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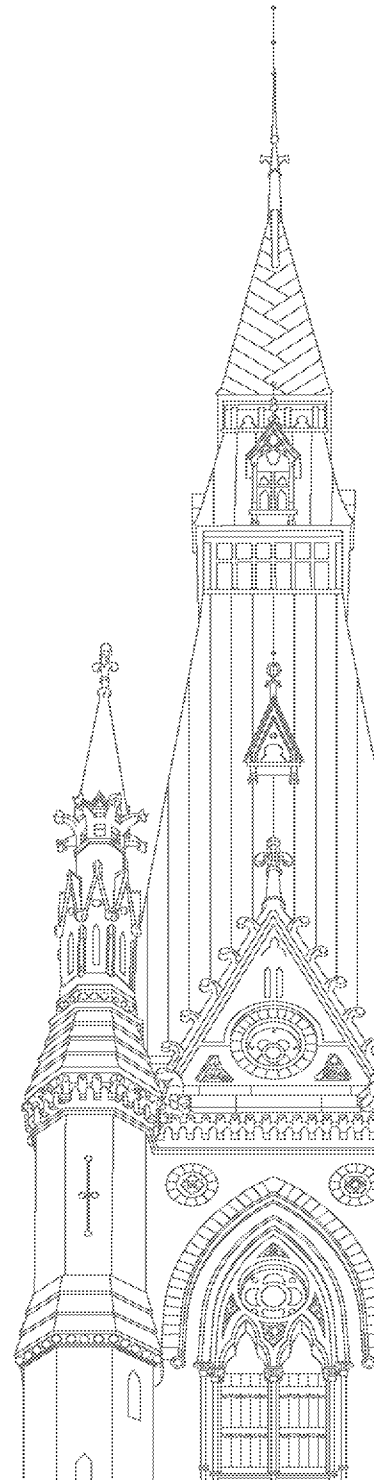
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Tuesday, May 9, 2023

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1110)

[English]

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

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

Before we begin, this is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

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

We have with us today Ms. Cherie Wong, executive director of the Alliance Canada Hong Kong; as well as Ms. Ai-Men Lau, adviser, joining us by video conference.

I understand that you will be bringing opening comments together.

I will start with Ms. Lau, who will automatically pass it to Ms. Wong.

Ms. Lau, welcome to committee.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau (Advisor, Alliance Canada Hong Kong): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Hello. My name is Ai-Men Lau. I am an adviser to Alliance Canada Hong Kong and a research analyst at the Taiwanese civil society organization Doublethink Lab, which researches CCP influence operations and disinformation campaigns.

Ms. Cherie Wong (Executive Director, Alliance Canada Hong Kong): I serve as executive director of Alliance Canada Hong Kong.

The Chinese party state apparatus is one of the most sophisticated actors in foreign interference activities. Beijing actively interferes in liberal-democratic political systems to shift social environments toward Beijing-friendly policies and narratives. The United Front Work Department's interference operates on interconnected dependencies between politics, economics, culture, technology, academia, governance and community, which most western governments fail to grasp.

Foreign influence is happening at all levels of government and across partisan stripes. Many politicians, public servants, political staff, former officials and diplomats are targeted.

Those who are outside of the diaspora and lack a cultural lens have a hard time identifying foreign interference, especially what is

happening through covert and clandestine means. Without adequate education and guidelines, many are wading into situations that leave them vulnerable.

At the community level, Beijing deploys a mix of incentives, intimidation, disinformation and social pressures. The United Front also disguises their activities as initiatives that advance the ethnic Chinese community's interest. Not only does the United Front mobilize ethnic Chinese communities to support candidates that align with Beijing's interests; they also sabotage candidates through social media with inaccurate information.

While financial contributions are regulated, volunteer mobilization, business and community investments, and outreach are contributions that cannot and should not be regulated.

The United Front also falsely presents the ethnic Chinese and diaspora communities as a monolith to actively discredit dissenting voices. Years of astroturfing have made it difficult for the diaspora to mobilize without Beijing's interference. Despite being afraid to voice their concerns publicly, many community members distrust elected officials due to their perceived close relationships with PRC officials and pro-Beijing organizations and their proxies.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: We have submitted a report for the committee's consideration. This latest report provides an overview of Beijing's influence in Canadian electoral and democratic processes.

Canada needs a holistic, whole-of-society approach to sustainably counter foreign influence while strengthening Canadian democratic institutions. It is critical that we develop educational materials for campaigns on issues of foreign influence and invest in culturally sensitive, linguistically appropriate civic engagement with vulnerable and potentially targeted communities.

On a broader scale, we need to provide Canadians with the tools and knowledge to participate in civic activities and to identify foreign influence and inaccurate information. Growing community resilience through digital literacy and media literacy can empower Canadians in making informed decisions, whether in front of a ballot or consuming information online.

Transparency and sunlight are crucial. ACHK supports the call for a country-agnostic foreign influence transparency scheme that ensures that foreign principals and their proxies register their activities, including political operatives and those engaged in academia, civil society, business and investments, and media. The transparency scheme must come with investigative and enforcement powers, and non-compliance should be penalized. The registry must also be accompanied by a fair and transparent appeals mechanism.

Though we have yet to see the office's mandate, the government's proposed national counter-interference office should be coordinating information dissemination. We urge the office to support the development of clearance-specific materials on issues of foreign interference to inform the Canadian public, as well as sector-specific advice for Canadian institutions.

Thank you for having us. We are happy to take your questions.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you both for joining us here at the procedure and House affairs committee.

We'll now enter our first round of questions, starting with Mr. Nater, who will be followed by Monsieur Fergus

[*Translation*]

as well as Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

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

Through you, Madam Chair, to our witnesses, thank you for joining us here in person and virtually from Taiwan, where I believe it would be very early in the morning right now, so I appreciate you staying up late or getting up early to join us today.

I want to begin with Ms. Wong.

You mentioned a phrase in your opening statement on astroturfing. This is something we've heard from a few different witnesses in our study. Could you explain to the committee what you mean by "astroturfing"?

Ms. Cherie Wong: Beijing seeks to use the appearance of grassroots organizations to carry out their state or party agenda, so they try to take over existing grassroots organizations or create shell organizations with the intention of appearing to be a grassroots community organization.

Mr. John Nater: You've called very strongly for a foreign influence transparency registry. How would such a registry help prevent the astroturfing mentality or the means of using astroturfing among the communities here in Canada?

Ms. Cherie Wong: I believe my colleague, Ai-Men, can speak a bit on it.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: Let me be clear in the first part of this.

I will preface this by saying there is really no foolproof way to completely stop foreign interference, but we can try to minimize the impact, and I think having a transparency influence scheme al-

lows for Canadians to understand how these operations work, how they function and how they may potentially impact Canadian society. It would safeguard our democratic institutions.

I think the question should maybe be around how we better inform Canadians that astroturfing is happening and what that looks like, because I think this is poorly understood. Doing that could be a deterrence mechanism, in a sense, as well.

Mr. John Nater: Chair...?

The Chair: Mr. Nater, we're going to pause, as you've brought to our attention that people who are watching publicly might not be receiving sound. Let's take a quick pause to correct that, if that's okay with you.

● (1115)

(Pause)

● (1140)

The Chair: We're going to return. I understand that the issues have been resolved. I apologize for that, and I hope people online can now hear us clearly.

