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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

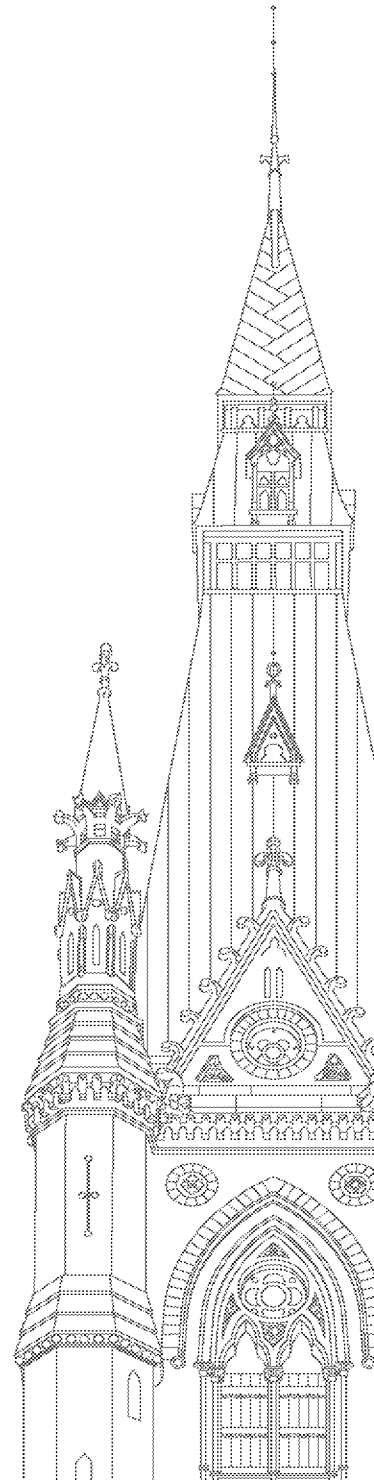
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Tuesday, May 16, 2023

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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger





## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

• (1835)

[English]

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

Good evening. Welcome to meeting number 74 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to study the question of privilege related to the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other members.

We have with us today Michael Chong, MP for Wellington—Halton Hills.

Mr. Chong, you will have up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions from the committee members. I want to thank you for taking the time to be with us tonight. Welcome to PROC.

**Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for inviting me to appear tonight.

The last several weeks have been a trying time for me and my family, but it is important to note that my case is only one of many cases of Canadians who have been threatened on Canadian soil by authoritarian governments and have suffered in silence. It is my hope that real change will result from what has happened, change that will strengthen our national security and intelligence to better protect all Canadians and Canadian institutions.

Here is a brief outline of the facts concerning my case.

I first became aware that Mr. Wei Zhao, a PRC consular official, was collecting information on my family in the PRC from his post in Toronto in a *Globe and Mail* report of May 1, 2023. The report indicated that Mr. Zhao was collecting this information for further potential sanctions to put pressure on me and other MPs with respect to debates going on in the House of Commons. According to a *Globe and Mail* report of February 13, 2023, a national security source had previously described Mr. Zhao as a suspected intelligence actor.

Two years prior, on June 24, 2021, I was briefed by CSIS on foreign interference threat activities. This briefing was general in nature and did not contain any information about Mr. Zhao. Between that first briefing I received from CSIS on June 24, 2021, and May 1, 2023, no one ever informed me that Mr. Zhao was collecting information on my family from his posting here in Canada.

I recommend, Madam Chair, that Mr. Wei Zhao be censured by the House for his foreign interference threat activities targeting a

Canadian member of Parliament. This would send a clear message to any person in Canada who would engage in these activities that Parliament will take action to defend its members.

Clearly, Mr. Zhao and representatives of the PRC in Canada have been coercively and corruptly targeting MPs on both sides of the aisle to put pressure on MPs with respect to foreign policy. In order to identify where the systemic problems are, I recommend that the committee obtain the documents and tracking records related to the July 20, 2021, CSIS intelligence assessment entitled “People's Republic of China Foreign Interference in Canada: A Critical National Security Threat”.

Madam Chair, I understand from earlier testimony that an MOU has been entered into whereby CSIS notifies the House of Commons if a member might be under threat by a foreign government. In light of this MOU, I recommend that CSIS inform an individual MP directly about specific, detailed foreign interference threat activities targeting them and their family, including the identity of the persons involved in those threat activities.

