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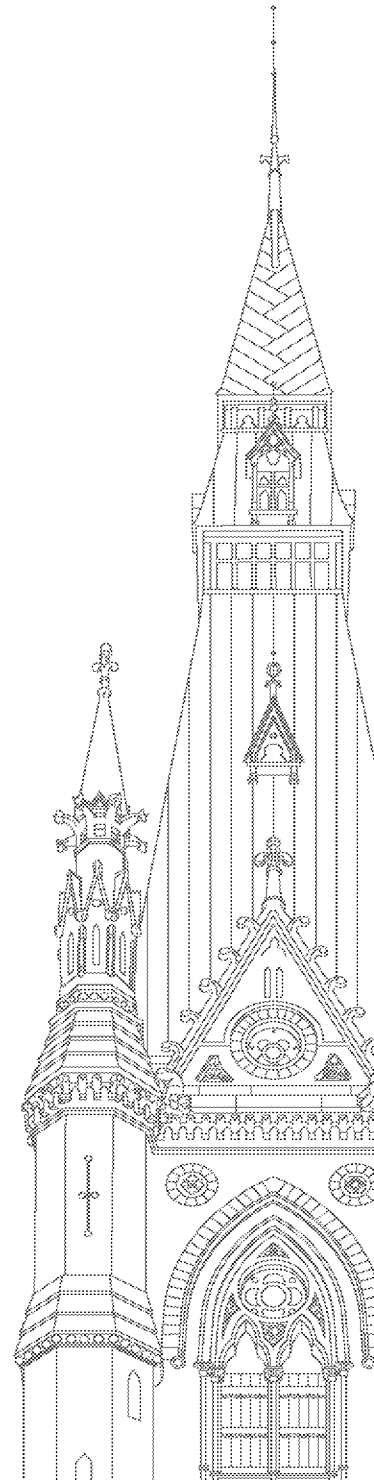
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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1205)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I want to get us on our way for our second hour. I want to start by really thanking Minister Joly and Minister LeBlanc.

I know it was really tough to get your schedules to work for you to be here today, but I want you to know that it is noted and it is appreciated by all committee members.

Minister LeBlanc, I will let you introduce the people who are with you, and we'll keep the opening comments to five minutes. For the purposes of committee members, I will remind everyone that all comments will be made through the chair. I will also remind everyone about the conversation we've been having with regard to interpretation and only one person speaking at a time. If the question is posed or the comment is made, then we want to provide adequate time for it to be responded to. I think I have demonstrated that I will always provide time for good, important conversations, since this is such an important topic that we are dealing with.

We will now start with Minister LeBlanc for five minutes.

Welcome, Minister.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities): Madam Chair, thank you.

Colleagues, thank you for your invitation. I'm obviously very happy to be here with my colleague, Mélanie Joly, but I'm accompanied in my capacity as minister responsible for democratic institutions by somebody you know well. Al Sutherland is the assistant secretary to the cabinet for the machinery of government—it's an impressive title—and democratic institutions.

[Translation]

Working to preserve the integrity of our elections is essential to maintaining the legitimacy and credibility of Canada's democratic processes.

[English]

Foreign interference in Canada's elections is obviously not acceptable, but let me be very clear that Canada's elections are free and fair, and the non-partisan national security experts who oversee threats to elections are confident in the results of these elections.

As a world leader in various economic, technological and research sectors, Canada has always been subject to foreign interference activities.

[Translation]

That's why, at a time when many democracies have already faced foreign interference, it remains important for Canada to prepare for this evolving threat. We have done so through a wide range of innovative measures to combat these complex threats.

Canada led the way among its international partners by developing the plan to protect Canada's democracy, announced in early 2019. This strategy has four distinct areas of action.

[English]

The first part of our plan, as you know, focuses on citizen resilience through preparedness and prevention, by enhancing digital media literacy. Since 2000 we have reached more than 12 million Canadians under the digital citizen initiative, through projects that help people to recognize fraud, disinformation and manipulation when they see them online.

The second part of our plan focuses on improving our government's ability to identify threats, emerging tactics and vulnerabilities in our systems. Under these measures, we've worked for the first time to provide security clearance to representatives from each of Canada's major political parties to make sure they are able to protect their organizations, their candidates and ultimately our democracy.

As I have said in the House of Commons a number of times, we also created the critical election incident public protocol to make sure a non-partisan panel is in place during the caretaker period, the election period, to inform Canadians quickly and effectively of any incidents that threaten Canada's ability to have a free and fair election. We established the security and intelligence threats to elections task force to support the work of this important panel.

[Translation]

Third, as a global challenge, the fight against foreign interference requires international cooperation. In this regard, Canada has also been active internationally, leading the creation of the G7 rapid response mechanism, which established a coordinated approach with our allies to respond to foreign threats to democracy.

The fourth point in our plan combines awareness and action by increasing transparency, authenticity and integrity on social media platforms. In May 2019, we released Canada's declaration on electoral integrity online. The declaration was updated in June 2021 and is supported by many platforms, including Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, Google, TikTok, YouTube and LinkedIn.

[English]

Canada's plan acknowledges that foreign interference and disinformation challenges are too complex and too relentless for any one actor to tackle them alone.

Observers routinely commend Canada for the high levels of integrity in our federal elections. In no small part, this is a result of Canada's electoral law, including amendments passed through the Elections Modernization Act, which took into account, of course, colleagues, recommendations made by this committee in previous Parliaments.

