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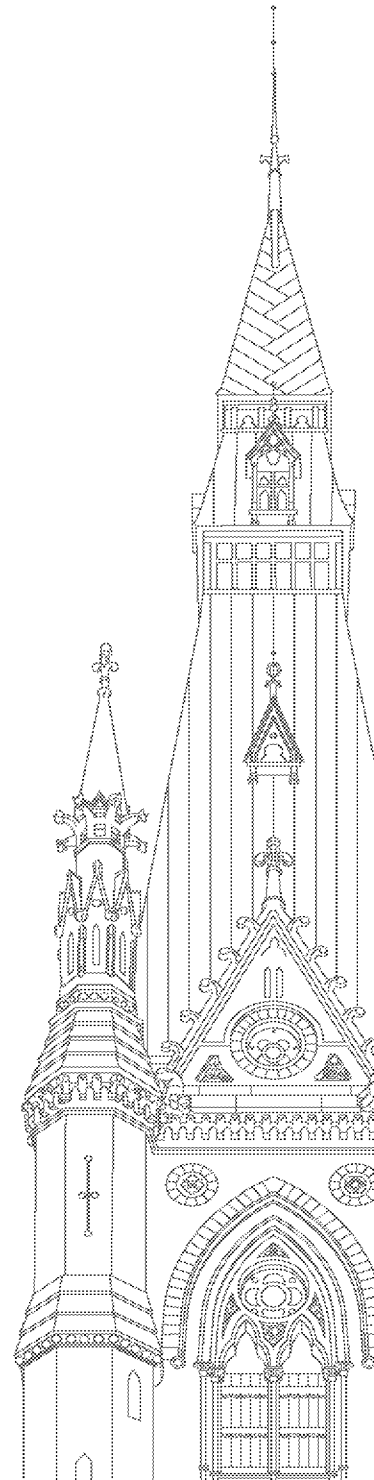
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Thursday, April 27, 2023

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 67 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to continue its study on foreign election interference.

The clerk and I will maintain a consolidated speaking list of members wishing to speak.

We have with us today the Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Public Safety. The minister is accompanied by David Vigneault, director, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and Shawn Tupper, deputy minister, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Welcome back to all of you.

Minister, you will have up to five minutes for your comments. Welcome back to PROC. Thank you for being here.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Public Safety): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm here today to discuss the very real threat posed by foreign interference and what our government is actively doing to address this threat to our national security.

This committee has already heard from numerous witnesses on our government's dedication to combatting foreign interference.

Today, I want to reiterate that we have put in place robust measures to safeguard our national security and public safety. As this committee well knows, democracies around the world have been faced with the growing threat posed by hostile actors. This issue is not new, and it's not unique to Canada.

The Communications Security Establishment and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service have indeed alerted Canadians about these threats for over a decade. We see foreign governments—the likes of the PRC, Russia, and Iran—attempt to undermine Canadian interests both at home and abroad.

[*Translation*]

It is one of the greatest threats looming over Canada. It threatens our security, our critical infrastructure, our livelihoods, our prosperity and our sovereignty.

I want to be clear: we are leaving no stone unturned when it comes to protecting our institutions and the interests of Canadians. That is why the government has taken significant steps to counter this threat since 2015.

[*English*]

As the Prime Minister's national security intelligence adviser, Jody Thomas, told this committee, “We are taking concrete steps to strengthen our counter-foreign interference approach...by making sure that those who engage in such activities face consequences.”

Since 2015, we've had our eyes wide open. We established the critical election incident public protocol to maintain transparency with Canadians during elections. We stood up the security and intelligence threats to elections task force, or SITE, to integrate our national security agencies. We implemented the G7 rapid response mechanism to coordinate closely with our allies.

Our response continues to evolve. To this end, the Prime Minister recently announced a suite of additional measures to secure our institutions. This includes appointing a special rapporteur in the form of former governor general David Johnston to put forward recommendations to strengthen our democratic institutions.

Indeed, Madam Chair, our government remains vigilant in creating new tools.

Budget 2023 earmarks \$16 million to establish a new national counter-foreign interference coordinator and nearly \$50 million to the RCMP to increase its investigative capacity into these threats and to support Canadians who may be targeted by foreign interference.

Further, in March, I launched consultations with Canadians on the creation of a foreign influence transparency registry to ensure transparency and accountability—to put in place guardrails against individuals who may be acting on behalf of a foreign government.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

This is in addition to ongoing engagement work with the private sector, universities and researchers, and critical infrastructure stakeholders to keep them informed and up to date on how best to protect themselves.

We provide mechanisms for the public to report threats through the websites of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or CSIS, and the RCMP, as well as through national security threat hotlines.

[*English*]

Madam Chair, we continue to take a whole-of-government approach to protecting our democratic institutions from foreign interference. We must work together as parliamentarians and with all levels of government to confront this threat.

In the complex and ever-evolving international landscape, we have our eyes wide open on the types of threats that could materialize. I want to reassure Canadians that, as I've outlined today, we have a robust system in place to deal with the challenges we are facing, both today and tomorrow. Our intelligence and law enforcement agencies will work with all partners to improve Canada's overall readiness and capacity to plan for, respond to and mitigate foreign threats.

The two intelligence committees that this government has created, in the form of NSICOP and NSIRA, two bodies that you have already heard from, raise the bar of transparency, Madam Chair, when it comes to how we explain to Canadians how we do this work.

[*Translation*]

We need to ensure that we have the best advice and evidence to make the best decisions for Canadians. Canadians can expect us to take the same approach when it comes to protecting our democracy, our rights and the values we hold dear.

[*English*]

Though the previous Conservative government stood back and watched as foreign actors threatened our public institutions, ignoring public threat reporting, our government continues to take decisive action to protect our electoral process, safeguard our institutions and crack down on foreign actors. We will continue to defend Canada and our democratic institutions, because that's what Canadians expect and deserve.

Madam Chair, I am now happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Mendicino.

Minister, I want to note that we were supposed to have you on Tuesday, and your schedule changed. There has been a lot going on in the country. I know your schedule did not permit you to come today and I really encouraged you heavily. I apologize that you are run off your feet. You proved that your schedule was too tight, and I was a little short at the beginning.

I appreciate your being here and your comments being exactly five minutes. That's the best gift of all.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm happy to be here.

The Chair: We will now go to six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Ms. Sahota, Madame Gaudreau, then Madam Blaney. Comments are through the chair, unless we can take turns speaking one after another. I would like us to maximize our time together, and I know we can do it.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours.

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

Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, it is well established that the Beijing regime interfered in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections. We also know the Beijing regime has operated at least eight illegal police stations on Canadian soil to intimidate Chinese Canadian citizens, including through coerced repatriations.

Minister, in the face of this blatant attack on our democracy and sovereignty, and on the safety and security of Canadians, why is it that under your government's watch not a single Beijing diplomat has been expelled from Canada?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, as you heard me explain during my remarks, this government has been concrete and proactive in combatting foreign interference. We've put in place new authorities for our national security agencies, including CSIS. The RCMP has taken decisive action to shut down the so-called police stations to which Mr. Cooper referred, and we will continue to raise the bar.

We're looking forward to receiving recommendations from David Johnston and we will do a full-court press to fight against this threat to our national security.

● (1115)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair—

Minister, I asked you a very specific question.

When the Minister of Foreign Affairs last appeared before this committee a month ago, on the question put to her about expelling Beijing diplomats, she replied, "Everything that is linked to foreign actions in Canada is under the purview of my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety."

In other words, she seeks your advice on the question of expelling Beijing diplomats. Canadians deserve to know, in the face of interference—a vast campaign of interference in two federal elections, and police stations being discovered, it seems, on an almost weekly basis—why no action has been taken to expel the very diplomats involved in these activities.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, perhaps Mr. Cooper missed what I said in my original answer, which was that the RCMP has shut down the so-called police stations and will continue to be proactive in that regard.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Eight illegal police stations, and not a single Beijing diplomat expelled.... Why not, Minister?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Through you, Madam Chair, to Mr. Cooper, we're "eyes wide open" about the threats. We've put threat reduction measures and powers in place for CSIS. The RCMP—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, who—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —is taking decisive action, and we will continue to be proactive.

The Chair: Okay, listen. I'm going to pause the time for a second.

I get it. I'm also going to be a little lenient, because I know there's a bit of theatre involved, but let's just try.

Your last answer was very good. It was shorter than the question. Try to keep it tight. You know, Minister Mendicino, how this works. Let's try to go with the flow.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, what is the holding block? Is it you? Is it the Minister of Foreign Affairs? Is it that your government is simply soft on Beijing? There have been no arrests or charges and no diplomats expelled. Why not?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's none of the above, Madam Chair. I have now been very clear about the concrete actions we have taken against so-called police stations—

Mr. Michael Cooper: You've taken no meaningful actions, though.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —and putting in place additional powers to protect all our democratic institutions.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Since, Minister, you're not going to—

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The first is just in terms of a technical issue, and a health issue for the interpreters.

Second, I feel that the witness is being harassed and not being allowed to answer the question. What's the point of this interaction, if it's not to get a response from the minister who is here?

The Chair: I don't have a.... I just feel like the first round's always the toughest one, and then we just have to get through it, because it just is what it is.

I don't know how many more times I can say that one person speaks at a time, and that it's difficult for interpreters. If there's advice or guidance as to what I can say or do, let me know. I welcome it.

I try really hard to run a functional committee, so I appreciate the point of order. I try to pre-empt the point of order, so I just.... I don't know, but if there's advice....

Yes, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): On that point of order, you asked for advice. My advice would be to at least allow the minister to start answering the question before the opposition jumps in and interrupts. That would be my advice. At least let him get a sentence out before they decide that they don't like the answer.

The Chair: I think that's reasonable.