I also recommend that CSIS inform the Speaker of the identity of any persons in Canada involved in foreign interference threat activities targeting MPs and their families so that the Speaker can inform all members of the House of Commons of the identities of these persons.

CSIS has consistently advised that sunlight and transparency are tools that Canada can use to combat foreign interference threat activities so that the details of these threat activities are made public. That way, MPs, citizens, parties and candidates can make informed decisions about what is going on.

A similar protocol is in place in the U.K. House of Commons and appears to have been used at least twice in the last couple of years. Last year, MI5 informed the U.K. Speaker of Ms. Christine Lee, an agent of the PRC who was engaged in foreign interference threat activities. The Speaker subsequently notified all MPs via email about this individual. In another example, all British MPs were alerted by the Speaker via email two years ago about two individuals acting as agents of the Russian Federation.

Madam Chair, I want to say something about the unauthorized releases of intelligence.

These releases are injurious to national security and diminish the confidence that Five Eyes allies have in the security of Canada's intelligence. These releases would not be happening in a system that is functioning properly, and that is the responsibility of the head of government, who alone is responsible for the machinery of government.

These releases are a result of a government that does not release information in a controlled and timely manner to Parliament or its committees. These releases are a symptom of a national security and intelligence system that is not working, a system that is not conveying information to Parliament, to its committees, to its members, to political parties or to other individuals and institutions in a controlled and timely manner.

In this day and age, information is ubiquitous and voluminous. Information is going to get out. The question is whether information is released in a timely and controlled manner by the government or whether it is released as it has been over the last several months. It is the job of the government to provide Parliament with information about national security and intelligence issues in a controlled and timely manner, whether on the issue in front of this committee tonight or on issues like the national security breaches at the government's Winnipeg lab.

The matter in front of the committee would likely not have happened if the government had followed the example of peer jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and the United States, which have a long history of briefing legislators on highly sensitive national security and intelligence issues. This is common practice in both countries and has been for decades. History shows that legislators are responsible and effective in how such information is shared and used. Canada needs to catch up and emulate the best practices of peer jurisdictions to ensure critical national security and intelligence issues do not become bottlenecked within the bureaucracy and executive. This can be done effectively and efficiently. Based on the U.K. and U.S. models, there need not be a trade-off between national security and empowering legislators in this way.

The Prime Minister's NSICOP is not a long-term solution. It has no standing in Parliament. It is effectively a government committee, appointed by the Prime Minister, on which MPs happen to sit.

The change that is needed is institutional. I recommend that NSICOP be brought within Parliament. Canada needs an independent parliamentary national security and intelligence committee based on the model of the U.K. and the U.S.

I also recommend that the government expeditiously introduce legislation for a foreign agents registry and commit to a public inquiry focused on PRC foreign interference threat activities.

In closing, Madam Chair, western democracies will continue to come under increased threat from foreign interference by authoritarian states. Foreign governments like the PRC and the Russian Federation will not stop trying to coercively influence our institutions in order to bend our actions to their interests. To think otherwise is naive. An urgent, whole-of-government approach is needed for this serious long-term threat.

A national security review is long overdue, and I recommend that the government undertake one as soon as possible. The review

must go beyond the Prime Minister and our intelligence agencies. It must involve, as an equal partner, Parliament—the institution that is the beating heart of our democracy.

The government needs to act. To not act is to make our democracy needlessly more vulnerable to the threat of foreign interference. I am confident MPs can rise to the challenge. Let's learn from our democratic allies. Let's act now to deter future foreign interference in our democracy.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

● (1840)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you for those remarks, Mr. Chong.

I want to remind everyone that comments must be addressed through the chair.

We will now begin the first round of questions. Members will have six minutes.

Starting things off is Mr. Cooper, who will be followed by Ms. Sahota, Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper. You have six minutes.

[*English*]

**Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chong, for appearing.

We know, based upon what the Prime Minister's national security adviser informed you about, that CSIS provided the July 20, 2021, intelligence assessment that revealed that you and your family in Hong Kong were a target of an accredited diplomat at Beijing's Toronto consulate. That memo was sent to the Prime Minister's own department and other relevant departments, including Global Affairs Canada. The Prime Minister claims he first learned about this when it was reported in *The Globe and Mail* on May 1.