Just to make sure we're able to get through this in a good constructive way, Mr. Nater, we'll start your six minutes from the top and then continue with Mr. Fergus.

● (1145)

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you, thank you to our witnesses.

I'll combine my first two questions into one.

You've heard it once; it was about the concept of astroturfing and what that is in the context in which we heard about it before. As well, how might a foreign influence transparency registry be used to counteract some of those efforts?

I'll go first to Ms. Wong here in the room and then Ms. Lau online.

Ms. Cherie Wong: Astroturfing refers to initiatives that Beijing undertakes to try to appear to be a grassroots ethnic organization. They do this either by using a name or acronym similar to that of an existing organization or by forming a shell organization to appear to be a community grassroots effort.

I'll hand it over to Ai-Men.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: The first thing I want to preface to the committee is that in my opinion there's no foolproof way to completely stop foreign interference, but there are ways by which you can try to minimize the impact.

We do believe that a foreign influence transparency scheme would provide Canadians with the very much needed knowledge on how these astroturfing operations function within Canadian society and better inform Canadians about the organizations they may be engaging with and whether or not that engagement is something they want to pursue in the future.

I think, of course, that transparency is a deterrent in itself; however, that might not completely stop astroturfing from continuing to occur.

Again, sunlight and transparency are critical here.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

I want to follow up on a bit of an individual level with both of you.

You've both been strong voices against the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing. I want to know, from your personal experience, whether you've faced any challenges or intimidation for being such strong voices.

Ms. Cherie Wong: Maybe I'll start.

When I first founded Alliance Canada Hong Kong three years ago, I spent a week in Vancouver. My hotel room was booked by my colleague under a name that was different name from mine. The day after we launched Alliance Canada Hong Kong, I held a press conference. At 7 a.m. someone called my hotel room, identified me by name, identified my room number and said, "We're coming to get you."

Now, I'm able to say this calmly here today, but a couple of years ago on that day, that morning, I shook in that hotel room. I did what I was supposed to do. I called the Vancouver police. I called for help and said, "I think someone is threatening me. They know where I am and who I am, and I do not feel safe."

To this day, I have not met with any representatives from the Vancouver Police Department. They have never sent an officer to meet with me or to talk to me about this. I have a case number, but there was no information provided to me beyond "This is not an emergency, and in fact you should not be contacting us about such an issue", because in their eyes it was not a threat.

Mr. John Nater: Ms. Lau, do you have anything to add to that?

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: Certainly I haven't faced the level of harassment that Cherie has faced, but I do know that at the height of my advocacy, I've had friends who have received incredibly strange phone calls with someone just breathing on the other end of the phone. That sent me into a panic. On a personal level, engaging in public-facing advocacy has certainly caused personal relationships to be quite strained. I certainly still worry to this day for my loved ones.

Mr. John Nater: I want to thank both of you for your advocacy. I don't think any of us around this table could imagine what you've faced.

We heard yesterday in the House of Commons how Mr. Chong, a member of Parliament—someone with a platform, someone with a strong voice—has been threatened and intimidated.

Then we have the entire diaspora community here in Canada.

Could you talk perhaps about how the community here in Canada faces ongoing threats, ongoing intimidation from Beijing?

• (1150)

Ms. Cherie Wong: It is quite unsafe for diaspora and ethnic communities to speak out. I think it is important to acknowledge that those individuals who feel safe enough to speak out in public spaces often can't face the repercussions for their action from state actors, making it an incredibly unsafe environment for dissidents like us to speak up. When we face this type of harassment and our community members know that there is no action and there are no safety protocols for us, they become more afraid of speaking out. It is a very isolating and lonely experience.

I hope we can look to you to provide support to us and understand that there are real concerns and real threats facing diaspora and ethnic communities for them to safely engage in civic duties in this country.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you for that.

Following up, we've known that foreign police stations have been set up in some of the large metropolitan areas in Canada. How does something like that affect those living in Canada?

Ms. Cherie Wong: It's of course a very scary experience. These alleged police stations make them further afraid and they remain silent because of them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank Ms. Wong and Ms. Lau for being with us today. I would also like to thank them for their testimony, and especially for answering my colleague's questions about their personal situation.

[*English*]

I'll start with you, Ms. Wong. In your testimony and opening remarks, both of you talked about the various ways to better inform Canadians at large as to how they should recognize—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

I'm sorry, but I'm told that the information is not being properly broadcast on ParlVU. I'm concerned about the witnesses and the people who are on ParlVU right now.

Can we verify that it is just the signal and not the interpretation of what was said?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mrs. Sahota, do you hear me?

Excellent. We just wanted to make sure that you were also hearing me.

Ms. Lau, can you hear the room?

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: I can hear the room, yes.

The Chair: Perfect.

We'll just make sure that people online can also hear. Please stay tuned for a couple more seconds.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We will check on that.

• (1155)

The Chair: We will now resume the discussion.

Mr. Fergus, you have the floor again for six minutes. I am giving you back your 39 seconds.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to begin by thanking the witnesses who are with us today.

I also want to thank you, Ms. Wong and Ms. Lau, for answering the questions that my colleague asked. I commend your courage. You have come here to share with us not only your expertise, but also unfortunate situations related to the intimidation you have experienced.

[*English*]

Ms. Wong, you talked in your testimony about how to better inform Canadians writ large. I'm wondering if we could talk specifically about the diasporic community of Chinese Canadians and in what types of ways we could better inform them of how to recognize, resist and render transparent any intimidation they might face from authorities in Beijing.

Ms. Cherie Wong: To begin with, we need to address that there are ongoing criminal activities being undertaken against dissidents and members of diaspora communities here. We need those issues to be resolved in order to trust the legal system to carry out its duties in protecting Canadians who are facing threats, harassment and sometimes physical threats.

On the larger scale, to safeguard the diaspora communities, we need to invest in social infrastructure that allows them to separate themselves from suspicious or foreign principal-linked funding sources.

I'll hand it to my colleague Ai-Men to talk about the specifics of what kinds of resources and tools our community would need.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: To begin with, I'd like to stress to the committee that the Chinese Canadian community is not a monolith. It is actually quite a diverse community. We have members who have had established lives in Canada for a very long time and members of the Chinese community who are from other diaspora communities overseas across the world, and many do not have ties back to the PRC.

Investing in diaspora communities might also need us to take more of a holistic look into it. That would be looking into funding language schools and looking at different languages beyond Mandarin, as well as strengthening our Mandarin language exchanges.

Ethnic media is a big one. I think we also need to be looking into Chinese language media in Canada, understand how it operates and how it disseminates information, and assess for potential opportunities for Canada and the Canadian government to support and bolster a much more diverse ethnic media presence.

Additionally, we need to be assessing for gaps in social services, helping newcomers and especially new Chinese Canadians look for vocational opportunities and resettlement and senior services, as well as translation. These are things we think we need to start building into the social infrastructure.

It is holistic. These are areas that are often overlooked. Because foreign interference and influence happen across Canadian society and not just in one particular sector, we can't look at things piece by piece. We have to look at it as a holistic solution.

• (1200)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I think the specific examples you gave—language schools, ethnic media, identifying and assessing gaps in social services—are excellent suggestions. Madam Chair, if our witnesses have more suggestions, I'd ask through you that they provide them to the committee through the clerk in writing. That would be very helpful for us.