Can we try to continue? What happens in this room, as in all rooms, is that there's a fine person who works really hard to turn our microphones on. If we can all just keep our hands away from the microphone, the microphone will turn on for us. That way we know there's only one on at a time and only one person is heard at a time. Let's try to let the mike technician do their job.

If we just keep an eye on each other, we'll see the impatience of wanting the floor back. I think we can always provide—it's an unwritten rule—the amount of time for the question or comment and answer, and go from there.

With that, you have three minutes left, Mr. Cooper. I'll go back to you.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have asked the minister three times why not a single Beijing diplomat has been expelled, so I'll ask a fourth time: Why not? What is the holdup?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, in fairness, Mr. Cooper also asked about police stations. I was directly responsive to the fact that the RCMP have shut them down. We will continue to be vigilant in taking whatever actions are necessary to combat foreign interference, including, if necessary, expelling foreign officials.

• (1120)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Have you advised the Minister of Foreign Affairs, since she is taking your advice on that question, to expel Beijing diplomats?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I work very closely with Minister Joly. I work very closely with all my colleagues in government. We will continue to be vigilant when it comes to combatting foreign interference, using all the authorities, some of them new, that the Conservatives have opposed.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, no arrests, no charges; the FBI have laid arrests, but none have been laid in Canada with respect to the illegal police stations.

Since you have failed to expel diplomats, and for all intents and purposes refuse to answer that question, in the face of interference in not one but two federal elections and the operation of at least eight illegal police stations, will you at the very least rebuke the Beijing regime?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I would strongly encourage Mr. Cooper to listen to the words I am saying. The RCMP have taken decisive action to shut down the so-called police stations.

We've also earmarked approximately \$50 million in budget 2023 to increase their capacity to combat foreign interference. It's quite clear that the Conservatives are going to vote against that provision—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —which will actually be counter to our national security.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, I asked a very specific question of the minister. The minister didn't answer my question. That's consistent with the pattern we've seen in the last several minutes.

I will invite you again, Minister, right here, right now, to rebuke the Beijing regime. Will you do that, Minister?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, Canada is among the strongest voices when it comes to rebuking any authoritarian regime and anyone who stands against human rights—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Then just do it now, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —and we'll continue to do that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Then just do it now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): I'm sorry, but I have to raise a point of order. Clearly, Mr. Cooper is not abiding by the normal rules of decorum in the committee, whereby you don't talk over the witness while they're trying to answer the question.

The Chair: I see that.

I think the minister was trying to answer your comment. I know that you don't feel that way, and that's okay.

I am going to give Minister Mendicino 10 seconds, and then we'll pass on the last 20 seconds to Mr. Cooper.

Go ahead, please.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the concerns about how we are protecting our institutions, and also, again, condemning any violation of human rights. Canada has a very proud and strong and record on that front.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The minister couldn't even see fit to rebuke the Beijing regime for election interference and for operating eight police stations in Canada. This is a government that is very weak on Beijing.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I couldn't disagree more.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Maybe I'll try to do the Conservatives, Mr. Cooper and the minister a favour. After that interaction, we were able to learn a little about the steps the government has taken. I know that many Canadians learned about these so-called police stations in the news. However, it was also learned that Canada is not alone in the struggle, and that over 53 countries report about 102 Chinese overseas police services centres.

I'm wondering if the minister wants to add anything else to the steps and the measures that were taken by the government.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, through you to Ms. Sahota, first, I appreciate the question. It allows me to expand on how we are combatting foreign interference.

I talked about how we have created new authorities and powers for our national security intelligence agencies, through Bill C-59, that bestow upon them the ability to address and to mitigate any potential threats to our national security.

We've also put into place a protocol that applies specifically during elections. It is called the critical election incident public protocol. It is applied by our most senior non-partisan, professional public servants, who have been charged with the responsibility of receiving information and intelligence as it relates to any foreign interference that could pose a threat to an election. It is applied when they inform and educate Canadians about that work.

This is a protocol that has served Canadians well. However, I would also point out to Ms. Sahota that we are not resting on our laurels. We are building on the recommendations put forward by two distinguished Canadians, Mr. Judd and Morris Rosenberg. I know that my colleague, Minister LeBlanc, has reported recently to the Prime Minister on how we are advancing recommendations to strengthen the mechanisms we have in place to protect all of our institutions, and most especially our elections.

● (1125)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you for that, Minister.

In that and in your opening statement, you mentioned several tools that have been put in place. I think the difficulty that Canadians face is how the average Canadian is able to perhaps utilize these mechanisms put in place if they feel that they're victims of state-backed intimidation. You mentioned the \$16 million in the budget. I'm really interested in particular in how this would protect diaspora communities, whom we often see being intimidated by these types of tactics.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, that is an excellent point.

In the context of the consultations I am doing right now to create a foreign influence transparency regime, I've heard directly from numerous community leaders and diaspora about their concerns around being stigmatized, marginalized and subjected to intimidation, harassment, abuse or worse.

That is why it is very important, in this work, that we are connecting those Canadians with the appropriate agencies within government to provide them with support. It is only by shining a light on where these threats occur and being transparent about how authorities are exercised by the various agencies, whether they be national security or conventional law enforcement, that we can maintain that trust and that confidence in our institutions.

That's exactly what I have been doing. I have been travelling across the country, connecting Canadians with the appropriate authorities so that they understand how we are applying those tools, and also how we can evolve the tool kit in general when it comes to combatting foreign interference.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'm glad you're going out into the communities. I look forward to your continuing that work and letting us know the results.

Over the last few months, Minister, we've heard a lot of accusations regarding elected officials. We've seen on social media vile accusations against senators and MPs of Asian descent that would make McCarthyism proud.

How is this type of polarization of the issue counterproductive to our common objectives of protecting democracy?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's a very important question.

As much as we need to be vigilant against the threat that is posed by foreign interference, we also have to be vigilant against the kind of stereotyping, stigmatization and overt racism that we have seen throughout our history. We need to be vigilant against both, because both are threats to our democracy.

Even as we expand our tool kit to protect our national security, our democratic institutions, we also have to be sure that we bring Canadians along, and the experiences of Canadians. It does inform by having this debate, and having this discussion. It is my commitment, and the commitment of the officials at this table and the government, that as we create new authorities, powers and tools, they will be exercised responsibly in accordance with the law and the charter.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, the floor is yours.

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

I still do not fully understand the new powers that were just mentioned. I gather there's a coordinator and a protocol, but I would like to know more.

I will let the minister answer.

• (1130)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That is an excellent question.

As I explained earlier, the 2023 budget allocates funds to create a national counter-foreign interference office. The goal is to bring together all of the resources used to combat foreign interference in an efficient and effective way, in terms of powers and authorities.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Those of us on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs have been concerned about this situation for six months now. We want to preserve people's trust in the integrity of our elections.

With that in mind, when will this new office be set up, and how will it work?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That is another good question.

Work has already begun. People are in the process of setting up the office using the federal funds earmarked for that purpose in the 2023 budget. I hope we will be able to move on to the next steps to finish setting up the office.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: For the sake of the public, can you tell us when we will have a detailed action plan and when the office will be operational?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It will be as soon as possible.

However, I would like to reassure the honourable member that an array of other measures are already in place. Even with the tools—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: The weeks are flying by. This is urgent. We have heard a great deal about it: We are told the thresholds need to be checked and the legislative agenda has to have enough teeth because there are clearly many shortcomings.

In the next couple of weeks, can the committee expect to receive the action plan and the timeline for the full implementation of the office, even though you are still in the process of setting it up?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: My team and I have always worked with the committee. That said, the sooner the 2023 budget is passed, the sooner the office will be up and running.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If I understand correctly, we will have the details shortly after the budget is passed—say, a week later.

The committee is very concerned, as you know. This is your responsibility, and you have had six months to prepare and to be able to answer this fundamental question.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I want to reassure the honourable member that we will closely monitor the implementation of this tool.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's excellent.

I have one last question, and then I will give the rest of my time to my colleague, if she wants to continue the discussion.

At the Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship, you spoke of concerns about stigmatization. What tool do you plan to put in place to protect those affected? You are the Minister of Public Safety, and it is your responsibility. How exactly will you address those concerns?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: In the context of foreign interference, in particular, we have already created a safe and inclusive space for Canadians who want to participate in consultations. I, myself, have already spoken with community leaders. Beyond my portfolio, there is a strategy to combat racism. With these two initiatives, I hope we can create a constructive, inclusive and truly safe space to do this work.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I would like to ask the minister to state in the report what tools will be used to protect our communities, when the action plan is unveiled after the budget is passed.

Thank you.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you.

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Minister, beyond budgetary considerations, there are issues that are purely legislative. I am thinking, for example, of a foreign agent registry. This issue has been on the table for two years, if not longer.

Why hasn't it been created yet? That measure has nothing to do with the budget.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's a good question.

We have already begun consultations on the matter. In the coming weeks, I will be sending an update to this committee and to all parliamentarians on everything we have heard during the consultations regarding the creation of that new tool.

● (1135)

Ms. Christine Normandin: I will repeat my question. We have been talking about this for at least two years. We've known for a long time that foreign agents have been influencing Canadians and members of the Chinese diaspora. We asked for such a tool over two years ago. Why don't we have one yet?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I know this is an urgent matter, but it is important to create the right tool, one that will help to combat stereotypes and stigmatization.

When the time is right, we will update everyone.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Go ahead, Mrs. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here.

It's good to see you, Minister Mendicino.

I have a few questions. I found it interesting, listening to your statement today. You talked about how robust the system is, yet a lot of the testimony that we've heard has told us that it is not robust, that part of the challenge, of course, is legislative, and that we need stronger, firmer legislation. That's something I'm very interested in, but I'm also interested in hearing a bit more about the goals moving forward around the foreign agent registry.

I have concerns. I've heard from many people who are concerned about being targeted, and how ethnic communities could suffer as a consequence of any false accusations.

