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Daphne Bramham: Conservatives face ugly barrage over party's China policy

Opinion: Conservatives expected attacks for promising tougher policies on China. But during this campaign, some of it is vile and full of falsehoods

Daphne Bramham

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Kenny Chiu, Conservative Party candidate for Steveston-Richmond, at his election HQ on Tuesday, Sept. 14. PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /PNG

When MP Kenny Chiu introduced his private member's bill last April, he knew it had little chance of becoming law. Private member's bill rarely do.

But Chiu's proposal for a foreign agent registry act signalled the Conservative Party's position that Canada needs a much-tougher China policy.

The bill — [C-282](#) — would require current and former politicians and civil servants working on behalf of foreign governments to register if they're attempting to influence or change Canadian laws or policies or attempting to influence who gets government grants and contracts.

Chiu knew that it would make him an even bigger target in Steveston-Richmond East, a riding with one of the highest percentages of ethnic Chinese people in Canada.

It's a riding he'd won in 2019 by 2,747 votes.

In April, he'd been sanctioned by China for his role as deputy chair of the subcommittee on international human rights, which determined that China's treatment of Muslim-minority Uyghurs fit the United Nations' definition of

genocide,

“With the kind of regime that I’m engaging with, it would be unrealistic not to expect an attack coming from there,” Chiu said. “It’s also not the first time I’m engaging with them.”

There had been social media attacks in 2019. But Chiu said they were “more subtle,” but still enough that he was advised to increase security at his home.

This time? “The barrage and falsification, disinformation and personal attacks, it’s beyond my expectation.”

The attacks on Chiu, his party and Conservative Leader Erin O’Toole are on various social media, including WeChat, Weixin and WhatsApp.

More recent ones refer to articles in Chinese state-owned media organizations like The Global Times and Today Commercial News.



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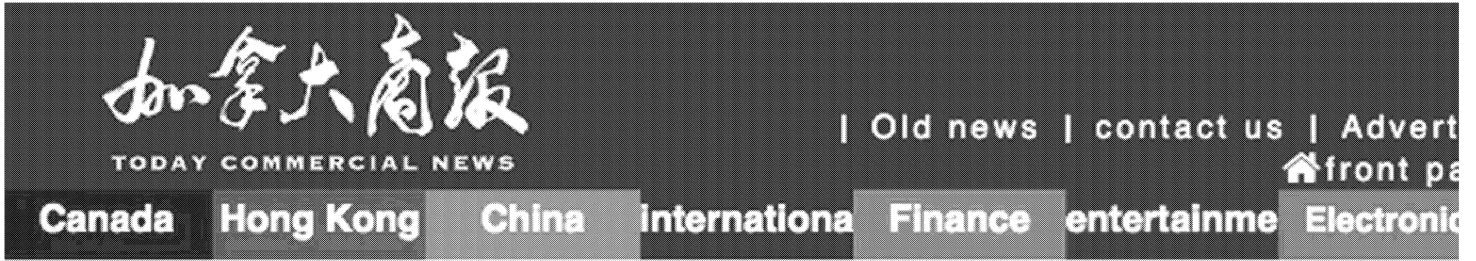
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Last week, along with a photo of O’Toole, China’s state-owned tabloid, The Global Times, published a [story](#) quoting unnamed observers saying that Conservatives are “unusually hostile” to China. It was headlined: “Canadian ‘hostile China blueprint’ caters to toxic atmosphere against Beijing amid sour ties.”

If those “hawkish” policies are put into action, they warned China will have no option but to retaliate. The only named observer — a professor at a Chinese university — said that regardless of who wins, Canada will “continue to serve as the U.S.’s toady to confront China.”

On the same day, Today Commercial News (todaycommercialnews.com) posted a [story](#) about Chiu’s bill, urging people to spread word that the bill would “suppress the Chinese community.”

That story falsely said that if enacted, the bill would deem as an agent of the Chinese government anyone who is a member of clan societies or went to events hosted by them, anyone who attends events hosted by the Chinese consulate, joins alumni association, receives any sponsorships from the Chinese government, its agencies or state-owned enterprises and companies whose executives are members of the Communist Party of China.



Canadian News



Please spread! Conservative Party Member of Parliament Zhao Jinrong proposed the "Foreign Power Registration" bill to suppress the Chinese community

It also wrongly said that anyone who had ever worked for the Chinese government or its agencies would also have to register.

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While making patently false claims, the story did include a link to the bill.

The attacks and misinformation in the more than 40 posts sent to me and translated by an independent translator repeat some or all of what's in those articles.

Some posts are vile, referring to O'Toole as "Canada's Donald Trump," and "vomit" because his surname sounds similar to the Mandarin word for it.

(Because of how his name sounds in Mandarin, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau is sometimes called "potato" or "little potato" in subtle reference to his father.)

Some posts describe the Conservatives as racist and with some reason. Over the weekend, O'Toole dumped a Toronto candidate when years' old Islamophobic tweets surfaced. But another Nova Scotia candidate who tweeted similar things more recently is being allowed to stay on.

Others disparage O'Toole, Chiu and the party as being pro-Hong Kong, anti-China and fuelling anti-Asian racism.

One long Weixin post mischaracterizes Chiu's bill saying that "every single group and many individuals within the Mainland Chinese community can be defined by this bill as an extension of the Chinese government, or an agent/assignee of the Beijing government."

The author falsely claims the Conservatives would also ban all popular social media apps widely used by Mainland Chinese including WeChat, QQ, Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Alipay.

A WeChat writer says: "China is the motherland of all Chinese Please vote for the Liberals. By showing the power of the Chinese, we could have a chance to influence the future of Canada and create a good life for all of us."

Another wrote: "It is ridiculous if the Chinese vote for an anti-China party, right? Please all vote and support the Liberals for the sake of China."

Chiu refuses to speculate whether the Chinese government or its agents are behind any of this.

"By observation, the message is the same," he said. "But I have no evidence. ... They (China and its agents) are the most experienced infiltrators. They have done it for so many years. They're not going to get caught."

In its July report on threats to the democratic process, Canada's cyber-spy agency was equally careful, describing Canada is a "lower-priority target" for countries like China, Russia and Iran.

But it warned Canada is not immune.

With so many lies and disinformation on social media, the Communications Security Establishment said Canadian voters are highly susceptible to "foreign actors" covertly creating and disseminating online disinformation aimed at undermining voter trust or increasing polarization.

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Yet it warned that the bigger threat comes from within because social media “provides a megaphone for domestic actors with many followers, such as influencers, individuals with verified accounts, or public figures.”

Free speech is a hallmark of democracy and all manner of commentary short of hate speech is tolerated including during elections.

But whether the intent of the barrage against Chiu and the Conservatives is — in CSE’s word — malign or not is an open question.

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