Let me get back to how the Government of Canada should be helping to safeguard these communities. In previous testimony we've heard of the importance of making sure that we have a diverse intelligence services community so that they can be better plugged into the reality that different communities in Canada are facing. Would you agree with that assessment? If you did, how would you improve on it?

Ms. Cherie Wong: I think it is crucial to first rebuild trust. Many in the diaspora don't believe in intelligence or security agencies anymore because when we do report incidents, they fail to inform us of any progress or anything.

The first step is repairing that relationship. Some of it is having some transparency in how they operate, showing some transparency about our cases and about progress in dealing with someone who's harassing us or intimidating us. The diaspora deserves to know what kinds of threats they are encountering.

I also hesitate to look at everything from an intelligence angle as well, because some of this is happening outside of the legal jurisdiction. In the threat against me, for example, they only said, "We're coming to get you." They never said what that was for, so that kind of falls into the grey zone: Even if I do report it to intelligence or to the RCMP, it may not actually initiate any change because they don't see it as a criminal activity.

I do believe we need to be a bit more creative and look at other solutions as well.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wong.

Ms. Gaudreau, the floor is yours.

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

I'd like to commend the witnesses for their courage and audacity.

I'm going to start by asking a simple question.

Right now, Ms. Wong, do you feel threatened?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes, I do.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Did you feel threatened when you came to the House of Commons in person?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Have you been called on to appear by video conference on other occasions?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: I have. I have appeared in Canada-China relations and at the IRCC committee as well as the ethics committee, and they've all had tech issues in appearing electronically.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Is what we are experiencing now déjà vu? I'm talking about the technical issues. Has this type of incident happened to you before?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Is there any reason to be concerned?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: I believe so.

Within minutes of receiving an email from this committee inviting me to appear, my home Internet just stopped working, specifically for my laptop. I was still able to access the Internet via my phone, my iPad or other devices, but my computer itself would not connect to the home Wi-Fi.

This is not the first incident of it occurring. There is a pattern that when I receive emails from MPs' offices or committees, my home Internet or my devices encounter technological difficulties.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What should we do going forward?

In your opening remarks, you talked about educating citizens, especially those in the diaspora.

I would like to hear your comments on the education of our specialists in this area. What are your thoughts on that?

• (1205)

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: I do think there is a need for that.

A part of it is that there are very specific incidents that trigger these types of cybersecurity issues, and it's often when we do media appearances or public appearances that are seen as unfavourable to Beijing. If we are able to get specialized tech support to help us identify where the vulnerabilities are and help us overcome them so that we can participate fully, not just in committee but in other spaces—in advocacy meetings with MPs or with meetings with government officials—that would be a great help for us.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: From what I understand, there are gaps in expertise in this area.

As an expert and a victim, do you have any other recommendations to help us determine the actions needed to address interference right now?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: I think that's precisely why we are the experts and we have the knowledge. Thank you for having us here again.

I believe that strengthening the diaspora and dissident communities so that we are more free to participate in civil society and in civic activities is a proactive counter to foreign interference. If we're more included in decision-making rooms, we can notice things that are going wrong or things that are happening.

I believe there is a need for a long-term solution, but also that we need to make concrete efforts to put diasporas in the room when we're making decisions, particularly when it comes to foreign interference, where we are the experts. We see it happening all the time in our daily lives. Bring us into the rooms. We'll inform you. We'll tell you how to best move ahead.

First of all, again I will say that we have to rebuild trust with the communities. There is an ongoing negligence that's been happening, and we need to first build a bridge to the diasporas and say, "We are listening and we are willing to change some of our ways so that we could incorporate you in our work."

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the diaspora's trust in the means currently available to us to help you counter interference?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: I think it's very difficult to say. Many of my colleagues and my volunteers, I think, are seeing these types of consultations, these meetings, as a step forward, but these are just consultations. We need actions. Actions lead to change.

I don't want to speak on behalf of the diaspora to say that this is how much we trust you, because there is a very wide political ideology behind the diaspora, but I do think that we are coming slowly to the beginning of regaining trust.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I invite you to send us any additional information on the demonstration, on educating people and on ways to improve the means we have.

For example, what would be the new thresholds that would allow us to intervene upstream?

It would be very important for us to get those pieces of information here at the Committee so that we can help you.

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: We have made a written submission. We'd be happy to make any supplementary submission as needed.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

In fact, this morning, we received a document of several pages that we have sent to the interpreters of both official languages and that we will send to everyone afterwards.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

[English]

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

As always, all things through the chair, and I first want to start by thanking our witnesses for being here. I deeply appreciate you doing this, especially in the context in which you're doing it. I appreciate that.

For my first question, I'm going to start with Ms. Wong. If Ms. Lau has anything to add, I welcome it.

I really think—and I've heard this in other testimony—that one of the challenges is that it feels like the police and the RCMP are not prepared, that they don't understand how to react around this particular issue. We know that the diaspora does not always feel connected to those groups, so I'm wondering about two things: One, do you have any recommendations or thoughts about what these groups need in order to be more extensively trained and to understand these complaints as they come forward? Two, how do we build trust between those communities so that they can have faith that if they move forward...? You told your story and you disclosed something, and then you heard nothing, so the trust was broken.

I'm wondering about your thoughts on that.

• (1210)

Ms. Cherie Wong: There are multiple layers to this.

One is that the police officers and enforcement agencies need to enforce laws when there is very clear criminal activity, such as harassment, assault and destruction of property. These activities already occur, and they need to be treated seriously.

The second layer is having a foreign interference lens. Enforcement agencies need to be trained to notice the patterns and the signs of foreign interference at play. Without adequate training of our enforcement agencies, they won't be equipped to make an informed call on whether or not to flag this issue.

Another layer of this is... Not to shy away from it, there is institutionalized and systemic violence towards racialized people by policing agencies. That is a fact. When we want to engage with enforcement agencies, we have to understand that some members of the racialized and diaspora communities do not feel safe in doing so. We therefore need alternatives to make sure every member in the community has a safe way to reach out and seek help. That doesn't necessarily mean they should go to people they don't trust, but rather to those with whom they have had good interactions in the past.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Lau.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: Putting on my research hat, I would ask the committee how often you think foreign intimidation, influence, surveillance or interference happens in Canada. Can you point to how many cases there are?

We had a report, "In Plain Sight", that we submitted previously to the CACN committee with recommendations. One of them was a public commission on foreign influence. We wanted to collect data on foreign influence and allow for a public reporting mechanism. This is a way we can allow for diaspora communities, who have been facing the brunt of foreign influence and intimidation, to have a reporting mechanism. We can collect that data and see not just how severe the problem may be within Canada but also identify patterns, establish patterns of operations, and see how they work in order to better inform our authorities on how this works.

Additionally, I would like to stress that foreign intimidation and surveillance is not a strategy used solely by the PRC. We have seen other countries use these same tactics. The Citizen Lab has a fantastic report called "Digital Transnational Repression in Canada". They carried out interviews with Canadian dissidents experiencing foreign harassment. That aspect needs to have a country-agnostic approach. We need to be looking at how this repression affects other communities as well.

Those would be my recommendations for the committee.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Another thing that I saw, Ms. Wong, in some of the information I read about the work you've been doing, is with regard to specific targets around rural and remote communities. Could you talk about that?