My questions for you are on the foreign agent registry. What is the framework that you're looking at? How are you addressing key things, like what this means for citizens of Canada? Will citizens of Canada be put on this registry? If so, how will you deal with charter rights? If it is just non-citizens, what does that mean?

We know that Canadians have various statuses in Canada, so I'm curious about those different statuses and thinking of permanent residents.

How will you decide? Will it be people from particular countries that have been identified as participating in foreign interference or targeting Canada?

Canadians want to understand what the structure will be and what those components will look like. I think Canadians need to know if they could potentially be on this registry, and what that would mean for them as well.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Through you, Madam Chair, to Ms. Blaney, first, I completely share the concerns you articulated about how we create this new registry. In my conversations and interactions, many have expressed the worries and the fears that there

could be, either inadvertent or advertent, a stigmatization as the result of it. That is why we are engaging in these consultations, to use that advice to inform the creation of the tool.

The last thing I'll say in response directly to your question, Ms. Blaney, is that you have identified a number of specific elements that will form the parameters of this registry: Are we looking at principles? Are we talking about citizens, about foreign nationals? Are we talking about both? Are we talking about countries? Are we talking about a country-agnostic approach? Finally, do we put more of an emphasis on the types of activities so that we can promote transparency around legitimate diplomatic engagement here in Canada, versus the kind of activity that goes beyond legitimate and lawful activity and instead spills over into clandestine, deceptive activity that is counter to Canadian interests both here and abroad?

You put your finger on some of the very crunchy questions that we have to answer as we create this tool, but my commitment to you is that at the end of day, it will be one that is consistent with the values of the charter.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I think that has to be watched very carefully. I hope that as you're going through the process, the consultation is inclusive and informative enough to the public that people know when to respond. It is really concerning to look at that and to know there are many people from many countries who have been here, in some cases for generations, who are already feeling concerned that they may be specifically targeted.

We know that disinformation is one of the biggest challenges and that information is flowing out that is not based on fact. It's concerning to Canadians, and it's scaring them sometimes.

I know that Australia has its Australian National Security, where people can look up on a website what the national threat level is every day. They can report any suspicious behaviour they see, and there are the day-to-day security concerns that can be updated. People can look on that website to see if there's been misinformation come out into their country, into their community, and see what was done about it, and then they know, oh, that was absolutely misinformation.

I'm just wondering whether there are any discussions happening around exploring that opportunity.

● (1140)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, again through you to Ms. Blaney, I think it's an important suggestion and worth studying very carefully.

I would also highlight that Canada has shown some important leadership on the international stage. We created the rapid response mechanism in conjunction with our G7 allies. That's incredibly important when we're talking about international events of consequence, for example, Russia's illegal invasion into Ukraine. Mr. Putin has been making scandalous claims. For example, he claims to be de-nazifying Ukraine. We need to push back aggressively against that kind of disinformation.

I would also point out that it strikes very close to home as well. Throughout the course of the pandemic, 90% of Canadians who did any research on vaccinations were at some point exposed to disinformation.

As we do this work, it is important that we think about it not only internationally, but as well here on Canadian soil.

The last thing I'll say is that in my own engagement as Minister of Public Safety, and with my deputy minister, last fall, when we were in Germany for the G7, I specifically engaged our G7 counterparts on the question of disinformation. I'm pleased to report to this committee that next week, we'll be taking the next steps towards having that conversation on how we can combat this threat too.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go into our second round.

I'm just going to note for our official record that the last three exchanges probably were the best, in the sense of getting the maximum out, because there were not people speaking over each other. I would like for us to continue this in the second round.

For the second round, we will have Monsieur Berthold, followed by Mr. Gerretsen, then Madame Normandin and then Ms. Blaney.

I am hoping to squeeze in a full round, so then we'll go with two more if we can keep it tight, but I'm not going to name who would be next, because if I have to continue interrupting, we will not have the time for that.

Monsieur Berthold.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, the committee undertook this study in response to a series of revelations about the Beijing regime's interference in our elections.

Revelations that the Liberal Prime Minister and his government appear to have been compromised because of interference by the regime in Beijing have Canadians worried.

There is interference through the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation. There is interference through donations to political parties. There is interference through Chinese police stations in Montreal and elsewhere.

No diplomats have been expelled or arrested as a result of all these revelations and interference. What other explanation is there, Minister, if not that the Beijing regime's interference is already

working and exerting undue influence on the Prime Minister and his government?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I have explained several times to date, the RCMP has taken concrete action against the so-called Chinese police stations, and we remain vigilant.

I am working with my honourable colleague Minister Joly on the matter of sanctions against foreign diplomats.

Mr. Luc Berthold: If it is true that the Beijing regime has no influence on the current government, why have no diplomats been expelled?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We will use every tool at the government's disposal to fight against foreign interference, including from Beijing.

Mr. Luc Berthold: If it is true that the regime in Beijing has no influence on the current government, how is it that no diplomats have been expelled?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I have already explained that the threat of foreign interference is real. That is why we have introduced new powers and new tools for the Canadian Security Intelligence, or CSIS, the RCMP and any organization that deals with national security. I just want to point out that it was the Conservatives who tried to block the creation of some of these new tools.

● (1145)

Mr. Luc Berthold: If it is true that the regime in Beijing has no influence on the government, how is it that no diplomats have been expelled?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The government remains ever vigilant on this issue. We are doing everything necessary to protect our democratic institutions, including taking concrete action against so-called Chinese police stations. The measures we have already put in place to protect our elections include the protocol, the creation of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, and the creation of the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency. I can give you a host of examples.

Mr. Luc Berthold: If the government is not under the influence of the regime in Beijing, why is it that after these illegal Chinese police stations were closed, no Chinese diplomats were expelled and no one was arrested?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: My department and I will always consider every option before us, in co-operation with Minister Joly and all of my other colleagues in government. We will take the necessary steps.

Mr. Luc Berthold: What other explanation for the lack of action is there, if not that the regime in Beijing exerts undue influence on the Prime Minister and his government?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: With all due respect, the honourable member may not understand my answer, but we are already taking many steps to combat foreign interference. In fact, I have already provided a host of concrete examples.

Mr. Luc Berthold: How can the regime in Beijing take Canada seriously, and how can the regime in Beijing be prevented from continuing to exert undue influence on Canada, if, under the current Prime Minister, Canadian authorities are unable to expel diplomats? Isn't this proof that the government is already under Beijing's influence?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I am confident that hostile actors understand that Canada is always vigilant against foreign interference because of our strong record. I am very proud of the work of my officials and of our government's record in creating new tools to combat foreign interference.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I asked the question in a number of ways, and it's clear that the minister refuses to answer. I note that the Minister of Public Safety, who is the minister responsible for protecting Canadians from foreign interference, has not bothered to take any concrete steps to expel a diplomat from the regime in Beijing or to send a clear message that we will no longer tolerate this kind of activity in this country.

CSIS warrant applications require the personal signature of the minister. Is that correct?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's a good question.

Indeed, there are provisions in the act that specify the circumstances in which I am to work with CSIS to authorize certain powers.

Mr. Luc Berthold: By law, if I'm not mistaken, all warrants must be signed by you, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: There are a couple of provisions in the act that require me to work closely with CSIS to apply certain powers.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Have you ever been asked by CSIS to sign a warrant application that directly or indirectly involved a member of the House of Commons?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I work in co-operation with all of the officials in my department.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Berthold. I appreciated the way you asked your questions. As you noticed, I gave you a little more time because you were very respectful. You were very considerate, and I certainly appreciate it.

[English]

Mr. Gerretsen, the floor is yours.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Both of the Conservative members who have spoken at this committee so far have gone beyond reality and made comments to the effect that "it has been found that", suggesting it is a matter of fact. Indeed, there's a lot surrounding this issue that is not matter of fact. They are only accusations. Nonetheless, the Conservatives have no problem conflating that with reality.

Minister, my question for you stems from what I just referenced and the fact there's a lot of misinformation out there. You were responding to Ms. Blaney's questions about this, as well. Although it is extremely important that the media get that information out there, so that Canadians can be informed and hold their government ac-

countable, as they should, the reality is that, quite often, there's a lot of misinformation, a lot of rhetoric and a lot that permeates into the public.

Can you comment on how that is counterproductive to democracy, generally speaking?

● (1150)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, through you to Mr. Gerretsen, you have put your finger on one of the most challenging aspects of having a discussion that is thoughtful on the subject of how we protect our democratic institutions and our national security.

In my view, disinformation is a deliberate device used to break the bonds of trust between citizens and the institutions that are there to serve them. It is corrosive. The way we can cut through that is by having as much transparency as possible in the way in which we, together, need to do this work.

Let me come back to the example I was discussing with Ms. Blaney. There have been calls, yes, for some time for the creation of what we refer to colloquially as the foreign agent registry. Before we do that, we thought it would be appropriate to directly engage with Canadians, so we could hear their concerns.

One of the main concerns we have heard consistently in our conversations is that there is a fear that, as we afford new powers to government, we circumscribe them in a way that is consistent with the principles of the charter. We've heard about the concerns of Canadians who wish to engage on foreign interference but are worried they will be intimidated, harassed, subject to retaliation and threatened. We need to reduce those barriers.

I would submit to you that there is a relationship between disinformation and the lived experiences of many Canadians who want to step up and be part of this work.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Minister, who stands to gain from that disinformation, which leads to the questioning of our democracy? At the end of the day, who really stands to gain?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's those who stand against Canada and Canadian values. They are the hostile actors.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I have another question that I wanted to ask you.

In the first mandate of this government, Bill C-76 was introduced, which, by the way, the Conservatives voted against. That bill had a lot of teeth in order to combat foreign interference.