The result is that our law, including our political financing regime and Elections Canada itself, is regarded as one of the most thorough in the world.

[Translation]

As a government, we are continuing to improve the measures put in place, because the threats to our democracy continue to evolve, and Canada must be prepared.

This concludes my remarks, Madam Chair.

Thank you again.

The Chair: It's us who thank you for being with us today.

Ms. Joly, you have five minutes.

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Madam Chair and members of the committee, it's a pleasure to be before you today. I want to thank you for the invitation to discuss foreign interference and, in particular, for examining the matter of foreign interference in Canada's federal elections.

We all know the world is at a critical time. The world's power structures are shifting. Democratic systems are under threat and, in some cases, under attack. We know Canada is not immune, particularly given the realities of our interconnected world. The reality is that we can't take anything for granted, and that includes being vigilant in protecting our own democracy.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Reports of Chinese foreign interference in the 2019 election are deeply troubling. Obviously, we take these allegations very seriously. I will talk more about China in a moment.

I would like to begin by saying that protecting our democracy from any form of interference is a priority for our government. We will never accept foreign interference in our democracy in any form, period.

It is our duty to ensure that our elections are always legitimate, credible and reliable. That's why we have adopted a government-wide strategy to address threats to Canada's electoral integrity and sovereignty. In fact, my colleague Mr. LeBlanc talked about this a little earlier. It's a simple, clear and impartial process for informing Canadians of any threat to an election after it has been called. A federal group called the "P5", made up of experts in national security, foreign affairs, elections and law, is tasked with this process.

In addition, a working group on security and intelligence threats to elections supports the "P5". This is another important part of this plan.

We have also put in place Canada's rapid response mechanism, or RRM, which is responsible for identifying signs of foreign interference and coordinating information sharing and response within the G7 on foreign threats to democracy.

During the last federal election, Canada's rapid response mechanism group organized training on foreign interference for departments and agencies. It also provided briefings on threats to senior government officials, political parties and the media.

I would now like to talk about the disinformation and interference campaigns led by Russia and China.

[English]

While Canada has not been a primary target of Russian disinformation in recent years, Russia has long used disinformation and propaganda to advance its objectives. This is well known, as are the Kremlin's tactics of creating polarization narratives aimed at undermining trust and social cohesion in the west. Canada continues to work with international partners to monitor and share information on the tactics used by Russia, particularly related to disinformation campaigns.

In recognition of the importance of this work, this past summer the Prime Minister announced the expansion of the rapid response mechanism to include a dedicated team to focus on Russian disinformation as part of Canada's strategy in eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

China shows growing sophistication in carrying out online campaigns to influence Canadians and people worldwide. Beijing can quickly saturate social media platforms with messaging, but it is also nimble enough to microtarget anglophone, francophone and Chinese-speaking audiences in Canada. China is considered by some as being best able to spread its influence online now that social media companies have curtailed Russian-aligned accounts and activities in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine.

Last month I raised the matter of alleged Chinese foreign interference with my Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, on the margins of the G20. I said to him directly that Canada will not tolerate any form of foreign interference in Canada.

As I said recently when launching Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, we will do more to tackle foreign interference and disinformation. The strategy recognizes China's growing influence globally. It states that domestically, Canada's approach to China will include strengthening the defence of Canadian infrastructure and democracy against foreign interference. That includes interference in our elections.

Let me stop here for now, Madam Chair. I'll be pleased to take your questions.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you so much.

We will start with six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

[Translation]

It will then be Ms. Gaudreau's turn, then Ms. Blaney.

[English]

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and through you, thank you to the ministers for being here.

Ministers Joly and LeBlanc, were you briefed earlier this year, or did you receive memos, about interference by Beijing in the 2019 election?

• (1215)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, through you to Mr. Cooper, yes, I received updates, as have a number of implicated ministers, from our security and intelligence officials, as part of the routine responsibilities. I have participated in some of these discussions. It's not frequent, but certainly it's something I would be updated on by security and intelligence officials in the government.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: As for foreign interference in the 2019 elections, I did not have any information in that regard. I think you've heard the Prime Minister about this. He had no information in that regard either. Jody Thomas of the NSIA specifically stated before all of you that "we've not seen money going to 11 candidates, period".

That would be my answer to the—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Through you, Madam Chair, to Minister LeBlanc, you indicated you have been briefed more than once. Can you elaborate on what you know and what you were briefed about, specifically with respect to interference in the 2019 election by Beijing?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, as the Prime Minister indicated in the House of Commons, our ability to discuss publicly the details of those national security briefings is understandably limited. That was true of predecessor governments, including the Conservative government that was in office before us.

Again, the Prime Minister, in his answers in question period and in various media interviews that I have seen—

Mr. Michael Cooper: My time is limited, Minister. I'll put the question this way: Did Beijing interfere in the 2019 and 2021 elections, yes or no?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I think that both Mélanie Joly and I have said that the Chinese government regularly attempts to interfere in various aspects of Canadian society. Elections would not be excluded from some of their efforts. The good news is that we have a robust security apparatus that follows these threats, that intervenes.

To me, the most reassuring news is that the experts who are empowered to do this work have confirmed that none of these attempts to interfere have constituted, in any way, something that would have had an adverse effect on the election results and the election outcomes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: On the overall—

Hon. Mélanie Joly: If I can add to that, you heard Jody Thomas about this and you heard the Prime Minister. I think my deputy minister David Morrison could maybe add to that.