I represent a more rural and remote region. It concerns me that sometimes information is not as accessible and sometimes doesn't come from trusted sources, especially as we see a lot of local papers and things like that closing down in communities. Could you talk a bit about that?

Ms. Cherie Wong: Rural, remote and northern communities are at a higher risk. Foreign interference is more effective because the fewer resources have a disproportionately larger impact on the community. We need to look at northern and rural communities with a specialized lens when we talk about civic engagement and how we can get accurate information to these communities while at the same time making sure we're not allowing foreign influence activities to take place without calling attention to them.

• (1215)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

My next question is around Canadian elections. I read your information as well. Right now, of course, a lot of information is given out in French and English, but that's it. How would having an expanded number of languages to reflect the diverse communities within Canada help with foreign interference and Canadian election strength?

Ms. Cherie Wong: For one, we need to actually stop translating materials, because when you translate materials, they get taken out of the linguistic and cultural contexts. We need to actually generate materials with a cultural and sensitive lens that reach the communities you're talking to and that talk about things they care about.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to the next speakers. I'll give five minutes to Mr. Gourde, five minutes to Ms. Sahota, and two and a half minutes to Ms. Normandin.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes. Then we will bring in the next panel.

[Translation]

Mr. Gourde, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question will be for Ms. Wong.

Ms. Wong, any form of intimidation, whether it is mild, aggressive or severe, constitutes interference, whether it is to restrict an individual's actions or the information they wish to disclose.

Can you give an example of the intimidation? Earlier, you mentioned that your computers seemed to be under surveillance. There are urban legends about that. For example, people say they feel like their house or apartment is being photographed and they are being followed on the street.

Is this the kind of thing you have experienced? Do you know people who have had this happen to them and who wanted to restrict their freedom of expression because of it?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Intimidation and harassment are the extreme ends of how the diaspora could be controlled in their behaviours in Canada, but there are more subtle and more seemingly innocuous ways to influence and govern the diaspora.

First off, many in the diaspora already know that there are certain topics and issues that you can't cross, because it will be seen as angering Beijing or getting on the PRC's radar, and that's not even talking about dissenting behaviour. You're not talking about challenging the state. These are simply activities and social issues that are seen as sensitive by the state that you learn to steer clear of.

Another aspect is that the diaspora is encouraged to surveil each other and report on each other. There is guilt by association to be

gin with, so if you are associated with someone who has been seen as a troublemaker, you're less likely to get a job promotion. You're likely to be denied services. You, your work and your friends and family could be in trouble, and under that lens is where lateral surveillance comes in, in that your friends and your family could be telling on you in exchange for being able to be seen as soldiers loyal to the regime.

Some of these are self-initiated initiatives, but some of them are out of self-censorship and self-protection in the sense that if I report on someone, I would be able to steer clear of the PRC's radar.

I do want to emphasize time and time again that the diaspora is surviving the PRC's violence here in Canada in whatever ways they can. We do not assign blame onto the diaspora, but we need to address this type of behaviour, whether it is lateral surveillance or this type of social pressure and exclusion. At its core, it is the foreign principal who is pressuring the community to engage in these types of violent and ugly behaviours.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Is it common for people to pressure the children, parents, spouse or other family members of someone who has, by virtue of their position or what they do for a living, some influence in our society to limit their freedom of expression?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes, and that type of activity is also extended to individuals who are here in Canada.

For example, I have spoken with a Chinese mainland international student who attended a protest and was later called to the embassy to talk about her visa status. Those are the types of activities that are used to suppress and govern not just our Canadian relatives overseas but also those who are here to make sure that control over the diaspora is maintained.

• (1220)

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Do you feel that there is foreign interference and infiltration in all spheres of society in Canada, whether it be the political sphere or the economic sphere, for example? It seems systemic.

I think there are many more people watching us than there are people we take the time to watch.

Is this a widespread phenomenon in Canadian society?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: In our previous report, "In Plain Sight", which was published two years ago, we did talk a lot about political influence, aspects of building relationships with people of influence and making sure that political decisions are favourable to Beijing.

There are also other aspects of infiltration and interference in basically any sector you could name in Canada, like technology, research, academia, civil society and the media narrative. It's happening in a whole-of-society manner. We have to address this as a whole-of-society issue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota is next.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to start off by thanking both the witnesses. Ms. Wong and Ms. Lau, your courage is really amazing. Thank you for coming forward.

You mentioned the overt but sometimes subtle tactics that are used, even just now with an international student being called into the consulate.

In your experience, the tactics were quite overt. You felt the intimidation by Beijing. Has it been your experience that others who speak out contrary to the regime's interest would also face these types of overt tactics by the regime? Are there other examples you could give the committee today?

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: Sure.

I have interviewed a number of members of the Hong Kong diaspora globally, not just within Canada. We have found a pattern of behaviour in which many of these Hong Kong dissidents who left Hong Kong after the 2019 protests and the 2020 crackdown experienced doxing. They also felt that they were being physically followed or had seen incidents of being physically followed.

Many of the interviewees I talked to also noted that at public-facing sites, like sites of protest, they were often getting their photos taken. They were getting threats of their photos being sent to embassies so that the embassies would have their information. Additionally, they would receive a lot of threats via texts and emails and online. There is definitely this pattern of behaviour that happens.

Many of the interviewees pointed to the fact that there is a seeping paranoia that they have to live with. This in turn seeps into the community itself. There's a lot of vetting. There are a lot of community security protocols that we take in order to safeguard ourselves, because we have felt like there is nowhere to turn. There has not been adequate support in that sense.

Additionally, a lot of advocates have taken other proactive measures, such as cutting off ties with families, loved ones or friends who continue to live in the PRC or in PRC-controlled territories.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Ms. Wong, do you have anything to add?

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes, I can also speak to some of the interviews I've undertaken with diaspora members here in Canada.

It's quite concerning when people begin to laugh off a dead rat on their front porch as, "Oh, they tried to intimidate me with a dead rat, as if that would do anything." Their tires are slashed, and they just say, "Oh, now I have to buy new tires." These types of incidents happen to diaspora and dissident communities so frequently that our community begins to see them as jokes, as just a part of our daily lives. That is incredibly unfair for all of our allies, because we should not be afraid to go outside. We should not be afraid that there's a dead rat sitting on our front porch or that our tires will be slashed because we intend to attend a protest today, yet that's the pattern of behaviour that many, many dissidents are experiencing and continue to survive.

• (1225)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have to admit that's incredibly worrisome. Of course it can cause paranoia, and rightfully so.

In order for the regime to intimidate or pressure people to not act contrary to their interests, they try to get to them so the person recognizes that something is happening that they can't quite explain or perhaps take to the police, although they are being intimidated in some way.

Ms. Cherie Wong: Again, I want to emphasize that there's already a culture of silence, because engaging in these types of activities is seen as dirty and as not something that someone who is in their right mind should be doing in politics. The idea is that you shouldn't touch that. For a lot of the community members, when they do see the very severe cases of intimidation and harassment, they look at themselves and say, "I'm not brave enough to undertake this. I'm not going to engage in it." They practise self-censorship before they get to the point of becoming a dissident.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: I also want to add quickly that a lot of our community members may not have the choice, because they might have to go back to the PRC or PRC-controlled territories such as Hong Kong. That puts them at an even bigger risk.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

I echo my colleagues' comments regarding your courage, ladies. Thank you for being with us today.