Could you comment on some of the measures that were included in that bill that were opposed by the Conservatives?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Perhaps the most important new authority created under Bill C-76 was that it made it illegal for foreign contributors to provide additional funding to third parties that may then, in turn, try to support certain parties, candidates and the like. That showed our ongoing vigilance in wanting to protect the integrity of our elections, and it really closed any potential loopholes that may have remained in place before that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: If I understand that correctly, had that bill not passed, those loopholes with respect to foreign money coming into Canada would still be open.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That's exactly correct.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Do you have any thoughts as to why any political party would not be in favour of that?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I can't explain why the Conservatives would have voted against that provision, but I will say that it is consistent with their pattern of voting against the creation not only of new authorities that are afforded to our national security and law enforcement partners, but equally the other new mechanisms that have raised the bar of transparency, like NSICOP and NSIRA. They voted against those as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister, earlier this week, Fred DeLorey, who was the campaign manager for the Conservative Party in 2021, told us that the briefings given to his party went more or less one way. In other words, the party gave information to the intelligence agencies, but the information did not flow the other way.

What struck me most was when he said that he received information about legislative gaps that prevented, for example, parties from taking concrete action to resolve situations of interference.

Do you agree with the assertion that there are currently legislative gaps that prevent concrete action?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I think the comments of political party leaders who have already given evidence regarding the last election should be studied very carefully. That is why my fellow minister Mr. LeBlanc has written a new report, which has already been submitted to the Prime Minister, in co-operation with the clerk, to build on all the other measures that we have in place, such as the protocol. I think the protocol is a critical tool in the context of elections, because it is the mechanism by which we can communicate threats received during electoral periods.

• (1155)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Mr. DeLorey already reported on the problems with the act at least a year and a half ago. I can't believe you weren't made aware of them at that time. A year and a half ago, then, alarm bells were already ringing. It may only be a year and a half until the next election.

Why are these legislative gaps not being addressed? For example, the government could be taking concrete action to combat interference, rather than just providing briefing sessions.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I share the honourable member's concerns. I just want to add that, in the report Mr. LeBlanc submitted to the Prime Minister, there is a proposal to review the authorities and powers under the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act. This is an opportunity for the government to work with you and other opposition members. Yes, this is an urgent matter—I know that—but there are concrete recommendations we can address.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Among the recommendations we heard was the creation of an independent office to investigate for-

eign policy activities on Canadian soil, similar to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to hear your views on the potential creation of such an office, with powers separate from those of CSIS and the RCMP, for example.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: This is an important issue. It relates to the creation of a position of national coordinator, which I've already mentioned. Indeed, we are in the process of putting in place other recommendations.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Madam Blaney is next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I have a couple of last questions.

I know that the consultation process that's happening with the foreign agent registry ends—correct me if I'm wrong—around May 9. If that's the case, I'm wondering if you could give the committee a bit of an outline on what the next steps will be and what the timeline is.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, through you to Ms. Blaney, on May 9 we will close the current formal consultation. The next steps will include publishing a “what we heard” report to capture the conversations that I've had and that my officials have had. I also would point out that there is a website where we are receiving submissions. A collating of the main themes of feedback will be published in that report.

Thereafter, Madam Chair, what I would say to Ms. Blaney is that we hope to come in fairly short order with a proposal around the creation of this tool.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

In terms of my next question, I'm an MP who represents a more rural and remote region of Canada, and the accessibility of information can sometimes be a bit of a challenge.

When it comes to misinformation, one of the things that concern me greatly is that a lot of our local newspapers are really struggling to continue to find ways to fund themselves, because the world is changing, yet they are a trusted resource for folks. I'm just wondering, in terms of addressing misinformation, what are the strategies around really meaningfully doing that in communities that may be losing their local paper? My region has not, but other regions have, and there's a standard of information there that is not necessarily the case online.

There are also communities that do not have Internet accessibility. That is a challenge. Also, just for different age ranges, some folks who are elderly may not be able to get onto a computer, because that's not something they're interested in. My grandmother was absolutely convinced that she would never learn how to use a computer.

When we lose those trusted resources of newspapers in local small communities, how do we assure people that they have access to information that is actually legitimate and safe for them to understand and believe?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I would offer to Ms. Blaney the opportunity to have her grandmother perhaps speak to my mother-in-law, who was initially resistant but is now very proficient. I'm happy to do that.

If I may be permitted perhaps one brief minute—I'm happy to stretch my time, Madam Chair, to accommodate—there are two things I would say. One, it is important that we continue to educate Canadians on disinformation. For rural, that means continuing access to broadband. We hear you on that. I think more importantly we've seen some very troubling trends around the attack on the role that media play, including the CBC and Radio-Canada. That's fundamentally wrong. They are a pillar of our democracy.

I think it's important that we also recognize that our work as parliamentarians has to include all of our democratic institutions, including the role that media play.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go to Mr. Calkins, who will be followed by Mr. Turnbull.

We'll take you up on that offer, Mr. Mendicino. That would just bring us to a full hour from when you joined us. That's what we were asking of your time, so thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, in your opening remarks you spoke about your so-called robust measures. We've heard numerous witnesses who have appeared before this committee talk about numerous incidents in numerous ridings, where information was sent into the robust measure processes that you put in place. Have those robust measures ever triggered a public notice in any of the campaigns in any of the ridings in the last two elections?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I'm confident that the non-partisan public servants—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —who exercised their discretion under this protocol have done so in a way that has protected the interest of our elections. I would also point out that the elections in 2019 and 2021 have been certified as free and fair.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: I have a short amount of time, Minister. It was a yes-or-no question. I'll just take that as a no.

Have your robust measures ever resulted in any diplomats being expelled? We've had actual records of diplomats from Beijing actually publicly taking credit—publicly taking credit—for changing the outcomes of the elections in at least two ridings. Have any diplomats under your so-called robust measures been expelled, yes or no?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: We all know the answer. You can just say it, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I've explained the many concrete actions that we have taken against threats posed by foreign interference. We'll continue to be vigilant on that front.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Minister, under your so-called robust measures, have any charges been laid against anybody for foreign interference?

We know that our Five Eyes allies, who actually used to involve us in security arrangements and are now passing us by, have done so, and that charges have been laid in places like the United States, Australia and other places. Have your robust measures resulted in any charges being laid, yes or no?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I'm confident that the discretion that is exercised independently operationally by law enforcement will safeguard all of our democratic institutions and our communities.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Well, it seems to me, Minister, that your robust measures on election integrity seem to be about as robust as your measures on bail reform, so I'll get off that tack and we'll move over to your comment on “eyes wide open”.

The Globe and Mail reported on February 17, based on their review of a CSIS document from December 20, 2021, that “political campaigns quietly, and illegally, return...the difference between the original donation and the government's refund'...back to the donors.

Under the direction of Beijing, donations were being made to political campaigns, and then those campaigns were illegally returning the money back to those donors to make them whole after they got their tax receipt. That's collusion.

Would you like to change your “eyes wide open” to maybe “eyes wide shut” under your robust measures?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, as I've indicated, the government has taken unprecedented steps in the creation of new authorities, including protocols that are there to protect the integrity of our elections. We've had two reports that have certified that the elections in 2019 and 2021 were both free and fair.

We will continue to build on that record, receiving recommendations from Mr. Johnston, working with parliamentarians at NSICOP and using NSIRA as a way to shine a light on the way that we are doing this work together.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, do you remember that two Parliaments ago, there was a bill—Bill C-406—that would have banned foreign money coming into our electoral process?

Do you remember how you voted on that bill, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, what I can tell you is that I recall my votes on Bill C-76 and Bill C-59. I voted in favour of them, in conjunction with the government—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Minister, it's about you and your colleagues—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The Conservatives voted against those.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: As a matter of fact, that was my private member's bill, banning foreign money coming into our electoral process, and you, Minister, voted against it. Your colleague Mr. Gerretsen did. In fact, the entire NDP caucus did as well.

It's interesting how we seem to want to say one-sided things and create a narrative that simply isn't true—even somebody who is supposedly a competent minister of the Crown.

I'll move on to a different question—

• (1205)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: On a point of order, I know that Mr. Calkins thinks he's extremely witty with his comments, but challenging somebody's integrity and their ability in this forum is not only in contravention of the Standing Orders in the House, which would apply to this place; it is also extremely unprofessional and extremely rude to any witness, whoever that witness may be.

Madam Chair, through you, perhaps Mr. Calkins—who, by the way, has been in the public, calling members of Parliament agents of Beijing—if he's not going to apologize for that comment, would at least like to apologize for questioning the integrity of the minister sitting at this table right now.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

I will come to you, Mr. Calkins.

I have been really persistent in how I would like our committee to function. At the end of the day, when it comes to our democratic institutions, as much as people might take this lightheartedly or think it's a...I don't even know what. This is a really serious topic. I know my constituents are very concerned with it.

At the end of the day, we all say one thing and then our comments and actions demonstrate another. I honestly don't think there's any place for that, Mr. Calkins.

I'll give you the floor.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will respectfully withdraw the comment—

The Chair: I would hope so.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: —in the way it was taken. Most of our legislation refers to how a “competent minister shall” in that legislation, but I will withdraw it if offence was taken. I will certainly do that.

Mr. Minister, we know that security-cleared Liberal staff were briefed on September 28, 2019, that the 2019 candidate for Don Valley North was part of a foreign interference network. Jeremy Broadhurst, who was here earlier, determined the contents of the briefing to be so serious that he personally alerted the Prime Minister the next day.

The Prime Minister knew about Beijing's interference benefiting Liberal politicians as early as the time of the 2019 election. We also know that the February 21, 2020, PCO document alerted the Prime Minister that political staff and politicians took broad guidance from Beijing's Toronto consulate. We know that the Prime Minister and the ministers received CSIS briefings that some political candidates were witting affiliates of Beijing's interference schemes.

My question to you, Minister, is whether you have investigated which members of your caucus or which Liberal candidates in the past two elections may have knowingly co-operated with Beijing's election interference schemes.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, let me say a couple of things.

