped unconditionally.”

“To now learn that there is a private company that is riding that wave, and is carrying out its own wholly unaccountable investigations and surveillance of journalists, and making that information available to governments and companies who are prepared to spend enough money is outrageous,” continued Neve.

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Ties to Canadian government, industry

A [2018 investigation](#) of Welund by American investigative outlet Mother Jones found numerous connections to Canada, including a pipeline of lucrative contracts with both the federal government and major players in the fossil fuel industry like Dominion and Kinder Morgan. This work likely prompted the creation of the Canadian subsidiary, which was incorporated in 2016.

[In 2017], as Canada’s National Energy Board was evaluating Kinder Morgan’s application to build the Trans Mountain Pipeline, the agency signed a contract with Welund to monitor social media activity and provide the government with weekly updates on activist threats, according to documents obtained through a public records request.

The contract, which came just months after protesters shut down the NEB hearings on the Energy East pipeline, focused on helping the agency manage threats to “personnel, critical assets, information and services” as it prepared for upcoming public events, many of them related to the Trans Mountain project. The contract

intelligence platform, email alerts and warnings from Welund researchers, the Welund weekly banking digest, something called the “Welund Weekly Activist Overview,” and up to 50 hours of “bespoke services,” which focused on information specific to the safety and security of the agency’s staff and activities, according to the NEB. (Welund had already been providing the NEB with some form of intelligence and analysis for some time.)

Mother Jones reported at the time that Lee Williams, who had been head of security for the National Energy Board (now the Canada Energy Regulator), recommended Welund’s services to colleagues at the NRCC and in other areas of government, before departing the public service for an executive role at Welund.

Another wrinkle is that Welund’s services are offered in a format designed to thwart access to information requests. Instead of sending intelligence reports to government officials by email, they publish them on their own secure site, where government officials are able to sign in and access them. Because the documents are never in the possession of the government, they can’t be compelled to disclose them.

“In response to a public records request for specific Welund materials — including copies of the weekly activist overview — provided to the NEB as outlined in the contract,” Adam Federman wrote in the [2018 Mother Jones](#)

records in its possession.

"I even wonder whether that practice itself is illegal," added Matsinhe with Amnesty.

"Because (the intelligence report on Morin) is a government document, produced (at least in part) through public funds."

Federman notes that as of 2018 the NEB (now CER) did not have a contract with Welund. But they did have several with Falling Apple Solutions. Two CER contracts listed in the federal contracts database list start dates in 2018 for similar subscription services, worth a combined total of over \$50,000. The CER confirmed to Ricochet that they have not contracted with Falling Apple Solutions since.

Falling Apple Solutions was founded by Eppo van Weelderen, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel in the Canadian army. Falling Apple has the same Alberta address as Welund, and van Weelderen is listed as one of Welund's directors. According to the NEB, the contract with Falling Apple, a self-described engineering and project management firm, was terminated after only three months. [This is one of two listed contracts found by Ricochet. The other shows no indication that it was terminated early.] When I reached van Weelderen by phone and told him what I was writing about, he hung up.

This is consistent with business practices in the intelligence sector, where multiple subsidiary companies are often created to decrease the likelihood of journalists or others piecing together the business relationship between such a company and government, law enforcement or other clients. We've identified at

back to Welund, including Foreign Reports, Welund North America Ltd. and Falling Apple Solutions.

‘It’s a violation’

For Matsinhe, with Amnesty International, a surveillance firm collecting intelligence on a journalist looks like a clear violation of the internationally-recognized right to privacy contained in Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, among other international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Canada’s own Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s government or third parties interfering with that right. It’s illegal, it’s a violation of this international standard. There’s no question about that. There’s also freedom of expression, and press freedom, because by interfering with the journalist’s right to privacy, they’re also interfering with freedom of expression, and press freedom,” Matsinhe said.

Another screencapped Welund page providing information about the company’s clients.

harm, the government should always conduct a human rights due diligence, that's an international requirement. You can't just contract (intelligence) work to a private company without doing due diligence to ensure that possible adverse human rights impacts are mitigated or prevented, or that there are remedies in case they take place.

"So can the Alberta government produce a human rights due diligence that was undertaken before they contracted this work out? That's a legal document that should be put out in public, everybody should have access to it," Matsinhe added.

It's unclear what may have prompted Welund to prepare an intelligence report on the [court case against Brandi Morin](#), which has been denounced by most national and international media and press freedom groups, or if they are working with the Alberta government or any of their clients in the resource industry to monitor her. We don't know if this locked report is composed exclusively of open source information (social media posts, press reports, public records, etc), or also includes other forms of surveillance.

What we do know is that the Alberta government has an active contract with Welund, and would have access to the report they published.

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