This has already been mentioned, but I would like you to elaborate on the importance of having a different cultural lens when analyzing attempts at interference and assessing threats to the community.

Should we be engaging community members more to better identify what they deem threats? Should we be keeping a record of those, even though they may not be considered threats if seen from the outside the community?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Absolutely the diaspora is the expert, and bringing us into rooms will only enrich the solutions that come through. We take a different perspective; we have different linguistic and cultural lenses that could come into the conversation, absolutely.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: More broadly, I'd like you to talk about the messages we are sending about the recent expulsion of a Chinese diplomat. Before the diplomat was expelled, we heard the government say that it needed to check whether there was a risk of economic or diplomatic retaliation by China.

On the one hand, does this send a message to China that threats and fear work, even in Canada? On the other hand, by holding this discourse, we are somewhat prioritizing maintaining our interests over protecting the diaspora. Was the message that was sent a bad one?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: Beijing sees inaction as weakness. They respond only to strength, and sometimes that means we have to take extraordinary measures that may cost us in something—maybe trade, maybe getting our diplomat expelled from China. We have to show strength in our interactions with them, because they take our weakness for granted. They will continue to push.

This is what Beijing is doing on multilateral institutions. They push the rules until the rules don't apply anymore, until the rules twist and turn in favour of Beijing. This is happening in the World Health Organization, in the UN, in Hollywood and on Wall Street. I believe we need to draw a line somewhere in Canada to say, "This is where you must stop. We are taking a stand for ourselves."

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

• (1230)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Through you, I'm going to come back to Ms. Wong first, and then, Ms. Lau, please add anything.

In your earlier presentation you talked about having sector-specific advice. When I listened to that, I was really thinking about how many conversations we've had at this table around action that we need to take not just during elections but also between elections. I heard you reference—and I can think of only three off the top of my head—different sectors like academia, media, business and so on. When you talk about that sector-specific advice, can you expand on what that advice would look like and how that would be provided?

Ms. Cherie Wong: On one, ethnic media, Beijing actually actively sends ethnic media journalists from Canada to train in Beijing to tell a "good China" story, a narrative favourable to Beijing. While that is a perfectly fine exchange, Canadians should be informed that these actors are being trained in Beijing by state actors. Therefore, we would need to develop a plan or a strategy to inform Canadians that when they're consuming this ethnic media organization's news, they should know that this organization is endorsed by the CCP and PRC and know that they are trained and funded through whatever means.

That's a very specific type of approach to media: understanding the funding and understanding the training they're undertaking.

With respect to academia, we already see some initiatives happening, but we should also be reaching out beyond academic institutions. We should be reaching out to researchers and to students to help them understand their collaborations with foreign principals and their proxies and how their research may be used for dual-use technology later, where it's applied to civil or military use.

We need to basically consult with experts from each sector and understand how each sector is facing foreign influence activities and create solutions for that specific sector in that time and space with respect to exactly the challenges they're encountering.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: My last question is around having a registry.

I've heard from a lot of communities that they're concerned about who could be put on that registry. I know there was talk about a strong appeals process.

I'm wondering whether you could explain how to balance the need for accountability and the need for human rights.

Ms. Ai-Men Lau: I also think it's very important to understand the messaging around the foreign agent registry. A lot of the messaging around it may have gotten lost. Certainly people were starting to take on their own narratives of it. Again, I'm stressing that this registry is country-agnostic and meant to deter.

Additionally, I think consultation undertaken with the diaspora communities is a good first step. Again, have further consultations with more groups. Understand not just one side of the concerns but also other concerns. You have to understand, especially for the Canadian Chinese community, that we have faced multi-faceted challenges that don't just relate to the PRC. Certainly, during COVID, we saw the rise of anti-Asian sentiment. That is a fact. That clumsy rhetoric has led to discrimination and increased violence against Canadian Chinese communities and the Canadian-Asian diaspora as a whole.

I think, as well, that we need to be understanding. We need to build out this registry act as a long-term solution rather than a short-term solution and look at the ways other countries may be engaging in foreign interference as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, I would like to thank you both for joining us today, Ms. Lau and Ms. Wong, and for the information you've shared.

I acknowledge once again that you provided us with a submission this morning. Once it is translated, we will share it with committee members. As always, if you have more information to share with us, please do not hesitate to share it with the clerk. We will have it circulated around.

With that, we will suspend quickly, do the sound check and have the next panel start.

We'll be back in a couple of minutes. Thank you.

• (1230)

(Pause)

• (1235)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Joining us for our next panel are Mr. Duff Conacher, coordinator of Democracy Watch, and Mr. Andrew Mitrovica, writer, who is appearing as an individual.

We will have both of you do your opening comments. Then we will have Ms. Wong stay for the question-and-answer session with members.

With that, I will turn the screen over to you, Mr. Conacher. Welcome to PROC.

• (1240)

Mr. Duff Conacher (Coordinator, Democracy Watch): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to testify on this important topic today.

I am, as mentioned, representing Democracy Watch. However, in several cases, in terms of the changes that I will be proposing that the committee recommend on any reported issues, I will also be representing Democracy Watch's coalitions of citizen groups. They have a total membership of about 1.5 million Canadians, and they are collectively calling for these various changes.

The main overall point I'm making is that simply putting in place a foreign agent registry, especially if it's loophole-filled, will not do much to stop foreign interference. Loopholes in election donations and spending and in lobbying and ethics rules currently make secret foreign interference relatively easy, as do the very weak and cabinet-appointed watchdogs, who have very weak enforcement powers. They generally also have very weak attitudes and practices in terms of enforcement.

First, turning to the foreign agent registry, it must require anyone or any entity to register if they are paid or compensated in any way, directly or indirectly, by a foreign government, a foreign entity or a foreigner. It must also require them to register if they have some arrangement with them for any activities that involve public relations, communications or any political activities aimed at influencing politicians, parties or governments. If the registry only requires registration of people or entities paid to directly influence Canadian politics, they will easily be able to avoid being required to register by arranging to be compensated for other services, or in some other way, while doing the influence activities for free.

Second, more than 40 lawyers and professors, 26 citizen groups and The Globe and Mail, in two editorials, have called for your colleagues on the House ethics committee—and I hope you will call on them—to reverse their position and to reject federal Commissioner of Lobbying Nancy Bélanger's proposal to gut key ethical lobbying rules in the Lobbyists' Code of Conduct in ways that will make secret interference in elections and secret activities to influence federal MPs and party leaders easier for foreign governments. Essentially, Commissioner Bélanger and the committee are proposing to gut key ethical lobbying rules in ways that would allow lobbyists to bribe MPs.

Third, loopholes in the lobbying law allow for secret lobbying. If you are allowed to lobby without registering under the lobbying law, then you can lobby unethically, because the lobbyists' code doesn't even apply to you. It doesn't even matter if it's gutted, because it doesn't even apply to lobbyists who are not required to register. That also facilitates secret lobbying by foreign interests and agents.

Fourth, loopholes and too-high limits on donations and spending allow wealthy interests, including foreign-sponsored lobby groups, to have undue influence over elections and policy-making processes.

Fifth, lobbyists and lobby groups, including foreign-sponsored lobbyists and lobby groups, are allowed to collude with contestants for nominations and party leadership in secret, and non-citizens are allowed to vote in both nomination contests and party leadership contests. Those are all loopholes that facilitate foreign interference.

