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Foreign interference didn't "impact" integrity of federal election, security expert tells MPs

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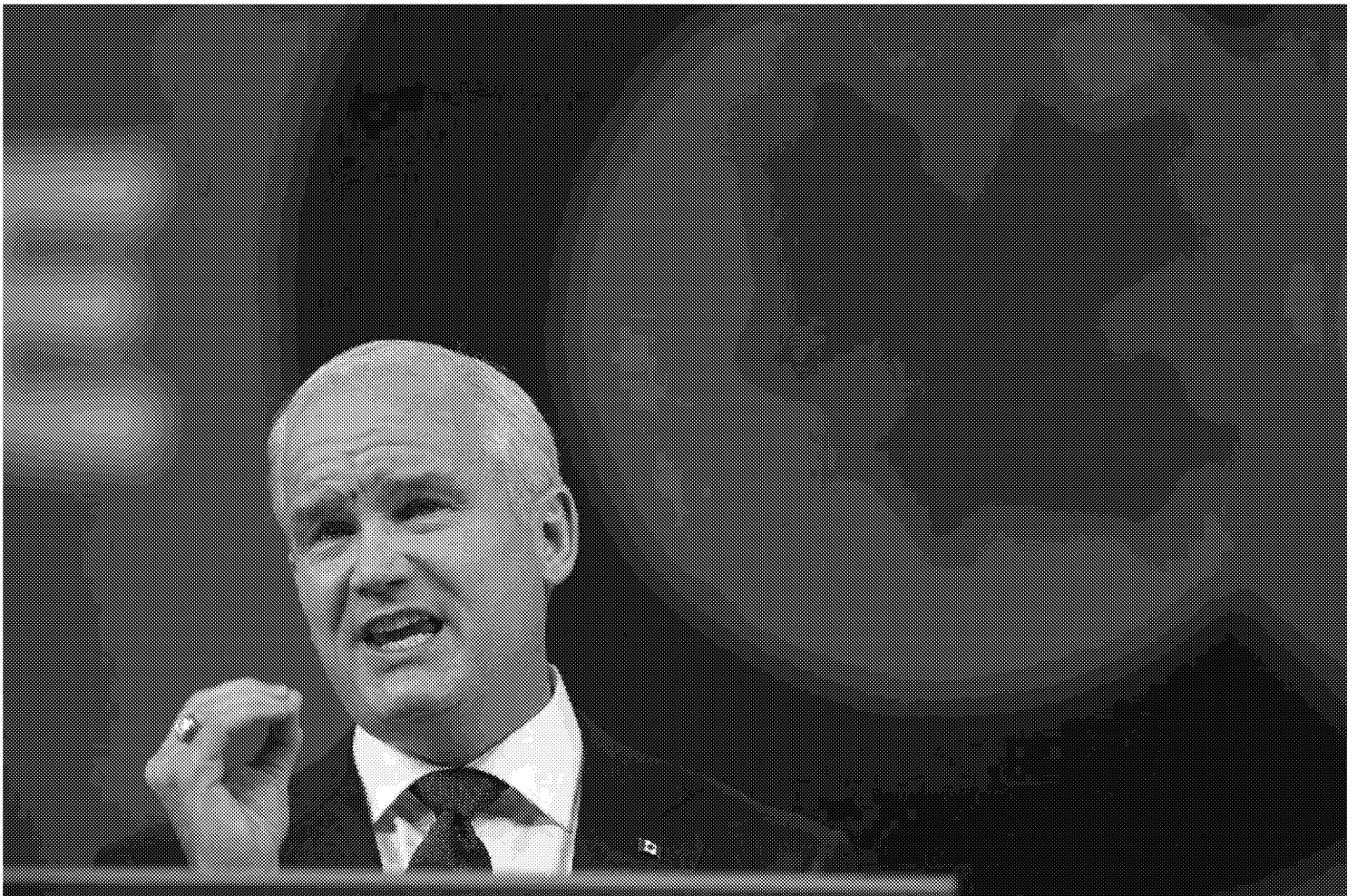
Home / Politics / Federal Politics

FEDERAL POLITICS

Foreign interference didn't "impact" integrity of federal election, security expert tells MPs

Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole has claimed that interference from China in the 2021 federal election cost his party seats.

By Irem Koca Staff Reporter



Conservative leader Erin O'Toole speaks to supporters on election night in Oshawa, Ont. on Sept. 21, 2021.

GEOFF ROBINS / AFP via GETTY IMAGES

OTTAWA—Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole's claim that interference from China in the 2021 federal election cost his party seats was challenged in testimony Tuesday at a committee studying foreign interference in Canadian elections.

"We do see activity of foreign interference or attempts of trying to influence, but not enough to have met the threshold of impacting the overall electoral integrity," Michelle Tessier, the deputy director of operations at Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), testified at the house affairs committee hearing.

Senior officials from CSIS and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) testified via video conference at the committee, which is investigating foreign threats in Canadian elections.

O'Toole, the former party leader under whom the Conservatives won the popular vote but not the election, has long insisted his party lost as many as nine seats in 2021 due to China's interference. O'Toole, the MP for Durham, did not appear before the committee on Tuesday.

A Conservative MP and member of the house affairs committee was not convinced O'Toole's claim was disproved.

"It is not a matter of speculation, it's a matter of fact. That was not in any way contradicted or denied by the testimony that we heard today," said Michael Cooper.

"There is an acknowledgment indeed that there is a very real issue of Chinese interference in Canada, along with Russia and Iran who are the biggest threats. The testimony underscored that foreign interference is happening, that it's real, that it is an issue of concern and that the Chinese Communist regime is interfering in Canadian democracy."

But a Liberal committee member said the testimony was welcome news.

"That was good to hear and gives us confidence in our systems," MP Ruby Sahota told the Star, "but we have to be proactive moving forward even if there are attempts being made to try to disrupt our system."

Tessier acknowledged that Canada's democratic process is under increasing threat, although she said she could not disclose operational details.

"We are very concerned, and we know that there is certainly a desire to target elected officials at all levels of government — municipal, provincial, federal," she told the panel of MPs.

Alia Tayyeb, deputy chief of signals intelligence with the CSE, told the committee that the first line of defence in protecting Canada's democracy is to ensure the public has accurate information to guard against misinformation.

"Certainly we do see our adversaries are very well resourced," Tayyeb said.

"They're dedicated to their strategic interests, and we do have a lot of work to do to ensure that we can catch up and that we can continue to be able to both identify and also counter the threats that they posed."

Neither security official disclosed specific data from the 2021 election, but warned attacks are increasing and growing more sophisticated.

Stéphane Perrault, chief electoral officer of Elections Canada, also testified and said the agency faces frequent cyber attacks.

In other testimony, the Commissioner of Canada Elections, a law enforcement organization, said there were 13 complaints concerning foreign interference during the last election campaign.

The committee plans to hold eight hearings and wrap up its study by the new year.

Correction — Nov. 2, 2022: *This story has been updated to reflect the fact that the Commissioner of Canada Elections, not Elections Canada, told the house affairs committee there were 13 complaints concerning foreign interference during the last federal election. The headline has also been updated to reflect statements provided to the committee.*



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