First, in response to the specific question, we take foreign interference very seriously. I believe all parliamentarians do. In the last hour, I think we've explained what our record is and what we are going to continue doing.

Lastly, with regard to the comment that was made, I personally wasn't offended by it. I think it's the reality of being in politics today that we need thick skins, but I think Canadians would be offended by that remark.

Perhaps it explains why we need to do this work together to protect our institutions. That kind of personal attack is becoming far too often a hallmark of the way we have these debates.

I'm glad that Mr. Calkins apologized, but I came here to offer what I thought was important testimony on a very serious issue. I've tried to be responsive, and I thank you for the opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Minister, thanks for being here today.

Do you direct the daily operations of the RCMP?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I do not.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Do you direct the daily operations of CSIS?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: No.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Essentially, CSIS and the RCMP have an independent mandate to investigate if they have actionable intelligence. Is that not correct?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Operational independence is extremely important. I would argue, especially for conventional law enforcement. This is one of the ways in which we divide functions. You do not want elected officials carrying out investigations, which is why we have an independent police branch.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister.

I'll note that's very consistent with what the director of CSIS—David Vigneault, who is here today—said at our committee, “We...have the authority to investigate...directly.” We also had the deputy commissioner of the RCMP say the same thing on record at this committee. I'll note the deputy commissioner of the RCMP also said, “We are not investigating any elements from the 2019 and 2021 elections. We did not receive any actionable intelligence that would warrant our initiating a criminal investigation.”

I find it very challenging when we have the opposition members continuing to claim things as though the minister can be held accountable for things that are not within his.... Essentially, the investigations are things that could be happening under those independent agencies, so it's misleading at best.

One other question I have for you, Minister, is this. The Jim Judd report makes a recommendation about how the critical election incident public protocol was operating over a time within the caretaker period. At election time, it oversees those elections. Outside of the election period, it is not in effect. Essentially, at those times, I'm sure ministerial accountability is the norm.

I want to ask you a more poignant question about that. In terms of our government's robust all-of-government approach, it seems to me that outside the election period there's a lot of need for coordination, because there are quite a few ministries that would be involved in combatting foreign election interference. Is that why a national coordinator position is so significant? Could you speak to that?

• (1210)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Through you, Madam Chair, to my colleague, Mr. Turnbull, it is indeed the vision of this new national coordinating role to bring together the various initiatives and agencies that work to identify threats created by foreign interference, so we can respond to them in a way that is agile.

You're also right, I think, to point out the distinction we have put in place. It is a protocol stood up by the government but applied by our non-partisan, professional public servants during an election. However, outside of a writ period, it's also important that we continue this work. That is something we have been doing with a lot of focus and energy over the last number of years. I believe many concrete examples show how this government is pushing out our policy and posture to protect all of our democratic institutions in a way that is unprecedented.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I agree, and I believe it is accurately described as a robust approach. There's a continual evolution of that desire, as we can see, to protect our democracy.

What strikes me as very challenging within this whole study is that the Conservatives have continuously used unconfirmed—maybe false—or uncorroborated allegations. They've ignored the facts that we have presented many times in this committee, about the many measures our government has put in place. They've accused our Prime Minister of working against the interests of Canada, and they've called into question our democratic institutions, which I think can compromise the faith Canadians have in our democratic institutions.

Minister, could you comment on how this partisan rhetoric is having an impact?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, it's negative. We've seen some of that behaviour on display today, unfortunately.

The fact of the matter is that the only way we can address the very real threats posed by foreign interference is to find ways to work across the partisan aisle. We do that through NSICOP. NSICOP has put forward recommendations, and the government is acting on those recommendations. I would certainly encourage my Conservative colleagues to take a page out of that book and work with us to deal with an issue that is not partisan.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

The Chair: With that, we want to thank you, Minister Mendicino, Mr. Tupper and Mr. Vigneault, for your time and attention today.

If there's anything else that comes to mind that you would like the committee to share, if there's something you wish you had shared but you didn't get the time to, please just share it with the clerk, and we'll have it circulated around.

With that, on behalf of PROC committee members, I would like to thank you for your time and attention today.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: We will suspend for three minutes, and we'll return with our first panel on Ontario redistribution.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We are now returning for our second hour.

To the people who are joining us, I apologize for the slight delay, but we will make sure we go through this session properly.

Before we do commence, I will say that we're starting on Ontario redistribution, which is really exciting for all of us. With that, we will need to pass a budget to ensure that the clerk and analyst can do what needs to be done.

Are there any concerns with the budget being passed?

Seeing none, we will make sure we get that done.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you.

The second thing is good news. We've been asking for extra resources to continue this work and the work on foreign election interference, and we have been given an extra hour, which will be next Tuesday evening. Instead of meeting from 6:30 to 8:30, we will get to meet from 6:30 to 9:30. Mark your calendars.

For our second panel, as I've noted, we will begin our study on the report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Ontario 2022, and we welcome our colleagues here today.

We have Michael Coteau, MP for Don Valley East, by video conference; Mr. Han Dong, MP for Don Valley North; Ms. Melissa Lantsman, MP for Thornhill; the Honourable John McKay, MP for Scarborough—Guildwood; the honourable Robert Oliphant, MP for Don Valley West; and Mrs. Salma Zahid, MP for Scarborough Centre.

We welcome you all and thank you for being here today. Each of you will have up to three minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to comments and questions from committee members.

We will start with Mr. Coteau.

Welcome.

• (1220)

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I believe that the electoral boundaries commission is about to make a major mistake that will have a devastating impact on certain Toronto neighbourhoods for years to come—including Flemingdon Park, where I was raised—reducing support to newcomers and upending stable historic communities that have existed for 100 years plus.

Last year, the electoral boundaries commission for Ontario released its recommendations, which included an expansion of Don Valley East, and the public had an opportunity to review and comment on those changes.

On February 10, the commission reversed course and recommended the elimination of Don Valley East without any public input. This came as a complete shock. My community was angry.

This is not the first time Don Valley East has been negatively impacted by electoral redistribution. A decade ago, the riding was cut in half when they created Don Valley North, and now it's being divided into three.

There are communities I represent that have been in three ridings, pending this proposal, within a decade. My submission, which each of you have, includes four objections: the lack of public notice and due process; the impact on newcomers, racialized and Muslim residents; the historical significance of the villages of North York; and a complete disregard for Victoria Park Avenue as a historical political dividing line between North York and Scarborough.

Because of time constraints, I will address two of the four main points.

First, the significance of the Victoria Park line was supported by 24 MPs, as outlined in a co-authored letter and supported by members adjacent to this historical border.

Second is the lack of due process. I must remind members of this committee that this report by the commission was never shared or consulted upon. No one had the opportunity to weigh in on these changes, and the original proposal recommended expanding Don Valley East, not eliminating it. This is unacceptable. We have a responsibility to do what's right as MPs, and you as a committee have a responsibility to never allow this to happen again.

I have also made four recommendations, which I hope the committee will endorse. My brief includes reference to court decisions that directly relate to the matters at hand. I trust all of you on the committee will have the opportunity to review these points.

I have also tabled answers to the six questions the committee asked to address. I have submitted a letter from the City of Toronto, signed by 23 councillors, and a letter from our MPP, the school board trustee, local organizations and two community mosques, a copy of every email my office has received on this issue—more than 500—and a petition signed by 952 people organized by a local group of concerned citizens. The group has also coordinated the placement of 1,000 lawn signs in the riding and has had three community consultations.

I implore you to do the right thing and recommend that this matter be sent back for public input to address the flaw in the legislation that has brought us to this point.

I want to say thank you to the city councillor from Willowdale, who is joining us here today.

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Ind.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm here today to express my objections to the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Ontario's proposal regarding the Don Valley North riding.

The commission proposed to move the riding's eastern boundary from Victoria Park Avenue westward to Highway 404, which would remove the neighbourhood of Pleasant View and parts of Henry Farm and Hillcrest Village from Don Valley North.

The proposal would instead incorporate these North York communities into Scarborough—Agincourt and result in an electoral district that would be 84% in Scarborough. The commission also proposed to include the neighbourhoods north of York Mills Road between Yonge Street, Highway 401 and Don River.

In my letter to the committee, I raised three main concerns regarding the commission's proposals, but for the purpose of this discussion I would like to focus on two.

First, I believe the commission failed to adequately apply its own standards with regard to how it drew boundaries respecting Scarborough versus North York. While the commission sought to respect the historical significance of the former city of Scarborough and took efforts to accommodate this reality, I believe it failed to do the same for the former city of North York.

The commission acknowledges in its report the importance of recognizing and considering communities of identity, as well as historic patterns that determine boundaries, but failed to do so in the case of North York. The commission rightfully acknowledged Victoria Park Avenue as a very important landmark for the residents of Scarborough; however, the commission has failed to adequately recognize that this is also a very important landmark for the residents of North York.

North York was its own municipality prior to the amalgamation of the city of Toronto and for many decades the residents east of Highway 404 and west of Victoria Park have been residents of North York—in fact, for over 100 years. If the commission is prepared to consider the importance of community of identity and historic patterns with regard to Scarborough, it must do the same for North York.

The second major concern I would like to raise has to do with an issue that this committee has heard much about already. That is the significant changes between the first proposal and the report that was tabled in the House.

I know this committee has heard these concerns raised by other members, and I believe the fact that other members have expressed this concern highlights its significance. These changes presented in the commission's final report vary so significantly from the original proposal that I believe they would have warranted providing opportunities for community feedback and further consultation.

I believe that there is more work to be done regarding this proposal that has been tabled. I'm hopeful that these objections will be thoughtfully considered.

I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions the committee may have today.

Thank you.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lantsman.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Chair, thanks for having me here. It's a different vantage point for committee, for sure.

Thanks for the opportunity regarding the boundary readjustment report for Ontario. I'm here with a simple objection to the proposed name change of the riding of Thornhill.

In the proposal, it says “Vaughan—Thornhill”, but I'd object to anything similar as well.