Sixth, federal ethics rules have huge loopholes that allow MPs to act unethically and allow ministers and top government officials to have secret investments and to participate in decisions that they profit from. These allow for unethical arrangements, including with foreign lobby groups and foreign-sponsored groups. This committee failed to address any of these loopholes when it reviewed the MPs' ethics code last year, in secret mostly, and issued an initial report last June.

In fact, this committee—and you say you're concerned about foreign interference—proposed, and the House approved on March 30, a new loophole in the MPs' ethics code that now allows lobby groups, including foreign-sponsored lobby groups, to pay secretly for interns in your offices. Essentially, you have made it legal now for foreign-sponsored groups to plant spies in MPs' offices and to pay for them in secret, with no disclosure.

Seventh, many types of false claims are allowed about election candidates, party leaders and MPs. No enforcement agency has the power to order social media companies to remove false online posts or ads.

• (1245)

Finally, eighth, as I mentioned at the top, enforcement of election, political donation and spending, and lobbying and ethics laws is very weak. All the watchdogs are hand-picked by the ruling party cabinet through secretive partisan political appointment processes. They all lack key powers and do not even have to report on complaints or situations they review and investigate. They can fail to do their jobs completely.

That includes the so-called independent critical election incident public protocol panel, which is not independent at all, because it's made up of public servants who were chosen by, and serve at the pleasure of, the Prime Minister. The cabinet directive for the protocol has several flaws that allow essentially for cover-ups of foreign interference—

The Chair: Mr. Conacher—

Mr. Duff Conacher: I will end there. I welcome your questions.

The Chair: We appreciate that. I can tell that your opening comments were not completed, so please share the remainder of the comments that you didn't get through during questions and answers with the committee, because it's important that we hear them.

Mr. Duff Conacher: I was actually finished. I have a written submission I will be filing with the committee, though, with more details.

The Chair: We appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr. Mitrovica, welcome.

Mr. Andrew Mitrovica (Writer, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair. Good afternoon.

I have been a reporter and writer for almost 40 years. For much of that time, I was an investigative reporter at CTV, CBC, The Globe and Mail and The Walrus magazine.

I have written a lot about intelligence services. That work led to a book called *Covert Entry: Spies, Lies and Crimes Inside Canada's Secret Service*. It is one of only two books of any consequence written about CSIS. That fact speaks to how few journalists in Canada know anything about how this nation's domestic spy service truly operates.

Despite having turned down many requests to appear as an expert witness in court, why have I agreed to appear here? I have been troubled by much of the recent reporting about alleged Chinese interference in Canada's elections. I have been disturbed in particular by the reliance on anonymous sources to tar Canadians of Chinese descent as being disloyal to the maple leaf. This egregious, life-altering allegation should require much more than some spook hiding comfortably in the shadows to accuse other Canadians of being a tool of a foreign power.

I know about China's interference in Canada. I wrote a series of front-page stories about Chinese interference throughout Canadian society while I was at the Globe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. That reporting culminated in a story about a joint RCMP-CSIS probe called Project Sidewinder.

Sidewinder was intriguing for several reasons. Its central finding—that the PRC was working with triads to infiltrate almost every aspect of Canadian life—was so controversial that the then CSIS director, Ward Elcock, did something that no director has done, to my knowledge, before or since: He publicly dismissed his intelligence officers' work as, in effect, crap. Of course, he used much more diplomatic language. He called it an interesting theory.

The curious story of Sidewinder doesn't end there. A senior CSIS officer ordered all copies of the report to be destroyed. This was also, I believe, unprecedented. Anyway, a surviving copy of the report made its way to me and subsequently onto the Globe's front page.

Here is where my reporting and much of the recent reporting about Chinese interference differ. Sidewinder included names of a slew of well-known companies, organizations and high-profile individuals that the RCMP and CSIS believed had been compromised by the PRC. At the time, my editors and I agreed that it would be irresponsible to publish their identities when relying solely on a 23-page report, even if it was marked "top secret".

Here's the other main reason I have agreed to appear. A kind of hysteria is being ginned up by scoop-thirsty journalists and what is likely a handful of members of Canada's vast and largely unaccountable security intelligence infrastructure. It's dangerous, and people's reputations and livelihoods are being damaged. My warning to you is to be cautious and skeptical about so-called intelligence, even if it is trumpeted as top secret—which, by the way, is a standard security classification.

The fact is that CSIS gets it wrong often. In the current somewhat hysterical climate, it's worth remembering the following, which Eva Plunkett, a former inspector general for CSIS, wrote in 2010:

The reviews...have identified again what I consider to be a large number of...errors identified in CSIS information holdings. While my office only reviews a sample of CSIS operations, these...errors are not isolated to one program or one set of processes. They appear in the range of core activities of the Service and across regions.

Those errors have had profound and lasting human consequences. Just ask Maher Arar.

Finally, I am working on a story involving two dedicated police officers who have had their loyalty to Canada questioned by, frankly, incompetent conspiracy-consuming CSIS officers. Their lives and livelihoods have been damaged too. It's a cautionary story, and after publication, I urge you to invite them to this committee to tell you directly the horror of what can happen when CSIS gets it so wrong.

Thank you for your time.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you for those comments.

We will now enter into six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Calkins. He will be followed by Mr. Turnbull,

[*Translation*]

then Ms. Normandin and Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will get to our new witnesses who have just joined us, but I first want to ask Ms. Wong a question, and I believe my colleague from the Bloc was getting to this as well.

You've testified, Ms. Wong, not only at this committee but at other committees, that you believe your laptop and your Internet were disrupted or hacked and that it wasn't a coincidence. Can you speak to any times, other than that particular incident, when you believe you or somebody from your organization was interfered with as a result of being invited to Parliament or any committee of Parliament?

Ms. Cherie Wong: Yes. Our organization was invited in August 2020 to speak to the Canada-China committee. After our testimony, our website and our cyber-network were basically taken down by hackers from Russia and from China. We recorded extensively the cyber-attacks and the IP addresses they were coming from, some of which are Beijing state-owned companies. They took down our website successfully with that attack.

We've since improved our security apparatus to prevent that. We did submit a report with the cyber-attack details to members of our security agencies, but we have never heard back.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

I have one follow-up question for you. In your opening remarks, you talked about Mandarin or Cantonese-based media outlets here in Canada, domestic media outlets. I've heard through people communicating with me that the vast majority of Mandarin or Cantonese media outlets are directly or indirectly owned, operated or influenced by Beijing. Can you confirm that?

Ms. Cherie Wong: I won't be able to confirm it. I don't have solid knowledge, but I can say that most of the diaspora who are aware of the information tactics that are used by the United Work Front deem ethnic media in Canada as compromised and overwhelmingly pro-Beijing.

It's also because of the self-censorship of journalists who practise in these media organizations.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay, thank you for that.

Mr. Conacher, on April 24 Democracy Watch released a six-page letter it sent to the federal Ethics Commissioner's office calling for an independent investigation and ruling on whether the Prime Minister violated the Conflict of Interest Act by giving a contract to a special rapporteur by the name of David Johnston. Could you speak to that letter and what your thoughts are?

Mr. Duff Conacher: Yes.