Do you believe that is credible? If the Prime Minister, in fact, is being truthful that he only learned of it on May 1, what does that say about his fitness for office, as the Prime Minister responsible for the machinery of government?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I think it's important to clarify that the July 20, 2021, intelligence assessment of CSIS was sent by CSIS to various points within the Government of Canada, including the Privy Council Office. That is my understanding of what happened. What exact points other than the Privy Council Office it went to is not clear.

I think it's also important to note that if one is to take the Prime Minister at his word, then clearly there was a breakdown in the machinery of government. In the government's "Open and accountable government" document, it's clear that the sole responsibility for the machinery of government is the Prime Minister's. It's also clear in that same foundational document that the Prime Minister is the lead on national security and has a special responsibility for national security.

Combining those two facts—that the Prime Minister has a special responsibility for national security and is alone responsible for the machinery of government—I think it's clear that the Prime Minister failed to structure the machinery of government in a way that would ensure information flowed to MPs and to the House of Commons when those MPs and the House were targets of foreign interference threat activities.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** There is no question that this was a significant failure, a major breakdown, in a best-case scenario. It may be worse than that; it may be that the Prime Minister knew about this and sat on it, but taking the Prime Minister at his word, who ultimately bears responsibility for this failure?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, I think the machinery of government is the Prime Minister's responsibility alone. That's not just my opinion. That's a fact. "Open and accountable government" makes it clear that the Prime Minister alone is responsible for the machinery of government—in other words, responsible for the architecture of the government, the organizational structure of the government—and it is astounding that the structure would be established in a way that would prevent MPs who were being targeted from being made aware of those specific threat activities.

I would add that the best practice of Five Eyes alliance allies makes it clear that other allies in the Five Eyes alliance have long had those procedures in place. I referenced in my opening comments a procedure, a protocol, that's in place between MI5 and the U.K. House of Commons. I referenced two examples of how that protocol was used in the last several years to protect the integrity of the U.K. Parliament from threats emanating from either an agent of the PRC or two individuals acting as agents of the Russian Federation.

Clearly, that type of protocol should have been put in place years ago when these threats were first raised by our intelligence community.

• (1845)

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** On May 3, regarding the information about the threat to your family, the Prime Minister told reporters, making a categorical statement, that "CSIS made the determination that it wasn't something that needed to be raised to a higher level because it wasn't a significant enough concern."

It wasn't just that the Prime Minister said that he didn't know; he made the categorical statement that CSIS made a determination not to pass the information on. The very next day, the Prime Minister's own national security adviser contradicted the Prime Minister. In other words, what the Prime Minister said was not true.

Did that give you any further confidence in the ability of this Prime Minister to do his job and to keep Canadians safe from Beijing's interference?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, I think there was clearly a systemic breakdown in the machinery of government, and that's why I think it's really important for the committee to understand where this information went.

My understanding is that CSIS does not produce intelligence products for itself. It produces intelligence products, such as the intelligence assessment in question here, for one of the points outside of CSIS within the Government of Canada. I believe there are 17 national security points within the Government of Canada. I think it's important that the committee find out, through tracking records, exactly where this information about me and other targeted MPs went within the Government of Canada and where the information about Mr. Wei Zhao went within the Government of Canada so that the committee can produce a report with recommendations about how to address these systemic failures.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Do I have any time, Madam Chair?

**The Chair:** You have five seconds.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Okay. I'll pick it up in the next round.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Chong, I can share that I do believe the intentions of the committee are to respond to the House on the question of privilege before the House rises, so it's something that we also take seriously.

Ms. Sahota, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chong, for being here today. I definitely think we'll get more insight as to how we can improve our system through this forum. I think we have similar goals.

I appreciated your recommendations. Some of those recommendations are ones that have already been undertaken. However, I know that there are nuances, such as NSICOP becoming a standing committee. The foreign agent registry is well under way. I wish this hadn't happened to you, but in a way, perhaps it will prompt us to do even better in the years to come.

However, we have had CSIS agents come before this committee and testify that this is not a new thing. Even from the time of Mulroney, CSIS and many agencies have had a difficult time trying to get government to act and move on ways to protect our democracy and our members of Parliament from interference. There have been many steps taken, and I think we can continue to improve on them.