The objection is made on behalf of not only me, but many constituents, as well as the ward 1 councillor from Markham, whose constituents are federally represented by the member of Parliament for Thornhill, as well as the neighbouring member of Parliament, your colleague, Minister Ng.

There are no objections to the name change from any other colleagues or the mayors in the region.

Thornhill is a unique pocket of the GTA. It's unlike any other in the sense that it was established in 1794. The people of Thornhill identify as Thornhillers, even though they are part of the City of Vaughan or the City of Markham, depending on where they live.

During the last federal boundary change, Thornhill was split into two ridings, which are the ridings of Markham—Thornhill and Thornhill proper. The name of the Markham—Thornhill riding makes sense, because 100% of that riding resides in Markham. It's the same in other neighbouring ridings. You would know from your colleague, Mr. Sorbara. His riding is Vaughan—Woodbridge, and 100% of his riding is in Vaughan.

It causes a bit of confusion. There are other examples where our colleague from King—Vaughan has both of those municipalities in her riding name, because it straddles both of those municipalities.

I realize that many colleagues around the table would have many municipalities, but when you have only two and you put one in the name, it creates confusion for people who live there.

The current riding of Thornhill straddles both municipalities, Vaughan and Markham. I'd appreciate it if the committee would consider keeping the name “Thornhill”.

I'll cede the rest of my time to anybody who wants it.

● (1230)

The Chair: Thank you kindly for that extra minute back. We appreciate it.

Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I would suggest that Mrs. Zahid go next, because Mr. Coteau's, Mrs. Zahid's and my submissions all kind of flow from each other. She would be the logical second person to speak.

The Chair: Mrs. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. I trust you all have read my detailed objection.

In short, with its final report, the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Ontario made radical changes not envisioned by the interim report, with no opportunity for meaningful public consultation. These changes split the existing constituency in half and split important communities of interest.

My objections are threefold.

First is procedural fairness. The final electoral boundaries map for Scarborough is a major deviation from the original proposal, which has not been justified. The new boundaries were created without effective consultation with the communities impacted by this new proposal.

Second, the new boundaries do not take into consideration important communities of interest in Scarborough Centre, including one of the largest Muslim communities in the greater Toronto area. More than 20,000 Muslims live in the riding, and the proposed boundary is a block from the major mosque. Drawing the proposed riding boundary at Midland Avenue effectively splits this community in half, which will create confusion about where and how to access government support. It also divides a major Tamil community of 10,000 people. These new proposed boundaries would also split this community, separating it from community resources and businesses that are routinely accessed.

As other levels of government map their boundaries to the federal boundaries, the proposed borders will also create challenges for other orders of government by splitting the catchment area for three schools serving the marginalized and new immigrant communities. Electing a trustee not responsible for their children's school will make it more challenging for parents to effectively advocate for their children and ensure they are able to access the extra resources they need to succeed in an at-risk neighbourhood.

Third, the new boundaries eliminate the traditional Scarborough border at Victoria Park Avenue and merge communities with very different socio-economic profiles. To address these objections, I'm proposing a series of boundary changes that will keep communities of interest together in a number of Scarborough ridings and ensure a stronger Scarborough presence within these six ridings than is currently proposed. These boundary changes are proposed in consultation and with the support of the members of Parliament for Scarborough—Guildwood and Scarborough—Rouge Park. A map showing the proposed borders was included with my full complaint.

Finally, given that our proposed new boundaries would result in a riding that is 68% Scarborough, compared to 55% Scarborough under the borders in the FEBCO's final report, I request the riding continue with its traditional name of Scarborough Centre. This is the name familiar to most residents, and it will help avoid confusion.

I ask the committee members to recommend these proposed changes to the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Ontario.

I welcome your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

May I say that I endorse Mr. Coteau's and Madam Zahid's remarks in full.

This is really a tale of three maps. I hope they've been distributed to you.

The first map is the current configuration of the boundary. The second map was the first suggestion of the commission, to which we submitted no objection because it worked to the greater benefit of both the 416 area and, more particularly, Scarborough. It recognized the integrity of Scarborough. We supported and had no objections to that. The third one completely blindsided the riding. It totally butchered the riding, bears no relationship to anything else, and did bits and pieces, because of other configurations.

I'm left to be the only one to object, because the community had no opportunity to object, no opportunity to weigh in, no opportunity to say what they might prefer. This is a process objection as much as it is a substantive objection. This proposed configuration, as Madam Zahid said, bears no relationship to communities of interest, no relationship to geographical sensibilities, no relationship to historical truths and no relationship to the integrity that has been Scarborough. Literally, I don't think we could go quite back to the 1700s, as Ms. Lantsman said—and there might be some who said I was there—but it is a community that has had its integrity over many years. At one point Scarborough was a township; then it became a borough; then it became a city, and now, much to its resistance or chagrin, it is part of the greater Toronto area.

With that, I cede whatever time I have left either to Mr. Coteau or to Madam Zahid.

I thank you for your time and your attention.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you.

The time will not go to the others, but when they have questions and comments, they will receive some extra time.

Mr. Oliphant.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of PROC.

It's pretty good to see Mr. Cooper here today, because I know that, uniquely among all members of Parliament, he has the maps of all our ridings over the last 100 years, and the election results, firmly ingrained in his head—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Robert Oliphant: —and he will know that these communities have bounced back and forth a number of times over the years.

You are dealing with the report from the electoral boundaries commission for Ontario. I'd like to present two relatively minor objections, and I would see them as improvements. They have no domino effect on the work of the commission but respond to a local concern and a community-of-interest concern. They were not in the initial report of the commission, having been added only in the final report.

The first is with respect to the name. I believe it would be best if it remained Don Valley West and was not renamed Don Valley South.

The second is that the small area known as Governor's Bridge should remain in University—Rosedale and not be included in the new boundaries of Don Valley West.

On the first issue, the final report of the commission says that the entire new riding lies west of both branches of the Don River. The name Don Valley South is inconsistent with the real geography of the riding. In 2013, the then electoral boundaries commission rejected a proposal to change the name of Don Valley East to Don Valley South. The commission concluded that, "While the electoral district is situated south of the electoral district of Don Valley North, it is also situated east of the electoral district of Don Valley West."

I'm giving you all the Don Valleys here.

The current riding of Don Valley West is situated to the west of the current riding of Don Valley East, and the proposed riding will still be situated to the west of the amalgamated riding of Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East.

Further to geography—this is a bit about the rivers—the source of both branches of the Don River is indeed north of the current proposed riding of Don Valley West; however, the Don continues south and touches on four other ridings before it reaches Lake Ontario. Additionally, the name is well known and, as my written submission indicates, 94.5% of the new riding has already at one time or another been called Don Valley West, either before or after the last redistribution. Changing it would add confusion to the residents.

In summary, the proposed riding name change to Don Valley South would be inconsistent with the conclusion of the 2013 commission, would be geographically incorrect, because the Don Valley goes much further south, and would cause confusion.

My second objection is with respect to a very small part of the newly proposed riding, called Governor's Bridge. Simply put, this area does not share a community of interest with surrounding neighbourhoods in Don Valley West. It really is part of Rosedale. I don't think it has ever been persuaded that it should be a community of interest along with Don Valley West. It represents only 0.5% of the new riding and, therefore, has no material impact on proportionality or numbers in the riding.

Those are my two suggestions.

The Chair: Thank you. That was brilliant.

We will now proceed with six-minute rounds of questions, starting with Ms. Gladu, followed by Mr. Turnbull, Madame Gaudreau and then Mrs. Blaney.

Madam Gladu, go ahead.

● (1240)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Chair. It's a pleasure to be here today.

Thank you to all of our witnesses today.

Before we go ahead, I should let you know that as the lead for the Ontario redistribution on the part of the Conservatives, I attended nearly all the public hearings. There were more than 40 of them, and there were 20 or 30 witnesses at each one, so it was quite a long undertaking.

What I would say, specific to Scarborough, is that out of the 800 to 1,000 people we heard from, a disproportionate number were from Scarborough—many constituents and councillors. It's my view that on the maps overall, even in Ontario, the commissioners listened to those who participated in the public hearings and addressed most of the issues.

In Toronto specifically, one of the points that Peter Loewen, one of the commissioners, made was that growth in Toronto was 6% versus 13% in the rest of the province. That was one of the things that caused the difficulty with their having to change boundaries.

Specifically to the witnesses, to each of you who has asked for a name change, a lot of latitude was given to naming the ridings appropriately. I don't personally have any objections to that, but I just want to make sure, Mr. Oliphant, that there's no objection from anybody within your riding.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: No, there isn't, and in fact there's widespread support from the MPP, the city councillor and the residents' associations.

I didn't get to that part. I got cut off.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Okay. Ms. Zahid, I have the same—

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Yes, people would like to see that Scarborough Centre.... Many community organizations, community leaders have written letters to the commission in response to the name change and these new proposed boundaries.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's very good.

Ms. Lantsman, I think you mentioned that everyone was on board in your area.

Mr. Coteau, I have one question. Do you know who's organizing the group Save Don Valley East?

Mr. Michael Coteau: Yes. That's made up of about 40 different community members. They've had three public meetings and they meet every Sunday. There are about 40 members. In addition, they've held a public consultation.

In regard to the name changes you just asked about, I disagree with both of those changes. Forty-five percent of Don Valley East is going into Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, and Mr. Oliphant's riding is taking a big chunk of Don Valley East.

No one has been consulted on that issue. I would say that the people of Don Valley East in general would disagree with the name changes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Do you know who is leading that charge on Save Don Valley East? Do you have a name of somebody there?

Mr. Michael Coteau: We have a gentleman right here who is joining us, Mr. Alim, and there are several other people who are part of a committee. They're made up of Conservatives and Liberals. It's a very mixed community group.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: I have a couple of concerns about that group. Their web page is asking for donations, and I'm not sure whether that is allowed by Elections Canada, in terms of a redistribution. That would be a question.