Mr. David Morrison (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): I'll happily add to it.

Before I was deputy minister, I was acting national security adviser through the most recent election. I was also acting national security adviser in the period after the 2019 election. There is, as has already been said, a kind of baseline level of foreign interference or attempted foreign interference at all times that we need to be vigilant on.

My experience as national security adviser in those key periods was that there was no spike in foreign interference, that I'm aware of, in either the 2019 election or the 2021 election.

Mr. Michael Cooper: In the production we received from PCO, there is a report entitled “Daily Foreign Intelligence Brief, 21 February, 2020”. It speaks to a subtle but effective interference network. It says, “Investigations into activities linked to the Canadian federal election in 2019, reveal an active foreign interference...network”.

Can you speak to that foreign interference network?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I am not familiar with that specific report, but I certainly take at face value what our colleague has quoted. I think it just confirms what the deputy minister of foreign affairs has just said: that there is, at various times, an active effort, not only from that country.

As Mélanie Joly just said, there are other actors that are also involved in this space, but the government has taken the necessary steps to protect democratic institutions, and we believe that has been successful.

• (1220)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Are you aware of an active foreign interference network in the 2019 election by Beijing?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I think, as I said in my comments—

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's tough to believe you wouldn't be.

An hon. member: Point of order—

The Chair: This is what's not fun. All that happens is we end up having points of order and we take away time, which means there's less time for questions. Whenever there is an action, there is a reaction. I suggest, as per my opening comments, that one person speak at a time.

Mr. Cooper, as I've demonstrated in the past, if you have a good line of questions, then I'll give you a bit of time. I think you want to ask good questions and make comments.

We've invited these ministers to be here because they have insights to share. We can let him respond. Is that okay? That's excellent.

Minister, you have the floor.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, through you, as we've said consistently—and the Prime Minister has repeated—we are aware, as I think Mr. Morrison said, of a baseline level of attempts from a number of foreign actors to interfere not only in the electoral context but in other economic contexts as well. We're not naive about the threat this represents.

The good news, Madam Chair, is that the government has taken robust and unique steps that didn't exist when previous governments were in office to combat exactly this legitimate concern of Mr. Cooper's that's shared by the government.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, we'll have your final question.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, I just note that it was specifically an active foreign interference network as it pertains to the CCP.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Well, you've asked me the question regarding any form of information I would have regarding the 2019 election or even the 2021 election, and I can confirm to you that I have no information regarding this particular issue.

Of course, my comment regarding foreign interference in general is that we have a principled approach. We don't tolerate it, period.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Turnbull, six minutes go to you.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks to our ministers and their officials for being here today with us on this important topic. We all approach it with a great degree of concern and a sense of duty and responsibility.

Minister LeBlanc, maybe I'll start with you, with a few quick questions.

Did foreign election interference start becoming a concern in 2019?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, Mr. Turnbull raises a question. The government took positive steps after assuming office, as we've indicated, with respect to the 2019 general election. I don't have information that exists of security briefings that would have covered previous periods, but it would be naive to think that this foreign interference suddenly started after 2015.

The tactics, as colleagues have said, are more sophisticated. Some people...I think my colleague Madame Joly indicated they get emboldened, some actors, but I don't think this is a new phenomenon.

Maybe she wants to add something.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I think the difference over the years in terms of foreign interference is actually the question of disinformation online, and what happened over the last year is definitely the fact that we all use social media and all of our citizens are on social media, so how we tackle the issue of disinformation online is extremely important for our democracy, but it is an issue that we are not facing alone. We are facing this issue as our allies and partners are facing that same issue—definitely the Americans and definitely the Europeans and other democracies in the world.

Bearing that in mind, what we decided to do recently, on the margins of the General Assembly of the UN, is to launch a first disinformation online.... We will work to make a declaration on this issue, along with the Netherlands. We hope we can come up with this new declaration, which would be creating the foundation for international law when it comes to disinformation online.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that.

Minister LeBlanc, we've heard assertions from time to time in the House and in this committee that somehow the government has neglected to implement measures to prevent foreign interference in our elections. I think that's contrary to the truth, as far as I understand.

Do you have any documentation or perhaps an overview or an outline of the progress we've made since 2015?

• (1225)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, Mr. Turnbull's question is a very good one. I have before me something the Privy Council Office has prepared. It's on measures to combat foreign interference in elections. It's a 10-year review. It summarizes what I think are many of the innovative and effective actions our government has taken, starting in the 2016-17 period.

It also shows what existed before 2016, when, as we've said, the threats were somehow not present. There was the establishment of the rapid response mechanism, which came out of the G7 summit, for example, in Charlevoix; and some of the work that was done around the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace; and obviously the "protecting democracy" plan of 2019, which I referred to earlier, around citizen preparedness, and setting up a panel—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. LeBlanc, I apologize—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: If it's okay, Madam Chair—I just asked Mr. Sutherland—I'd be happy to make available to the committee this particular chart. I'll make sure, obviously, that we have it in both official languages, and I will follow up and table that with the chair. Happily, I think it sets out a rather compelling answer to your very good question.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, and I appreciate that. If that could be tabled with the committee, that would be very helpful.

We got a package of documents, as well, Minister LeBlanc, from NSIA. It's the branch package, and on page 9—and I want to read this into the record because I think it's pretty important—with regard to political parties, it says this:

In accordance with the Protocol, cleared members of the political parties also received routine threat updates. We received positive feedback by the parties on this experience, most notably from the [Conservative Party of Canada].