You mentioned that you were briefed on June 24, 2021. I believe La Presse stated that you were also briefed on August 1, 2021, on February 5, 2022, and on July 18, 2022.

Do any of these ring a bell? Is that true or untrue?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** The only briefing I received on foreign interference threat activities was in June of 2021. That's the only briefing I received on foreign interference threat activities. That briefing, as I mentioned in my opening comments, was general in nature.

• (1850)

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Okay. Well, that's interesting—

**Hon. Michael Chong:** The other meetings weren't specifically about.... They weren't briefings on foreign interference threat activities.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** But they were meetings with CSIS.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes. I had met with CSIS outside of.... Yes. That's correct.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** But they did not have anything to do with any threat level to you or to your family.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** None of those meetings I had with CSIS indicated any information about Mr. Wei Zhao, the PRC diplomat in Toronto.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** You know, that's telling as well, because I know from all of the media reporting that we've seen that there are some inaccuracies or there's a tendency to elaborate sometimes and make something of a situation that may not be true, so I'm glad we were able to clear that up.

There was a big question on everyone's mind, obviously, when we read about the threats faced by you and your family in *The Globe and Mail* article. It was difficult to read. However, it did leave a lot of us with questions, because many members face these types of situations. We had witnesses here from Alliance Canada Hong Kong who gave us examples of the intimidation and threat tactics used by Beijing in order to intimidate organizations, activists and members of Parliament.

What were the exact threats that you felt or that you now perhaps know that your family faced?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I don't want to get into specific details about threats, but let me just say this, which may explain some of the meetings I had with CSIS outside of my June 24, 2021, meeting: I have received threats that I believe may be related to the PRC. I'll just leave it at that. That explains the meetings I had with CSIS outside of that June 24, 2021, meeting.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Without getting into details of what the threat was, is there a way for you to give us a general idea of what type of threat it is so that we have a better understanding of what to be looking out for?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Sure. It was more than one threat. One involved something that happened in the last federal election campaign. The others were outside of the federal election campaign and involved threats sent to me regarding the PRC and my travel outside the country.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** What kind of threats were made to your family in Hong Kong?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, that's.... I don't know, quite simply. As with many Canadians with family in authoritarian states, I long ago deliberately made the decision not to communicate with them in order to—

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Were there some red flags that caused you to make that decision?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes, there were. They were very public flags. One was when Beijing began its violation of the 50-year

Sino-British agreement between the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China governing Hong Kong.

You will recall that around the time of 2018 and 2019, Beijing started to violate that treaty and cracked down on the civil and human rights of Hong Kongers. It began with an attempt to impose an extradition treaty on Hong Kong that would have allowed the PRC to extradite anybody from Hong Kong for much broader reasons, which would have undermined the rule of law. It subsequently led to the introduction of a draconian new national security law, the results of which we've seen in recent years.

When those actions were taken by the PRC, out of an abundance of caution I decided to cut off communications with my family in Hong Kong. As a result, I don't know what's happened to them.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** It's a difficult thing to do, but it's something that many Canadians who have family back in authoritarian states have to go through.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chong.

Madame Gaudreau is next.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to continue along the same lines.

What's it like when the *Globe and Mail*—a responsible publication that does its homework—and Alliance Canada Hong Kong confirm your fears and the fact that you weren't being paranoid?

• (1855)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** It was shocking to find out that a diplomat in Canada was targeting my family and I, that he was using his diplomatic power, rights and immunity to obtain information on my family in China, in order to pressure me and other members to influence debates that were going on in the House of Commons. It was shocking.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Freedom of expression is a source of pride in our democracy.

Did finding out about this from a newspaper hinder you in exercising your freedom of expression?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** It didn't change anything for me.

I firmly believe that the constitutional principles underlying our institutions reflect our faith in democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Those are the universal principles on which Canada and other democracies around the world were founded. This will not affect my view.

I think we need to step up our efforts to defend those principles.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** I am well aware that there are people, including members here today—such as you, Mr. Chong, and the chair—who regularly stand up for the rights of Uyghurs.

You're saying that nothing has changed since this happened. It will not change your view.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** No, absolutely not.