The other thing is that they're collecting names, addresses and phone numbers for everyone who signs up, and from a privacy point of view, I'm not sure—

Mr. Michael Coteau: It's a separate, community-based group. You'd have to speak directly to that group. They're independent of me and my office. They've done everything themselves, and it's based on volunteers.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's great.

I want to talk to Mr. McKay. In terms of all the changes, you mentioned that your changes have sort of integrated with Ms. Zahid's and Mr. Oliphant's and that whole area. Since none of these really violate the quota, have you heard from anybody who would object to the redistribution that you three are suggesting?

Hon. John McKay: The number of people who have objected have been relatively minor in one sense, in part because there's been no opportunity to react. It's a ping-pong effect here, where Mr. Coteau's riding disappears, Madam Zahid's riding gets pushed to the west, and my riding gets further pushed to the west.

It basically chops the riding in half and moves the Guildwood part of the riding over to the Rouge Valley, so the community of interest that has been in existence for 20-odd years now all disappears, and we're left with what I would describe as a butchered riding.

• (1245)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

There was a lot of discussion about racialized communities and Muslim communities from the witnesses who came to various public hearings.

Ms. Zahid, you talked about the schools and the difficulty for parents. Could you explain that further? The municipalities aren't changing, so people would have the same school boards in their areas. The federal area just affects the voting.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: In regard to the comments you said in the beginning, that many of these Scarborough witnesses were heard in the initial proposal by the commission, I just want to bring to your

attention that these changes were not proposed. The majority of the changes for the Scarborough ridings were north of 401. Those changes have been addressed, and significant changes have been made to Scarborough Centre in the second proposal.

In regard to the schools, the proposed boundary by the commission is along Midland, and in that case, the catchment areas for the three schools will be divided. Those schools are on the east side of Midland. If the proposed changes are at the trustee level also, the trustees on the east of Midland will be different from the trustee on the west of Midland. The parents will be voting for a trustee in Scarborough Centre—Don Valley, but their kids will be going to a school where the trustee would be from Scarborough—Woburn.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair, and thanks to all the colleagues who are here today. I appreciated your opening remarks.

Mr. Coteau, I have a couple of questions for you. One of them is around the process, and I think Mr. McKay has spoken to this as well. We've heard quite a few times in this committee just how the commission's process in all the provinces has followed what I think they're mandated to do, but that there are deep concerns and probably some pretty significant flaws in that process.

One of our members, Jaime Battiste, was here. He called it “procedural catfishing”, which was an interesting term that I hadn't heard before.

You have an initial proposal, and you have an ability to weigh in and react to that. Then, when the second proposal comes out, if it's significantly different, there's no real process for consultation left, other than MPs coming before this committee.

Mr. Coteau, what would you say are the flaws in the process, and how could we address those quickly? Then I'll get Mr. McKay to comment on that as well.

Mr. Michael Coteau: One of the recommendations we actually make in the submissions—and I think everyone has a copy—is for this committee to do a study on the current process.

I think in the future this would be something we should aim to avoid, but in regard to this specific situation, imagine going out and doing a consultation like this and talking about a completely different area, and then getting a final report that says something so different. We were asked to consult on expanding our riding, and then we found out that the riding was being eliminated.

We're here to uphold democracy. We're here to speak on behalf of the people of our communities. Imagine that what I get is three minutes and my community gets absolutely no opportunity to talk about a significant shift in their electoral boundary that has existed since the 1970s. These are old communities. The people there love their community. Technically, they don't live in Scarborough, but the riding they will be part of now is going to be called Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East. It's completely different.

I hope in the wisdom of this committee moving forward you can look at this for the long term, but when it comes to this specific issue, all we're asking is that the commission do what they have the power to do. In the legislation they can continue consulting. They don't have to do just one consultation. Use the power of the legislation and recommend that they go out there and talk about these new maps. It is in the legislation, and they have the ability to do that.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks for the response, sir.

Mr. McKay, do you want to comment?

Hon. John McKay: Ironically, you have what should properly be before this committee sitting here. Mr. Oliphant's suggestions are of a relatively minor nature, but you're one step ahead of yourselves.

If in fact the difference between the first proposal and the second proposal is so substantive that the second proposal bears no relationship to the first proposal, then this is a deeply flawed process. That's what our essential objection is to what's being proposed here.

I understand the limitations of this committee, but if in fact there is to be a review, this would be the time to do it. I don't know what authorities the committee has, but when the second proposal of a riding is some order of a 25% or a 30% or a 40% change, a dramatic change, it should presumably be tossed back to the electoral commission to make a public justification for what its second proposal might be.

In all three of our cases, I'm sure you would hear from the public about the current proposal.

● (1250)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. McKay. I appreciate those suggestions, and I think we've heard that kind of a common theme throughout, but I think you've given some additional thoughts that build on that.

Mr. Coteau, Don Valley East is being proposed by the boundaries commission to be completely split up. How would that impact the residents' representation in the House of Commons, in your view?

Mr. Michael Coteau: I grew up in Flemingdon Park. It's across from the science centre. It's an economically challenged neighbourhood.

I want you to picture this. In the last decade, the riding has.... If this proposal goes through, it will have been moved three times, in three electoral districts. In 2015, the great, healthy riding of Don Valley East was cut in half to create Don Valley North. We dropped from 120,000 to 90,000. Now, the proposal is to split it into three. This riding has been split five times, essentially, in the last decade, and communities like Flemingdon Park, which are challenged....

They keep moving them around without any opportunity for them to weigh in. It disrupts our entire support system. For example, the police division, the catchment area for the hospital, the catchment area for not-for-profit organizations that are doing work, our school districts.... All of those maps have to be changed again. It doesn't allow for stability within the community or long-term planning.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Good afternoon everyone.

I find it interesting that Ontario is doing the same thing. At first, I thought only Quebec was looking into the process, the criteria and communities of interest, but I see that there are others. I'm very happy to see that, and I have to say I understand your position.

That said, I'm still hopeful. Some might say I've only been a member of Parliament since 2019, but I'll leave politics when I lose hope. Until then, I have to say that there is obviously a step missing. When you're presented with a proposal like this, you can't help but wonder if you blinked and missed something. In the end, you weren't involved.

I heard you say repeatedly that you have letters of support and everything to show that there has been consultation. I am hopeful that the commissioners are listening. I hope that you will be able to send the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs all of the information you have gathered and that it will be somehow carried over from the first stage, which was a bit of a surprise, to the final report.

From what I'm hearing, we really need to prioritize to prepare for the next redistribution process in 10 years. I think we need to look at the criteria and maybe even the weighting. We keep talking about the electoral quota. There have been several attempts to change it over the last few decades, but it's not going to change. That means we have to accept the reality and consider communities of interest. You said it about Ontario, the representatives from British Columbia said it, and Quebec said it loud and clear. I think that's where we're at.

I'll give you the rest of my time to respond to what I've just said. I don't think there's any question these issues need to be addressed.

● (1255)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much.

I agree this committee has an opportunity to make a recommendation—to study this issue further and make changes so it doesn't happen again.

However, right now, the commission has the ability to continue its consultation. I want to say that we're not here to fight the commission. It's a big task and we appreciate the work it does, not only in Ontario but across the country. It has a big job to do.

However, in the spirit of consultation and proper democracy, we're asking the commission to use its legislative authority to continue consulting—to go out there and consult on these final maps. Let people in Don Valley East, Scarborough—Guildwood and Scarborough Centre have just one official opportunity to have their say, so their voice is not muted and disregarded, and so democracy will prevail. I'm not recommending that you.... I haven't said, "Make sure Don Valley stays exactly the same." I'm saying, "Allow people to be part of that process and let them have a say."

Thank you so much.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: If I can add to it, I really agree with what you have said. I'm speaking today on behalf of the over 100,000 people of Scarborough Centre whom I represent here in Ottawa. I don't want any procedure that would be unfair to them.

In the first proposal, where the significant changes were being made, people were provided the opportunity to go out and speak. I was at the submissions, which were held in the Scarborough Civic Centre, and I heard people speaking about why it is important for Scarborough to maintain Victoria Park as the defining line and why it is important to have six strong ridings in Scarborough.

Why are significant changes being made in this proposal when my constituents, like the people in Don Valley East and the people in Scarborough—Guildwood, have no opportunity to go out and speak? In just three minutes, I cannot speak on behalf of everything.

Thank you.

Hon. John McKay: In addition to those comments, let me talk about the law of unintended consequences, which we—you—will not be able to address. Scarborough—Guildwood receives roughly \$100 million in Canada child benefits. If it's not number one in the country, it's close to number one in the country. It's a relatively impoverished community, particularly north of Kingston Road. The Guildwood part is more affluent. With this proposal, you chop off the more affluent part and you add to it a less affluent part.

Now, maybe that's a good idea, and maybe it's not a good idea. I don't know that turning the riding that is number one in the country for the Canada child benefit into an even more needy community, with greater needs and less representation, is really a good idea, and, as my colleagues have said, there's been no opportunity to say otherwise.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, what is the deadline for submitting documents from the community to show that the process is impartial and that the public and the witnesses before us strongly disagree with the commission's proposal? Is it in a week, another two weeks?

[*English*]

The Chair: Just so we know, basically, for us, up until the eve of the drafting of our report, we would accept information. Anything our committee receives, we send back to the commission in its entirety, regardless of where we stand. Once our report is being drafted—hence why I say “the eve” of drafting—we would not accept stuff after that. Once it's out of our hands, it's out of our hands. We do our job; we take it seriously, and we move on our way. That's where I'm going to leave that, solid.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

• (1300)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much to the chair and, of course, to our witnesses for being here today.

I will start with you first, Mr. Coteau.

If the City of Toronto maintains the 25 seats, the commissioners would have to adjust their final report, I understand, and cut a riding from another part of the province, if I understand correctly.