It actually says "CPC". What's interesting about this is that I keep hearing this narrative coming from the official opposition that somehow this is a revelation to them, that at this moment in time they're concerned about election interference, when in fact it seems as though they've been briefed on these credible threats from time to time, quite regularly.

Could either of the ministers speak to that and how regularly that happens?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Very briefly, Madam Chair, I can speak to exactly what Mr. Turnbull said. We thought it was important for major political parties to be security-cleared and to have access to this information. This is about protecting our democracy and ensuring that important political institutions in our democracy, like the Conservative Party of Canada, have access to this information and can take the necessary steps to protect their own infrastructure in the political space.

It's also important that the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, which includes members, obviously, of this House and of the other place, also be briefed by intelligence officials, and we think it's important that they, too, be kept up to date as part of ensuring that everybody has a line of sight on the very robust measures, Mr. Turnbull, that you referred to that our government is taking.

Perhaps Mélanie has a brief comment.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: All political parties in the last election were briefed on this issue. Maybe David Morrison, my DM—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but when you hear the beep, it means time's up. It's really awkward for me to have to do this. I would appreciate it if we could keep things moving.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for helping us shed light on this. The people listening to us are particularly concerned about disinformation, cyber-attacks and all that.

In the 2019 documents we received from the Privy Council Office, there are various summaries that I would like more explanation on. One is the issue of the panel that was formed. In 2019, it was reported that the expert panel that conducted monitoring activities on a weekly basis did not observe any activity that met the threshold for a public announcement or for the activity to affect Canada's electoral capacity.

I want to focus on the notion of a threshold. I'd like you to clarify that for me. What does it take for a public announcement to be necessary?

• (1230)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I would first like to make a few comments. I know that Ms. Joly will also want to add her comments.

Ms. Gaudreau has just raised an important issue. As we said, there are always people who try to interfere, intervene or meddle in elections. During an election period, the expert panel, chaired by the Clerk of the Privy Council and composed of senior officials of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other departments and agencies with security responsibilities, has the discretionary power to publicly warn Canadians of interference activities if it deems those activities to reach a certain threshold where it becomes in the public interest to do so. That decision is based entirely on the judgment of that panel. Understandably, in an election context, it isn't up to a minister of an outgoing government to make that kind of decision. We deliberately gave that responsibility to that panel.

These experts assess a series of factors. For example, they determine the reliability of the information, assess the potential for multi-constituency impact and determine whether the activity in question is regional or national. They assess a series of factors, independently of government, and decide whether Canadians should be notified of interference activities.

As we know very well, the good news is that this situation hasn't happened in the last two elections.

Ms. Joly, would you like to add anything in response to Ms. Gaudreau's question?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Certainly.

I'd like to thank Ms. Gaudreau for her question.

We all care about protecting our democracy. It was important for us to set up this system.

Basically, every time there's an election, it's no longer the cabinet and the duly elected government that intervenes. It's the public service that provides the transition during elections.

At the time, the process was put in place because there was a real concern about disinformation online. That's why I mentioned earlier, in response to a question from my colleague Mr. Turnbull, what disinformation campaigns could influence the vote of citizens.

As for the threshold issue, it's left to the discretion of the public service. They are able to make informed decisions based on information from security agencies and publicly available information.

Mr. Morrison, would you like to add anything?

Mr. David Morrison: Yes, thank you.

As I said before, I was on the panel during the 2021 election, but not during the 2019 election. In a way, we were lucky.

[*English*]

As I said before, we didn't see a spike, so the issue of the thresholds didn't really come into play.

We certainly had been briefed, and we had done scenario playing. However, in both elections, the panel functioned as designed and didn't have to confront the circumstances of a threshold.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Since I have only one minute left, I'll move quickly. In fact, I'm going to explore the task force a little more.

We were also provided with a summary of lessons learned. We all know that here we have the privilege of having a paper ballot, which helps prevent any kind of situation that could influence the outcome of an election. There is also a lot of talk about transparency and awareness.

I understand that, since 2019, the number of reported foreign interference cases hasn't increased, but what lessons have been learned and what recommendations have been offered? Things are still evolving at a rapid pace when it comes to disinformation and cyber-attacks.

I think you have 30 seconds left to answer my question.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I can give you my point of view, and then my colleague can respond.

In terms of foreign affairs, disinformation is really a concern within the G7, in particular. That's why we set up Canada's rapid response mechanism, or RRM. It's used by other G7 allies. This mechanism checks for trends in online disinformation. I think the issue of online disinformation is a contemporary issue that we need to address. That's why we decided to show leadership and work with the Netherlands on this issue.

• (1235)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I'd like to add something to Ms. Joly's response.

Ms. Gaudreau is absolutely right that we need to learn from this. These are new experiences for the government's national security apparatus.

The protocol requires an independent review by an expert. That's why, following the 2019 election, I chose former deputy minister Jim Judd to conduct this review. He submitted his report to the Prime Minister and me. We then forwarded that report to the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, which publicly released a version of the lessons learned.

The good news is that the same exercise was initiated after the 2021 election. I have already mandated Morris Rosenberg, a former deputy minister in the Departments of Justice and Foreign Affairs, among others, to do this work. In fact, I'm meeting with him on Friday of this week. If possible, we will share his findings with you, as we should.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and I thank all the witnesses for being here today.