[English]

I believe even more strongly that we have to stand up for these principles in the face of these threats. These principles are all we have. At the end of the day, all of our institutions and all of our laws are based on these foundational principles, which are the belief in freedom, the belief in human rights, the belief in democracy and the belief in the rule of law. They are not just the principles that the Canadian state is founded on, but also the principles that other western democracies are founded upon.

We are under pressure, clearly—not just Canada, but other democracies—from authoritarian states. Freedom House has published an annual survey for decades now that shows that democracies have been rocked back on their heels and are under pressure.

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** I worry for your family here, in Canada. I know that you have cut almost all ties with the rest of your family because of the pressure caused by the situation. You may feel free to speak your mind, but there is collateral damage.

Are your family members worried? Have they spoken to you about it?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** They've spoken to me about it a little.

I have assured my family that we are not going to change our principles or our views. We must stay the course.

[English]

I would say that what was disconcerting was to know that on St. George Street in Toronto, a diplomat was working to collect information about me.

I live near Toronto and I'm often at the University of Toronto, which is just down the street, meeting with policy experts and other experts. To know that a mere several blocks away, for several years, somebody was actively trying to collect information about me and my family in the PRC was deeply disconcerting, and to know that the Government of Canada knew about this and didn't do anything about it was deeply disappointing.

• (1900)

[Translation]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** I have one last question.

We talked about the briefings, which are really general in nature. If the person being targeted is at one of the briefings, will they be given enough information to recognize the signs that they are being targeted by foreign interference threat activity?

When this happened to you, were you able to connect the dots, as they say? Did the briefing help you to realize what had happened, or was it inadequate?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I think the government should ensure that all members, all parliamentarians, are aware of foreign interference in general. I'm talking about members of government at both levels, provincial and federal. It's also especially important to inform members who are being directly targeted by an authoritarian regime.

I think the government needs to do both at the same time.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We now go to you, Ms. Blaney.

[English]

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

As always, everything is through the chair, but first I want to thank you so much, Mr. Chong, for coming here today.

I imagine it has been a very hard period of time in your life to wrestle with these realities. What you said earlier about living your life as a member of Parliament, as a human being, and just down the street there is somebody who is gathering information, to what intent you don't know.... It is very hard to fight a battle that you don't even know is happening.

At any time, did CSIS advise you or your family of harm or threat that could happen?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes. The briefing I received on June 24, 2021, was a briefing about foreign interference threat activities. It was general in nature, but it provided very good information about the tactics and the approaches that authoritarian states like the PRC use. It was quite helpful.

I think it's a briefing that all MPs should receive. It is helpful to equip MPs with as much information as possible about how these tactics work so that they are forewarned and forearmed whenever they find themselves in a situation where that might be happening.

As I said earlier, there was no specific mention that Mr. Wei Zhao, in the Toronto consulate, was targeting me in particular.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** That is the challenge. You were told of the general battle but not of the specific people in the battle, and so it was hard for you to address it.

Since this has all come up, has there been any follow-up action around keeping you and your family safe?

You talked earlier about no longer having connections with family overseas. I'm wondering whether there has been any discussion about how that could be addressed in a more helpful way, as opposed to just cutting off ties.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** The Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Commons indicated that if I saw anything untoward, I was to report it to him. CSIS has made a similar offer. Those invitations for us to convey any perceived threats that we might be facing are welcome. I think those are good things for intelligence agencies and for the Sergeant-at-Arms here to undertake.

My view, as I said in my opening recommendations, is that there are two sorts of activities that have to take place to protect members. One is that members need to be briefed in general about the tactics and nature of foreign interference threat activities. Second, with regard to individual members who are being targeted, if the government obtains information that an individual member and their family are being targeted, then that briefing, with specific details about the persons involved, needs to be conveyed to that particular member.

I think both of those things should happen in concert.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** That makes a lot of sense to me, because it allows for a response and a more coordinated effort in addressing those issues.

Do you have a sense of how long this has been happening, where that information was being gathered and how they were gathering that information? Did they give you any understanding of whether you were being wiretapped? How were they gathering the information?