I'm wondering. You're proposing this, so where do you suggest the cut be in the rest of the province?

Mr. Michael Coteau: All the members of Parliament in the city of Toronto—the 24 in the caucus, I should say—advocated for this. It was something that we jointly signed. In addition to that, I have a letter here from all members of council at the City of Toronto, advocating for this—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry, Chair, if I could...

I'm just asking. I hear all the support, and my office has heard about it, so what I'm really asking about is whether, if you're proposing this, it means that the commission has to cut somewhere else. I'm just curious as to whether you have an area that you were hoping to see a riding change to in order to accommodate this.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Actually, if you look at my submission, which you have, I have four recommendations. I can read those recommendations to you. I originally signed the letter with the 24 MPs asking for the 25 seats. My objection here today has four recommendations. They're very specific. They do not include the 25, even though I fully support the 25 as a sitting member in Toronto.

The City of Toronto is 20% of the GDP of this country. There are 252 cranes in operation in the city today. It's the fastest-growing city in all of North America. To remove a seat and cause this disruption to the actual community—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: All right, thank you. I think I have your answer.

Mr. Michael Coteau: —is a huge challenge for the City of Toronto.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much for that.

I will go to Mr. Oliphant.

I am just wondering how, in your opinion, the Governor's Bridge neighbourhood is distinct from neighbourhoods in Don Valley West, like Bennington Heights and Leaside.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I'd like to say two things.

One, Governor's Bridge is divided from the rest of the riding by a large valley. Sociologically, they are part of Rosedale. Economically, the look of the houses and their traffic patterns tend to stay within the Rosedale community.

Bennington Heights could be argued to be situated close enough, even though there is a large green belt between the two. Economically and sociologically, Bennington Heights has always been a bit of an outlier anyway; however, historically Bennington Heights has been in the riding. One could argue that Bennington Heights could also go to University—Rosedale, but it's been there.

I've generally said that the one little island, which is cut off from everything, belongs most appropriately with University—Rosedale. It's about 400 people, about 250 electors. It's 0.05% of the riding. I think it just disrupts, and it doesn't make a disproportional change.

I think it makes sense—they're nice people. I would argue on that, too, with respect to the name, Don Valley South, it doesn't make any sense in the Rosedale area either. Don Valley West barely does, but it could.

The reality is, it's all about perspective on these things. For me, there is a reunification going on of three-quarters of the new part I used to represent when it was Don Valley West. It moved to Don Valley East, and I argued against that at that time. Ten years later, it has been reunited.

I respect the problem that Mr. Coteau is suggesting, too. It's a problem for the commission, and they haven't resolved it appropriately. I hope the committee can look to the future to suggest a process change.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, and I hear the process change request very clearly. We've heard that from a lot of testimony, and I presume very strongly that the committee will be looking into that.

I'll come to Madam Zahid and Mr. McKay. I am just a little concerned because it looks like there is no consensus between all the Scarborough MPs about the final version of the report. From what I understand, two of your colleagues from Scarborough are also Liberal, and they are in favour of the final report.

I'm just wondering how you will provide guidance to the commission to make changes, when there is not really consensus between the MPs.

• (1305)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: As to what I am proposing, the honourable member from Scarborough—Guildwood and the member from Scarborough—Rouge Park totally agree with it. What I am proposing does not make any changes to the ridings of Scarborough North or Scarborough—Agincourt.

What I am proposing will make changes to Scarborough—Guildwood and Scarborough—Rouge Park, so it is really very important that this committee take into consideration the split of the communities of interest, because literally having a boundary at Midland Avenue divides the community of interest into two. It is home to marginalized communities and to new immigrants, like a significant number of Syrian and Afghan refugees who have called that their home. Dividing along Midland Avenue will create confusion for them.

There are a lot of multi-generational homes on both sides of Midland. Those communities rely more on government services, and it will be a huge challenge for those communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

I understand that there are no more comments or questions from the Conservatives.

Madame Gaudreau, Ms. Blaney just completed, so maybe something will come to mind. I'll reserve your right of refusal.

I know there is a quick question from Mrs. Romanado, followed by Mr. Fergus.

Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all of the members for coming today.

Mr. Coteau, I just want to say that I have been hearing from folks in your riding, and I want to thank you for coming today and being their voice. They have been telling us that they didn't have an opportunity, obviously, to voice their opinions, so thank you for that.

I have a quick question for Mr. Oliphant.

You mentioned to us that you would suggest that a portion of the riding go back to University—Rosedale. Have you had a conversation with the current MP there? You didn't mention whether or not she was in agreement.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: She is in agreement.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: That's perfect. Thank you so much.

That was the only question I had. Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

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

Through you to Mr. Coteau, those of us from outside Ontario, or outside Toronto, might not understand the nuances of Scarborough versus North York. I was wondering if you could—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Isn't that the centre of the planet?

An hon. member: Never mind the planet; it's the centre of the universe.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Greg Fergus: Can you explain why this is so important for people on both sides of Victoria Park?

Mr. Michael Coteau: You know, the one thing that everyone adjacent to that line and all the MPs who signed the document—I think 24 MPs signed it—agreed is that this line should be respected. It is a traditional line. Again, it's our police divisions, our schools and our community-based organizations. Everything is aligned based on those traditional lines. This line has been around for 100-plus years as a border separating Scarborough and North York. If you come into my community, the architecture is different. The planning was different. The schools look different. Everything is different between those two communities.

I think the one thing the committee can take away from this entire process is that everyone agrees that the Victoria Park line should be maintained. Everyone I'm aware of who is here today, including MP Han Dong and others, agrees that it should be maintained. There are big differences between the two communities. If you walked into North York or Scarborough and asked the people what they thought about breaking down that border and building new ridings like Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, they would be fundamentally against it on both sides. I would say that it would be over 90%, without question.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before I go to Mr. Gerretsen next, Mr. Dong, you're not actually allowed to ask yourself a question, but yes, if you want to make a quick comment, go ahead.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I just want to add my support to what Mr. Coteau was saying. There is something called the "community council". I know that after amalgamation, everyone looked at Toronto and said there was no boundary, but in fact, when the local councillors are having discussions, they belong to a certain community council. In North York there is a community council, because this was their city councillor...and that's how they decide how to allocate resources to support services in different neighbourhoods.

If we don't respect the traditional boundary of Victoria Park, that will cause great challenges to the city of Toronto in terms of the community council's makeup.

I just want to add that point for consideration.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Perhaps Mr. Coteau is the best to weigh in on this, but I'm happy to hear from anybody.

Just going back to the process that's fresh in your minds on how this process could be improved, for those who participated in the Zoom conference call that Elections Canada or the commission had at the beginning of this process, back in the summer, they basically said that the vast majority of the changes would take place after public consultation on the proposal. Once the final solution was recommended, they gave statistics on what the likelihood of changes would be based on previous exercises. The statistics of those changes happening at this point were very, very low, and of course they will say that this is all because of the public consultation happening between the proposal and the final.

The issue is that it's almost better that the commission make widespread changes in their proposal to a riding during the proposal time as opposed to at this point, because then you have the luxury of all that public consultation that a community can drive into the process. If those sweeping changes take place, as has happened to Mr. Coteau's riding, after and at the final stage, you don't have any of that public consultation take place.

I guess if anything comes to mind, Mr. Coteau or any others, if you were to change the process that allows this to happen, what would you recommend? Would you say something to the effect that only a certain percentage can happen at this stage in the game? What would help to inform this committee to make the proposal better?

The Chair: Okay. I try not to do this, but when you hear the beep-beep-beep, then you know I'm going to speak. You didn't even hear the beep-beep-beep.

I think that was a great conversation. I know there was a question, and I'll ask the members to think about and ponder how we can always improve legislation and the act. Please send that back to us. As Mrs. Blaney has also suggested, we should really look at what we would be recommending back to improve it. It has been a continuous theme.

With that, I want to thank you all for your time here at PROC today and for your submissions. If you have anything else that you would like to add, please send it to the clerk. The clerk will share it around. You are the first of four panels for Ontario, so you will have ample time before we're looking at a report, should you want to provide anything for us to consider.

I'm going to let our guests go, unless you need them here. That's excellent.

Have a great day.

Now, we have a point of order from Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Can we contain the excitement for a couple more minutes?

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Very briefly, I have circulated this to most parties. I'm hoping there might be agreement with unanimous consent to make a small change to the Alberta report. Obviously, it's confidential, so I can't speak to it, but we have identified what appears to be an error in it.

I wonder if there would be unanimous consent to make that change to the draft report.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Procedurally, you can't move a motion for UC on a point of order.

Mr. John Nater: When you're seeking unanimous consent, you can do anything on unanimous consent.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Could we revisit this at the next meeting? In full disclosure, I'm not exactly aware of what Mr. Nater is talking about.

Could we revisit it, or perhaps at the next meeting go in camera for five minutes to deal with it?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm just going to say that I'm happy to support it.

● (1315)

The Chair: I'm sorry. Mrs. Blaney, can you say that again?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm happy to grant unanimous consent, but it sounds like not all of us are.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Without speaking to the specifics, it was simply an error. It's based on an objection. The drafters misinterpreted one thing. We missed it when we went page by page. I missed it. It's just to correct that.

The Chair: I don't feel that there's unanimous consent, unless....
Go ahead, Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I've just been given what it is. I'm happy to concede to my colleagues on this, depending on what their position is on it.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus: To tell you the truth, I would appreciate the opportunity to have five minutes at the front end of our next meeting, so that we can deal with this right then and there—in camera, please.

The Chair: I'm going to say there's no consent and we will deal with this at the next meeting.

In good news, we are going to do panel two on redistribution at the next meeting, followed by looking at a draft report of another province. In the evening, as I mentioned, we will have three hours for foreign election interference. We will be back in this room. It's room 225.

With that, I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday. See you next Tuesday.

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