One of the things that's very concerning about the story about the 11 candidates is the fact that it has created a great deal of distrust across Canada in our systems, and that can never be underestimated. I think creating a sense of assurance that the systems work is very important, and I would like to see a bit more of that, because people see these things and they of course have a reaction.

Could you explain what the rationale is for not releasing the names of the individuals who were targeted by foreign interference?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: First and foremost, thank you, Rachel, for your question. I think it's really important that we all agree that this should not be a question that is politicized, because at the end of the day, like you mentioned, it's about the trust of Canadians in our institutions and in democracy.

As I mentioned, we don't have information about these 11 candidates. The Prime Minister has mentioned it, his national security adviser.... I, the foreign minister, don't have any information about this.

Of course, we take very seriously this media story, but at the same time, I'm giving you under oath the information I have, which is that I don't have any form of information on this.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: In terms of process, were the candidates aware that they were targeted? Do you know that?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, perhaps Al Sutherland would like to add something, because it's an important question.

Mélanie said it very well. I share Ms. Blaney's view that trust and public confidence are essential. These state actors, these malevolent actors, seek exactly to undermine that trust.

The question is very appropriate. That's why, as much as possible, the actions of the government, and more particularly the national security agencies that are responsible for ensuring that the democratic processes are free and fair, need to be able to assure Canadians that's the case, as did Madam Thomas, the national security adviser to the Prime Minister, and a number of other officials.

Like Madame Joly, I don't have this supposed list of 11 candidates. I have seen that in the media. In my discussions with security officials, people didn't produce lists of these names, but if individual candidates may *ex post facto* have been the subject of an attempt, I don't know how or if they're informed of that. Maybe Al Sutherland or somebody else has information.

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government and Democratic Institutions, Privy Council Office): I don't have a list of the 11 either.

What I can say is that as part of the 2019 and 2021 elections we engaged primarily with campaign chairs and chief information officers for the major parties. I have to say I was very pleased with the level of engagement we had with the parties. It was clear that partisanship was left at the door, and we had a seriousness of intent that I think was admirable.

The sorts of meetings we had were used to raise the issues around technology, because a lot of this is cyber-enabled, so for each of the parties we were laying out issues around technology requirements and the kinds of weaknesses and the simple things you've also heard about as part of your briefings with CSE—two-factor authentication and those sorts of things. Then there were also specific briefings by the RCMP, by CSIS and by CSE in kind of laying out the state of issues.

I would say this was an experiment in 2019. We did it again in 2021, and I would say it exceeded our expectations because of the seriousness with which each of the parties took it. It was, I think, a very helpful part of the protecting elections protocol. It meant that we created.... Because everyone was security-cleared, we could

give secret briefings. It created an information link, so that if parties had issues, they could come to us and raise them with us one on one, as well as in a group setting.

• (1240)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I guess my next question is specifically around consultation with the parties. I read about it in some of the information.

I'm just wondering if a candidate of a particular party was targeted specifically. I know you can't give details, but what was the process of letting the parties know? Was it something you talked about individually with parties if their particular candidate was identified? Was it something that was shared with all parties, not giving, maybe, the detailed facts? Were they alerted to that?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Your question has a hypothetical aspect to it, so let me take it as a hypothetical.

If it related to a specific party, it was a discussion that would be had with the party. They could, of course, raise it in forum at the meetings, but they were not required to. If they had an issue, they could come to us. If we had an issue the other way, we could come to them.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, I want to make sure I understand Al's answer, because it's important.

The mechanism—and your question, Madam Blaney, is, I think, very appropriate—would probably be this group that was established where Al Sutherland and his colleagues were active participants with designated representatives of the parties. If their particular candidate had a concern about a particular circumstance, it would presumably, in a campaign structure, be raised with the appropriate campaign officials, who would then have access to Mr. Sutherland and other experts in that context.

I suppose, Al, in the same way, there would be a two-way process by which you have security-cleared, designated representatives of all these political parties with whom you and your colleagues could talk should you see a particular incident that required their awareness.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: That's correct.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you.

We will now continue with Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. LeBlanc and Ms. Joly, thank you for being with us today.

Mr. LeBlanc, I just want to confirm something. You said earlier that you couldn't share with us everything you learned during the briefings because some of the national security information couldn't be disclosed. Is that correct?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: This is a long-standing tradition that has been followed by many governments before us, so it won't surprise you at all to know that your statement is absolutely correct.

Mr. Luc Berthold: During these briefings, were you personally informed of any specific instances of foreign interference in our elections by the Chinese communist regime?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: As I said in English in response to a question from Mr. Berthold's colleague, these discussions are general. In these discussions, intelligence services inform about the ways in which some foreign actors are trying to interfere, and that is not limited to the electoral context.

As for discussing specific cases in this context, you'll understand that your predecessors under Mr. Harper's government did not discuss them either, because that would have been irresponsible. However, we can assure you that the information provided to the House of Commons by the Prime Minister is absolutely correct.

Mr. Luc Berthold: So we're talking about information that you can't tell us more about.

Ms. Joly, have you been personally informed of any specific incidents in the 2019 or 2021 elections?

• (1245)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: No.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Ms. Joly, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, you recently released Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which I have read by the way, despite what you said last week.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Congratulations. I hope you enjoyed reading it.

Mr. Luc Berthold: There's one thing that caught my attention. It's the statement that "Canada will continue to strengthen the defence of our Canadian infrastructure and democracy.