• (1905)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** What I was told by Mr. Vigneault was that Mr. Wei Zhao was the diplomat involved in gathering information about me from his posting in Toronto. Beyond that, everything else I know is from the reports in the *Globe and Mail*, which highlight the breakdown in the machinery of government that I highlighted in my opening remarks. We would not be finding these things out from the *Globe and Mail* if we had a properly functioning and working national security architecture that informed members and their families about specific threat activities.

As I pointed out, the U.K. Parliament has protocols in place to inform members at large—all 640 or so members of the House—about persons who are in general targeting the House. They also have protocols in place to inform individual members when they are specifically being targeted. I think these things clearly should have been put in place a while ago in Canada.

Regarding your question about what else I know through the *Globe* reports, this individual, Mr. Wei Zhao, apparently came to Canada in 2018, and CSIS already had a significant intelligence file on this individual when he arrived here. Some of it was from the Communications Security Establishment and some of it was from U.S. intelligence. The *Globe* also reported that Global Affairs Canada had known about this individual for three years and knew that this individual was targeting not just me but other members of Parliament.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I think your point is that national security shouldn't be going through the media.

You talked about having the release of documents. I see how important that is, but I also see how important it is that we maintain our level of national security. When those documents are released, should it just be to the member who's impacted, or do you feel there should be another process as well?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I don't think documents necessarily need to be released to members who are being briefed about specific individuals targeting them. I think they need to be briefed orally about who's involved so that they can equip themselves to protect themselves. I don't think it necessarily means a conveyance of documents.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

For the second round, we will start with.... Is it Mr. Calkins?

[*Translation*]

It's now over to Mr. Berthold. Then we will go to Mr. Ferguson, Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

You have five minutes, Mr. Berthold.

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

First of all, Mr. Chong, I want to commend you for holding tight to your principles and standing up despite everything that's going on right now. I want to point out that all of this started, if I'm not mistaken, with a motion you put forward in the House of Commons to recognize the genocide of the Uyghur people. The motion was supported by members of every party, except the members of cabinet, all Liberal ministers.

Is that correct?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Thank you.

It's important to make that clear, because what I'm looking for today is information. There's been a lot of talk about information and information sharing, but there's been little action on the government's part. Despite this flow of information, the government seems to be nonchalant about doing something.

We know that CSIS flagged what the diplomat was doing, in 2018. We also know that CSIS had had a significant counter-intelligence file on him since 2020. I'm talking, of course, about the infamous diplomat tasked with collecting information on you and your family.

We learned from the *Globe and Mail* article that you had been targeted, and the government claims to have known nothing about it.

How do you explain the nonchalant attitude of the Prime Minister's Office and the Prime Minister himself on this issue? Not only does it affect members of Parliament, but it also affects many members of the Chinese diaspora here, in Canada.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** There is no way to explain the government having the information and doing nothing about it.

[*English*]

It's really inexplicable, and that's why I think the committee really needs to get to the bottom of where these CSIS intelligence products went by looking at their tracking records on the top secret system. This is a system separate from the Government of Canada's regular computer systems that CSIS uses to transmit intelligence products to what I believe are the 17 national security points within the Government of Canada, one of which includes Global Affairs Canada. They also include the Privy Council Office and the other various central agencies and departments.

I think it's really important for the committee to understand where this information went within the Government of Canada so that these systemic problems can be addressed, because if we are to take the Prime Minister at his word that he did not know of this information, nor did the public safety minister, then clearly there was a breakdown. We need to know exactly who had the information and why it didn't go to where it needed to go for action.



• (1910)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** That brings two things to mind.

The fact that the diplomat was expelled tells us that the *Globe and Mail's* source was pretty reliable. According to that source, CSIS had a list of diplomats who should be expelled because of their involvement in foreign interference threat activities. That means other Canadians are being targeted by the same actions carried out against you.

Do you think the government needs to take action as well? It's well and good to be informed, but that has to be followed up by action. Only one action was taken. No one was arrested. No one else was expelled.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes, I think the government should use every tool at its disposal to combat foreign interference. Expelling a single diplomat is pointless. That's not how you tackle the overall issue of foreign interference.

[*English*]

I think there's a whole range of tools that the government needs to use. If we look at other democratic allies, we see that they've been much more willing to expel diplomats of authoritarian states when those diplomats are engaged in activities that are inconsistent with their diplomatic or consular status.