According to both Prime Minister Trudeau and David Johnston, they are friends, and the Conflict of Interest Act says very clearly that you are not allowed to participate in any decision-making process that gives you the opportunity to further the interests of yourself, your relatives or your friends, or improperly further another person's interests, so I think it's a clear violation.

Handing a government contract that pays \$1,400 to \$1,600 a day to someone does further their financial interest, and the Prime Minister and David Johnston say they're friends. Even if they're just family friends, if that's the decision of the Ethics Commissioner—when there is an Ethics Commissioner—it would still be improper to hand a government contract to a family friend, and it's a violation of the Conflict of Interest Act to improperly further another person's interests. It would be improper again to hand a government contract to a family friend.

In terms of the Ethics Commissioner, as I mentioned, all the so-called watchdogs under our key democracy laws are hand-picked by the cabinet through secretive, partisan, political, cabinet-controlled processes, as we saw with the interim Ethics Commissioner. The cabinet is currently choosing the Integrity Commissioner, the

RCMP commissioner and the Ethics Commissioner, as well as the interim ethics commissioner.

You can't choose your own judge, and choosing David Johnston was, in effect, Prime Minister Trudeau choosing his own judge, but now Prime Minister Trudeau will also choose his own Ethics Commissioner, Integrity Commissioner, RCMP commissioner and all the other commissioners as those roll over. It's a very flawed system, and the Federal Court of Appeal ruled unanimously that cabinet is biased when making these appointments. The appointment system has to change to be independent, involving all the parties and an independent commission doing a merit-based search—an actual merit-based search—and a merit-based decision as to who's going to watch and enforce these key laws that protect our democracy, including protecting us from foreign interference.

● (1255)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Notwithstanding the notion of the friendship relationship, as noted by both individuals, we know that there was \$200,000 or \$140,000, whichever number you deem appropriate, and another \$800,000 donation to the University of Montreal that had been tied back to Mr. Zhang Bin and of course those operatives in Beijing. CSIS believes that those donations were part of that influence from Beijing, and given the fact that Mr. Johnston was a board member of the Trudeau Foundation that received that money, do you see a another conflict of interest there, other than just the friendship one?

Mr. Duff Conacher: Yes, but the friendship aspect is the most important one, obviously. The alarm bells did go off. There was a lot of media coverage back in 2016 when that donation was revealed. Unfortunately, the bells didn't really go off very loudly in the foundation itself until very recently, but everything was there to show that that donation never should have been accepted.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull is next.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to start with Mr. Mitrovica.

I recently read an article that was published in Al Jazeera in March that you wrote, sir. In that article you said, "because a piece of paperwork churned out by an 'information officer' with a CSIS badge is marked with any sort of security classification...does not make it true."

I wanted to ask you this: Does this mean that we should be con-testing the truthfulness of the leaks that we've seen published on platforms like The Globe and Mail and others over the past few weeks, or at least bringing their veracity into question until they're corroborated? Could you speak more to that?

Mr. Andrew Mitrovica: Yes, I think this is quite an important and crucial point. Intelligence services don't collect evidence; they collect information. That information is not tested in the way that police evidence is tested in courts. It is not tested as rigorously as is evidence that is collected by police. That's an important distinction that I think the committee should understand and that Canadians more broadly should understand and, to be quite frank, journalists should understand but don't seem to be understanding enough in terms of their reporting about these matters.

The other issue at the core of the question that you're asking is that when CSIS gathers information, it often gathers that information without context and, as you rightly pointed out, without corroboration. Often the language that is being used can be embellished to support a certain narrative that might be established within or among a few intelligence officers within CSIS. Then, of course, there is the editing of that information, which again might be framed in a way to support a particular narrative that doesn't include exculpatory information.

What I suggested in my opening statement is for the committee—and, more broadly, for Canadians and some journalists who don't have an appreciation of how information is created within CSIS—to step back and understand that they have to be much more cautious in accepting as gospel information that is either being paid publicly or being leaked to them by CSIS. I think it's a very important point.

My own reading of what I've been reading, watching and listening to is that this information is being accepted simply as gospel. That can be dangerous and has certainly, as I said in my opening statement, affected people's reputations, and it has led to at least two very serious defamatory libel suits against journalists who have produced these stories. I think that's also quite cautionary.

• (1300)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that response.

I know you've also cited in that article other examples. You rightly said in your opening remarks that sometimes CSIS gets it wrong. I think you actually said they often get it wrong. Certainly you've cited the example of Maher Arar, which I think we all know of. Would you like to speak to how they got it really wrong in that particular case?

Mr. Andrew Mitrovica: Before I address that question, I think it's important for the committee to note that I think you should also invite Eva Plunkett to appear before the committee to provide you with some context. Of course, the inspector general's office was closed, shuttered, by a previous administration, largely because Ms. Plunkett was doing her job too well. In her last report, she pointed out that there were systemic issues throughout the range of CSIS's core activities where they got it wrong, and repeatedly got it wrong; and she warned about that.

To the point of Maher Arar, in a very lengthy piece I wrote for Walrus magazine I dissected not only the security intelligence infrastructure's role in smearing an innocent Canadian, but how that information was being fed, literally fed, to some reporters—who are doing reporting today about Chinese interference—about Mr. Arar's alleged role as a terrorist. All of it turned out to be absolutely false.

The same dynamic is playing out here today. You have a few anonymous sources within the security intelligence superstructure feeding information, again, to selected journalists, who then repeat that information as gospel.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

It's 30 seconds.

I have a quick question for you, Ms. Wong. Could you tell us about or point to any other countries that are leaders in the field of protecting their citizens from foreign interference?

Ms. Cherie Wong: I think most of the western world is lacking in it, but I urge the committee to look at Taiwan and some of their more successful tactics in safeguarding their communities.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: No one jurisdiction in the world stands out as being the front-runner.

Ms. Cherie Wong: Beijing has a multidecade engagement and outreach strategy on national security. Most western countries, due to democratic cycles, only have four-year plans, so most countries in this world are falling behind Beijing's interference operations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we have Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I'm going to direct my first question to Mr. Conacher, but then I'll come back to Ms. Wong.

Mr. Conacher, you talked a lot in your speech about the importance of impartiality when people were appointed to investigate various issues.

I would like you to tell us more about a potential inquiry commission and about how the person who would chair such a commission would be appointed. The Bloc Québécois has suggested that this person be appointed by all the parties.

I would like to hear your comments on this proposal and perhaps on an independent public inquiry in general.

• (1305)

[*English*]

Mr. Duff Conacher: Thank you very much for...

[*Translation*]

I should practise my French, but I do not have a strong enough handle on the language.

[English]

I will answer in English.

The key is to have a fully independent commission that does the merit-based search for a short list of candidates. It will be a commission that no party controls, a commission of people who are not tied to any political party. The commission members can be set up by all the parties approving the members so that you will all cancel out biases, or by using people who are in set positions. They will then do a public, merit-based search for candidates and come up with a short list, and that short list should go back to an all-party committee.

Quebec has elements of that for appointing provincial judges. None of the members on the advisory committee that does the searches are appointed by the minister.

B.C. has another element for all the democracy watchdogs in B.C. It's an all-party committee that does the search. I don't think politicians should be doing the search, because these watchdogs watch over politicians from all parties. An all-party committee in B.C. makes the final choice.