So I assume you've been briefed on foreign interference by the Chinese communist regime in the process of implementing the strategy.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Generally speaking, we know that there are attempts of foreign interference in the country, and—

Mr. Luc Berthold: Have you been informed of any specific cases during briefings?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I would just like to finish my answer. Thank you.

Yes, I sometimes receive briefings on attempts at foreign interference by certain foreign actors. When such cases are brought to my attention, I work with my colleague Mr. Mendicino because our national security agencies have a job to do.

My job thereafter, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, is to raise these situations with the representatives of the foreign states in question to basically tell them that foreign interference is unacceptable in our country. That's what I did last time at the G20 with my counterpart Wang Yi.

As for the 2019 and 2021 elections in particular, as I said, I don't have any information on that. You've also heard from the Prime Minister on this issue.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Madam Chair, the minister also seems to want to speak, but—

The Chair: Actually, I'm asking members to respect their time, but I'm asking the same thing of the witnesses. If we could get one answer to the short questions, that would be really good.

Perhaps you'll have a chance to respond next time, Mr. LeBlanc.

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I want to stay within the confines of how the committee operates.

So, Madam Minister, you have had briefings. Can you explain to us why the committee didn't receive any briefing notes or other documents from your department on foreign interference in our elections, when it had asked to receive all documents related to foreign interference? Are there no documents from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development that deal with foreign interference?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: As I told you, I don't have any information about foreign interference in our elections.

However, I spoke earlier about disinformation online, which is certainly a form of foreign interference. We have seen several countries, including Russia and China, try to launch online disinformation campaigns that have an impact on our democracy. So we need to do more to counter that. We also have the rapid response mechanism, which identifies these kinds of threats.

Mr. Luc Berthold: So I'll summarize the situation, Madam Minister.

You're the Minister of Foreign Affairs. You developed Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and, within your department, you haven't produced a single briefing note on the Beijing regime's interference in our elections or our democratic system. If I look at the documents that were provided to the committee, I see absolutely no information that we received from your department.

Did you talk about—

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I can answer the question, Madam Chair.

Mr. Luc Berthold: No, it's not a question.

Madam Chair, can I have a little time for one last question?

The Chair: You may finish your comment.

Mr. Luc Berthold: There's a lot of talk about the 2019 and 2021 elections and the reports you've done on that. Often, when we look at the facts after the fact, we ask questions to find out exactly what happened. Unfortunately, the answers we have aren't timely. We don't always catch a criminal in the act, Madam Minister. Sometimes things are discovered after the fact.

What we want to know is what you have learned since the 2019 and 2021 elections about this underground network of 11 candidates who allegedly received improper funding.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

Please respond quickly, Madam Minister.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I think my colleague is asking us questions that have already been answered.

The answer that the four of us up front can provide is that we don't have any information on the 11 alleged candidate cases. I can't be any clearer about that.

Now, with respect to Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, I'm glad you read it. If you go to the end of the document, in the appendices—it's always important to read the appendices as well—you'll see that there's \$150 million to support our security agencies to manage the issue of foreign interference.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berthold.

[*English*]

Ms. Sahota, you have five minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Going from where we left off, I keep hearing from Minister Joly and Minister LeBlanc that they have no information as to money going to these candidates. In the recent defence committee meeting that was referenced today, we had Ms. Thomas, who is the Prime Minister's national security adviser, as you know, state that she has “not seen money going to 11 candidates, period”.

Would you agree with that statement? Has that been conveyed to you in your briefings as well?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Like I said, I have no information about the 2019 election, nor 2021, regarding foreign interference. Therefore, I can only relate to Jody Thomas's statement and the Prime Minister's statement.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Sahota, the information I have received from the Privy Council Office and the security agencies is exactly consistent with what Jody Thomas shared at the other committee as well.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: My next question is about the briefings in which all parties take part. Different leaders have taken part, and I imagine the democratic reforms minister is informed about them.

Mr. Sutherland, you said there's a lot of co-operation in those meetings. Within those meetings, can you explain what issues have come up? How often have these meetings been happening? I assume they haven't just been happening now, post the 2019 and 2021 elections, because we have been talking about this baseline of interference that we have been aware of as a country for some time now.

Can you elaborate as to how long we have been having these types of briefings and where the discussions have evolved to?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, if you will allow it, Mr. Sutherland—who has direct personal knowledge, having participated in those discussions with political parties—can answer Madam Sahota's question. I also think Deputy Minister Morrison—having

been a member of the panel in a previous election, as he indicated—can provide insight into that.

Mélanie and I are obviously not participating in those particular fora, so perhaps Mr. Sutherland and Mr. Morrison could provide very precise answers to a very good question.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: For briefings for the political parties, the committee—if I can call it that—occurs during the election time period. It could have them weekly or once every two weeks during the election time period. The briefings are intended to provide information on security steps parties should take, and anything we're seeing in the national security space. That's why you would have briefings from CSE. The RRM came forward and provided a briefing on the ambient level of disinformation, giving a sense of, “Here's what we're seeing, and here's what we're not seeing.”

Parties were invited to ask questions. If they had something that was, perhaps, sensitive to them, we could also have a follow-up discussion, one-on-one.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Who are the party representatives at these meetings?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: I'm sorry. I don't have the names right now. Typically, it was the campaign chair, as well as a CIO.

For the Conservatives, it was Walied Soliman. I think it was Anne McGrath. They were both participants.