I think recently of the fact that Germany expelled some 20 Russian diplomats, just in the last several weeks, for activities that were subversive.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Chong, I know you're a man who believes in institutions. I know you're a hard-working parliamentarian. You talked about ministerial responsibility earlier, saying that the Prime Minister was ultimately the person responsible. That idea seems to have fallen by the wayside these past eight years. Many ministers have been found to be in breach of ethics. They issue a statement, and a week later, they change their story.

What place does ministerial responsibility still have in our system, in Canada?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** The responsibility falls on ministers.

[*English*]

Ultimately, it rests with the Prime Minister.

If you look at the open and accountable government document on the government's own website—the foundational guiding document of the ministry—it's clear that the Prime Minister alone is responsible for the machinery of government and has a special responsibility for national security.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Over to you, Mr. Fergus.

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

I want to thank you, Mr. Chong. I've followed your political career for quite some time, long before I got into politics, so I know you to be someone who believes firmly in our institutions.

[*English*]

When I first read the *Globe and Mail* articles, I was deeply disturbed and concerned—as you made clear that you were—because of the privileges we have as members of Parliament and the role that we need to be free to play.

In reading some of the comments and in hearing your testimony here, I can see that you are trying to protect the security services and the information that you received to respect your obligations as a former cabinet minister and to respect the counsel that is shared with you, but I'm trying to figure out how we go forward.

Are there things that you would like to share with this committee that you know you can't share in public?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** The only information I don't want to share in public are the specific threats that were directed at me in the last several years that appear to be related to the PRC. I don't want to talk specifically about those threats, for obvious reasons. That's the only information that....

I've conveyed those threats to the appropriate agencies and authorities in the federal government and to my local police force of jurisdiction.

• (1915)

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** I'm assuming also that those threats were shared with you from our security agencies in your most recent briefings.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes, the threat regarding Mr. Wei Zhao was shared with me by Mr. David Vigneault the day after the *Globe* report.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** Without going into details or specifics, were there other threats that were shared with you?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Were there specific threats shared with me? No.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** According to what I read in *La Presse*, you met with CSIS on four occasions. You spoke at length about your briefing on June 24, 2021, but you had three other meetings.

First of all, is it true that you met with CSIS three other times?

Second of all, can you share with the committee any details you're able to disclose regarding the nature of those discussions?

[*English*]

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Sure.

First of all, I know the June 24, 2021, date because I looked it up. I met with CSIS beyond that several times. As I've said before, those other meetings with CSIS were for me to convey to CSIS specific threat activities that I believe I had been the target of, one involving the last federal election campaign and other threat activities, I believe, directed at me outside of the campaign. I don't want to get into specifics of what those threat activities were, but that was my reason for conveying them to CSIS during these three other meetings.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** I'll try not to get into the specifics. Maybe you can confirm some of the dates, because La Presse had reported that it sounded like CSIS had an interaction with you. I just want to make sure that the dates are—

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I can't confirm that right now—

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** No, but—

**Hon. Michael Chong:** —but I would be happy to provide the committee with other meetings I had with CSIS, yes.

**Hon. Greg Fergus:** For the record, I'm just going to lay out the dates that La Presse reported. They talked about August 5, 2021, February 5, 2022, and then July 18, 2022.

If you could be so kind as to share with the committee at a later time, that would be very helpful.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'm happy to confirm whether or not those are the correct dates.

I can tell you right now why those three meetings took place. It's because after my initial meeting on June 24, 2021, where CSIS opened up a channel of communication with me—as they did with some other 40 MPs, I believe—they briefed me on the general nature of foreign interference threat activities. I was, I believe, subject to some foreign interference threat activities, so I conveyed those threats to CSIS.

As I said earlier, I don't want to get into the details of what those threats were, but that was the reason for the three other meetings. I will get back to the committee on whether or not those were the actual three dates.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chong.

Mr. Chong, just for my understanding, would you prefer having some time that is in camera and not in public?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I prefer not to reveal the nature of those threats.

**The Chair:** Whether it is in camera or in public?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** That's right.

**The Chair:** Okay. I just wanted to ask.

Madame Gaudreau is next.

[*Translation*]

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

The committee has been studying Chinese interference since November, Mr. Chong. A number of surveys show that one in five Canadians does not trust the results of elections in Canada. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs had a lot of work to do.