That's the way it should happen for any inquiry commissioner and any other watchdog, the RCMP commissioner and all of the officers of Parliament. Anyone who's doing any watchdogging or judging of anyone in politics has to be selected in this way. Otherwise, we have just a biased, partisan, politically controlled process that ends up choosing lapdogs, not watchdogs.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I imagine you would make a positive recommendation on the Bloc Québécois request to amend the Inquiries Act so that all public inquiries would be chaired in a neutral and impartial manner by a person selected by all parties.

Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Duff Conacher: Yes, I would, very much so.

As I mentioned, the Federal Court of Appeal ruled unanimously that when cabinet chooses these people, they are biased. Unfortunately, an old Supreme Court of Canada ruling says that bias is allowed, but it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It's a bias, and it means that there's a layer cake of conflicts of interest that undermine effective law enforcement, which is very dangerous when the laws being enforced apply to cabinet ministers and are there to protect our democracy.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Ms. Wong, I would like to come back to the creation of a registry. You said in your speech that it should not be limited to political actors, but should also include actors from academia, the media and the cultural field.

What criteria should be considered for the inclusion of names in this registry? Do you have any suggestions on how to create an ef-

fective registry, based on criteria that would be universal in terms of the people to be selected?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: For one, we repeatedly urge this committee to consider country-agnostic views on these types of policy, because we don't want the registry to be seen as falling into racial tropes whereby it overcompensates and only applies to ethnic individuals in Canada.

We look to the transparency schemes that actually provide transparency in how people are funded in their activities, who they're connected to, their meeting frequencies and where monies are spent. As my colleague said earlier, we want to collect this data so that it can inform policy-making in the future as well.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I would like to come back to the issue of threats.

You talked about threats to yourself and other threats that the community has received, for example, in the form of phone calls or dead animals left on the front porch.

Are you aware of any more direct threats or even physical attacks on members of the diaspora?

I would like to know if these have been reported to the authorities. If so, has there been any follow-up?

[English]

Ms. Cherie Wong: In one of our older reports from 2020, we actually recorded pro-Beijing actors undertaking a global operation in countering pro-Hong Kong democracy activists. It happened across seven provinces and across the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Japan and Taiwan. What we saw there was that pro-Beijing actors actually came ready with these red plastic mats so that they could be ready to make a physical confrontation with pro-Hong Kong democracy actors at these rallies.

Of course, these are being recorded because there are cameras and cellphones, but a lot of times, policing agencies take these as conflict within the community. They don't see it as actual physical intimidation or assault.

● (1310)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Next is Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our new witnesses.

Thank you to Ms. Wong for sticking around a little longer. I really appreciate it.

First of all, my question is for you, Mr. Mitrovica, and I hope I got your name somewhat right.

I think that has been the challenge. I read your articles as well. Going through this process, I feel like we're looking for the bogeyman in the closet. It's like, "Here's what this means", and I know that it may not be what it means. It's about trying to gather information in a more holistic way, take a common-sense approach and really address the key issue, which is how to make sure that Canadians have faith in their systems. What do we need to do better as a country to make sure that this is there?

I read through your article, and I was very interested. You used the word "hysteria" quite a lot. I guess my question for you is around whistle-blowers. I hear what you're saying: Because there's nothing attached to this person, we accept that as factual, and it becomes concerning what that information is.

Could you talk about that? Do we have enough rules in place to support whistle-blowers? In getting information, is part of the challenge that we don't have enough supports?

Mr. Andrew Mitrovica: I wrote a piece many years ago about the protections that should be afforded to whistle-blowers who come forward to share, in the public interest, information that is in the public interest, but I have some difficulties with the construct that The Globe and Mail source is a whistle-blower.

He or she is being trumpeted on the front page of my former newspaper as a whistle-blower. Whistle-blowers generally step out of the shadows. They don't make accusations in the shadows; they step out of the shadows.

This individual is making some very serious allegations about individuals, organizations and parties, and I think it requires that person to step forward, like other whistle-blowers—courageous whistle-blowers—who have stepped out of the shadows and pointed an accusatory finger at the institutions they operated within and were prepared to publicly defend their accusations, their motivations, in a public forum. That's what true whistle-blowing is about.

The Globe source is not a whistle-blower. That person is still an anonymous source who's causing a great deal of chaos, in my view, and is not having to defend what they are doing and is not being questioned about their motivations, the sources of their information, the veracity of their information, how that information was corroborated—if it was corroborated at all—and whether or not they're embellishing or editing the information—to fit a certain narrative.

I think this is a real point of contention. When a newspaper provides a source with that kind of protection and then trumpets the person as a whistle-blower, I have a great deal of difficulty with that situation.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I think it is challenging to try to navigate this in a way that goes back to protecting Canadians and making sure that they have information they require. That's, of course, why we support a public inquiry.

With regard to the other part I want to talk about, you said—and we've heard this a lot—that a lot of our legislation around these is-

...sues is old, which is a big challenge for us, and that a lot of legislation around CSIS is old and needs to be reinvented.

You spoke in your earlier testimony about information being what is gathered, not evidence. When you look at that process and at the changing reality of foreign interference, at the changing reality of misinformation, how do you see those things going together?

It seems to me that misinformation is largely at the core of this, and it has been in many countries. In a convoy out here not too long ago, we had people holding up other presidents' signs. It was like, "You're in the wrong country."

We have to look at this really seriously, because it's not just one country but multiple countries that are doing things during elections and between elections, and they have a huge impact on us.

I'm wondering if you could talk about all of that in terms of the role of CSIS and what needs to change to make sure that there's a more thoughtful process.

• (1315)

Mr. Andrew Mitrovica: It's a big question.

Let me try to answer it this way. There's a great deal of misinformation about CSIS itself. I wrote a book painting a rather unflattering portrait of Canada's spy service. There should be some sort of inquiry on one of my key findings, because it points to the fact that CSIS itself—and I don't want to be hyperbolic here—can be considered a bit of a threat to our national security.

Let me just be specific about that. I reported on a national security breach that has never been properly investigated by any authority, including CSIS. I devoted a chapter in my book to it. It involved a senior member of CSIS in Toronto who was a member of special operational services, one of the most sensitive aspects of CSIS operations.

I reported that he was exchanging highly sensitive information—bartering that information—with Mafia-affiliated drug dealers for heroin. This was at or about the same time that the crown jewels of the agency, their operational planning document, went missing. It allegedly was stolen, according to CSIS at the time, by three drug addicts. That was a cover story.

We have to understand that CSIS itself is.... The misinformation that is being presented at the moment is that CSIS is filled with these Boy Scouts and Girl Guides who sing *O Canada* in the morning and *O Canada* before they go to sleep. The fact is that there is real trouble inside that agency. However, if you listen, watch and read much of the coverage lately, it's the hagiography that needs to be challenged.

The Chair: I'm going to have to say thank you. I can tell that your answer probably could go a little bit longer.

Mr. Mitrovica, Mr. Conacher and Ms. Wong, thank you for your time today and for offering these insights.

It is very possible that members might have other questions that we would like to send to you, and we would ask for written responses. Is that okay? We'll send those to you.

If you have any more information that you would like the committee to consider, please send it to the clerk in writing, and we will have it translated and distributed to all members.

With that, once again, on behalf of PROC committee members, Mr. Mitrovica, Mr. Conacher and Ms. Wong, thank you for your time today. We wish you a good rest of the day.

We'll see you this evening at 6:30. The meeting is adjourned.

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