I'm sorry. It wasn't the campaign chair for the Liberals. I don't recall who it was.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Go ahead, Mr. Morrison.

Mr. David Morrison: I have very little to add.

Al's group provides the support function. I was one of the briefers. I think we did it once, mid-campaign. What we were able to convey is a version of the answer I've already given.

Foreign interference is an ongoing concern, but we hadn't seen any perceptible spike up to the point of the briefing. That was the case for the rest of the 2021 election.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Would briefings taking place after the 2015 election—just like the ones we're talking about, after 2019 and 2021—have included former prime minister Harper, Prime Minister Trudeau or former minister Pierre Poilievre? At the time, he was the democratic reform minister.

● (1255)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I'm not the democratic institutions minister, but I can answer for him, if he likes.

I'm teasing him.

My answer is that there was no process before. We put the first process into place in order to deal with this issue, because we had real concerns. Other democracies in the world had faced issues of foreign interference.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, the answer to the question is that after the 2015 election.... None of these institutional elements were put in place by the Conservative government, so the follow-up, the review and the effort to strengthen.... We also evolved our own measures from 2019 to 2021, based in large part on the report by an expert like Jim Judd—

The Chair: Thank you—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Those things were strengthened, but they didn't exist before.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

One thing is certain, we all agree that anything that constitutes espionage and foreign interference is a significant threat.

I have in my hands the text from the document entitled “Canada: National Security Outlook 2019”, which summarizes the threats in the context of the Canadian election. What it makes clear is that Canada is an attractive target, given the stance it takes. It also states that efforts to try to influence the election process generally have one of four main objectives. This is where this relates to the one question I am going to ask. One of the objectives of foreign interference would be to undermine the integrity of the electoral process or to cast doubt on its integrity. This is a concern and should be avoided.

My fellow citizens ask me the question: why is it that, despite all the opportunities parliamentarians have to go and gather certain pieces of information, whether it is during oral question time or elsewhere, they are not well aware of what is going on? I would like you to help my fellow citizens understand better, so that they do not lose confidence in our democracy.

We spend weeks gathering information. Is it normal that we are not aware of the whole situation? I'm talking about us, the parliamentarians, but even you, the ministers. Obviously, I will never be a minister, because Bloc Québécois members are not called upon to be ministers. I'm talking about all the parliamentarians in this House.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I thank the member for her question.

Ms. Gaudreau is absolutely right. We fully share the desire of the Bloc Québécois and other parliamentarians to strengthen the public's precious confidence in the integrity and transparency of the electoral process.

We have seen, in other countries not far from here, what can happen if the public lacks confidence in an outcome, a process or a method of counting votes. There are some very disturbing examples that have happened not too far from here, where our government has actually been called upon to intervene.

I know we are running out of time, but I want to remind you of something that is important to us. It is the decision to ask the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, chaired by our colleague Mr. McGuinty, to look into these issues. This committee has had access to this information on a highly confidential basis and can ask follow-up questions. It places great importance on transparency. I think it is this body that can reassure our citizens. It does its job while respecting national security obligations.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now give the floor to Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to come back because I am really fascinated by the process. I think having that process be clearer to Canadians will help us trust these systems and also be critical where we need to be.

I guess, in terms of process, what I'm trying to understand is whether, when interference is identified, any actions are taken against those who have done the interference. Is it referred on to law enforcement? In that context, as well, are there any legislative gaps that prevent action that need to be fixed?

I guess what I want to say in that last part of the question is that we're hearing clearly what the ministers and the department don't know, but what I don't understand is what you do know and how you look at what is happening to make sure that, legislatively and in terms of all our processes, those things are strengthened as we deal with this increase in foreign interference.

● (1300)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: I just want to make sure, Rachel, that I understand well your question. Is that for elections or for foreign interference in general?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's foreign interference in elections.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Do you want to take it?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, Madam Chair—and maybe Mr. Sutherland wants to add something—Madam Blaney's question highlights a concern all of us share. This is a new and evolving space for open democracies like Canada's. The intelligence reports that some colleagues have read properly identify Canada as a target for the precise reasons that Madame Gaudreau and others raised.

It contributes to a lack of confidence and a lack of faith in these institutions, which are fundamental to the good governance of any modern democracy. That's why we have a high level of concern about all these allegations. That's why we have taken a series of what we think are responsible and appropriate steps.

We're always looking to strengthen and renew these measures. We evolved them from 2019 to 2021. None of these measures existed previously.

This committee, I know, will produce a report or suggestions for the government that will inform further actions. Madame Joly properly identified international work that we're doing with partners in the G7. Her department received additional funding in previous budgets so that we can have exactly that kind of capacity to learn about best practices from other partner democracies.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, do you want to put a quick word in?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: One of the parts that wasn't answered was that if there is foreign interference and it's identified, are the people who did it charged, and who takes that on?

Mr. Allen Sutherland: It's important to differentiate between just the ambient level that the ministers have discussed, about there always being a base level of foreign interference.... If we were to react to every single one as a government during an election time period, you would conclude that, in fact, you didn't have a legitimate election. That would be wrong; it would be an incorrect impression.

Therefore, what is set out in the cabinet directive, I think, is important: There's a threshold that has to be hit, a level of impact or potential impact. In that case, we have a mechanism in place. It's the critical election incident public protocol panel, a name only a bureaucrat could come up with. If something were to exceed a certain level of impact, the panel of five would be empowered to step forward and explain to Canadians what happened and what they can do to avoid the consequences of it.

The fact that the panel did not step forward in either the 2019 or 2021 elections should give Canadians comfort that in fact, despite this ambient level—and I'd say, as David has, that it's low-level interference—our elections are legitimate and proper, and there isn't—

The Chair: Thank you. I know it's hard to get quick answers in, but I appreciate the attempt. We've gone over time.

We're really grateful to both ministers and their teams for making this possible.

To finish out the round, we're going to do a quick two minutes with Mr. Cooper, followed by a quick two minutes with Mr. Fergus.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

Madam Chair, through you, Minister LeBlanc keeps hiding behind national security. The advice of CSIS is that when it comes to foreign interference, the policy of the government be “grounded in transparency and sunlight” in order to expose that interference, and that such interference should be brought to the attention of the public. That is the advice CSIS has offered the government. We have seen anything but transparency in the way of answers to some very straightforward questions here today.

Through you, Madam Chair, going back to Minister Joly's saying she has no information, no knowledge of interference by Beijing in the 2019 or 2021 elections, we have a foreign intelligence briefing

document from February 21, 2020. It doesn't make an allegation, but it provides an assessment of an effective interference network: “Investigations into activities linked to the Canadian federal election in 2019, reveal an active foreign interference...network” by Beijing.

In the 2021 election, the minister talked about the rapid response mechanism. Analysis from the rapid response mechanism reveals that there was interference by Beijing on social media platforms. In the face of all that, how can the minister claim she doesn't know, that she has no knowledge...? It's simply not credible.

• (1305)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Michael, I think there's something that should be made very clear to all of us. We have a shared interest in tackling foreign interference. No single person or party benefits from any form of foreign interference. Obviously, we want to make sure that our democracy works and that the will of the Canadian people is respected in every aspect of the democratic process.

Now, when it comes to foreign interference, we have national security agencies that can investigate. Afterwards, as a country, based on the rule of law, there can be prosecution. Our job is to make sure that work is being done. That's why I will do so, working with the Minister of Public Safety, and make sure also that he has the right resources so that the RCMP can do anything linked to any form of foreign actor trying to negatively influence our democratic process.

At the end of the day, when it comes to disinformation online, this is something on which I would like to be working with all of you. This is a very important issue that all democracies in the world need to tackle.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, it will have to be quick.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I'll try one more question to see if we can get an answer.

CSIS documents reveal that politicians and riding associations were targeted by foreign interference. What are the names of those politicians and riding associations?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you, Madam Chair. This question has been answered on multiple occasions. Just because Mr. Cooper wants to participate in some theatrics that are not responsible for Canadian democracy doesn't mean he's going to get an answer that doesn't exist.

The Chair: We don't want answers that don't exist. We are trying to deal with a very serious issue here, so I appreciate that exchange.

Mr. Fergus, your two minutes have just turned into 3 minutes and 10 seconds, like magic.

We can do ourselves a solid and keep the questions and comments short. The run-on sentences just run on long, and it's—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Chair, it would be the first time it's ever happened in Parliament—no run-on sentences. I've never seen that.

The Chair: I know. It will be “breaking news”, and that will probably be the headline.

Mr. Fergus, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the ministers who have come here today, and the officials who are with them.

My first question is for Mr. LeBlanc.

I was not shocked, but surprised by your comments. As Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, you are responsible for the democratic process. That is part of your mandate. Yet you said that prior to 2015, before this government came to office, there was no robust system to investigate issues of foreign interference in our elections.

Was there really no process in place?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: You are unfortunately right, Mr. Fergus.

Prior to the 2015 election, under the Conservative government, there was no system or transparency at all in this regard as there has been since the 2019 general election, which is the one after the election where we succeeded the Conservative government. The protocol is led by the senior officials responsible for the national security agencies. They have a solemn obligation to warn the public when foreign interference activity reaches a threshold where it presents a threat to Canadian democracy.

In the interest of transparency, these items are now publicly available and can be better understood by Canadians, and political parties can participate in briefings. None of this existed before our government was elected in 2015. Of course, I can't speak for Mr. Harper's government. Today, the Conservatives are certainly outraged by these allegations of interference, but when they had the opportunity to put safeguards in place, they fell short and didn't do so.

• (1310)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I will use my remaining time to ask a short question of Mr. Sutherland, Mr. Morrison, Ms. Denham or Mr. Epp.

If there was no process, there were certainly threats and incidents of foreign interference in our political system. This was not invented in 2015. Am I right? Why was there no process at least in the Canadian public service?

The Chair: There are 15 seconds left for a response.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: As my colleague Mr. LeBlanc said, it is unacceptable that no process was put in place earlier to ensure that there is no foreign interference in our elections. We have known for years that there are opportunities for foreign interference, and we must always be careful about that. We must also pay attention to this in any form of political party activity, including leadership contests.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's excellent.

With that, Minister Joly, Minister LeBlanc and all the officials, thank you so much for your time today.

Minister LeBlanc, you've been here a few times. I really want to give a shout-out to your team for responding so quickly and making sure you get to come to your favourite committee, that being PROC.

With that, I wish you both the best of the season. Merry Christmas and all that good stuff. We look forward to seeing you again next year.

To all committee members, we'll reach out in 2023. Until then, I wish you the best. I hope you keep well and safe.

There is no meeting on Thursday, because we've been so productive and effective.

Take care. Thank you to all the support teams and all that stuff, too.

Bye for now.

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