Today, we find out that the public safety minister, Mr. Mendicino, issued a new directive to CSIS, instructing the intelligence service to inform him of any threats to elected officials or Parliament. CSIS is also going to have to inform parliamentarians of threats against them, whenever possible. Much of that information flows only one way.

Fifty times now, we have heard that something has to be done, that bold action is needed and so on. There have been baby steps.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chong, you're helping to change and preserve the integrity of our democracy.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

● (1920)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I think the minister's directive comes a bit too late. Clearly, foreign interference poses a major threat, and Canada isn't the only target. Other democracies are being targeted as well.

That's why I think the government needs to deploy a lot more tools to tackle foreign interference.

[*English*]

For that reason, I think the government needs to expeditiously introduce legislation for a foreign agents registry.

We need to reconcile the problematic definitions of foreign interference in the Security of Information Act and in the CSIS Act. They are different from each other. We need to reconcile the security community's definition of foreign interference with the RCMP's definition. We need to ensure that the RCMP has the resources it needs to prosecute not just foreign interference but espionage, as we've seen recently with the Hydro-Québec case and the recently botched case, I might add, of a former employee of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in the Prairies.

There are a whole range of things that need to have been done yesterday to protect us from foreign interference and espionage.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I need this clarified with just a yes or a no.

With regard to the meetings that were offered to you, you asked for those meetings.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** That is correct.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you. I wanted that clearly on the record.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I did not ask for the meeting of June 24. This was part of CSIS's effort to reach out to the MPs to brief them on the general nature of foreign interference threat activities. I believe our colleague MP Jenny Kwan also received a briefing. I think dozens of MPs subsequently received a briefing on that.

The subsequent three meetings—I will double-check the dates—on August 5, 2021, February 5, 2022, and July 18, 2022, came from my reaching out to CSIS to convey information I had about threat activities for which I think I was the target.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you. That's very helpful.

We've heard testimony from other folks who have had challenges with authoritarian governments and states. They have talked about going to the local police or RCMP to try to say this was happening, and getting absolutely no response. There seems to be a lack of awareness or understanding at that level of how to address that issue, which I think all fits in, because you've talked about how you also shared what was happening with local RCMP.

What sort of protective measures need to be put in place? As MPs, we have this extra bit of privilege, so if something gets caught, it goes into the Globe and Mail, but for so many Canadians who are not in these roles, nobody is going to report on it.

What do you think we need to do around addressing this in a more meaningful way comprehensively across Canada, both on the political level and on the everyday level of people in Canada?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** First, as has long been called for by experts in the intelligence community, we need to reconcile the different definitions of foreign interference in the Security of Information Act and the CSIS Act.

I think the next thing that needs to happen is a clear understanding between our intelligence community that collects intelligence, which may be converted into evidence, and the RCMP about the definition of foreign interference so that investigations can begin and prosecutions can follow.

To my knowledge, in the last several years, despite the heightened foreign interference threat activities here in Canada, we've not had a single investigation that's led to the prosecution of any agent acting on behalf of an authoritarian state here in Canada. This is despite the fact that in our closest ally countries, individuals have been arrested for these activities.

● (1925)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Chong, as you're not a stranger to these hallways and these meetings, we will be taking you slightly over the hour to finish this round, if that's okay.

Thank you for indulging us.

I have Mr. Calkins, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair. My questions for my colleague Mr. Chong will go through you, of course.

I'd like to start by thanking my colleague. He and I have been here a long time. If you add the years together, I think it works out

to something like 36 years of service in this place. I have known him a long time. I want to commend him for the grace with which he has comported himself since finding out this information. I wish him and his family the best going forward, regardless of what comes out of these meetings.

Mr. Chong, you're no doubt aware that this committee has been seized with undertaking a study on foreign interference as it pertains to elections. In this case, we've seen numerous pieces of information put into the public realm through non-normal channels, information that we would normally expect to see through transparency and sunlight. I have my own thoughts about whether it's a breakdown in the machinery of government or whether it's a political vacuum in leadership. However, we've asked numerous times in this committee for the production of documents through various motions. Some of the motions have passed. Some of the motions were amended to remove the request for production of documents. There is a motion before this committee right now that will request documents.

My question for you, given the fact that the information will be largely about you, for an example, is this: Do you think it's completely reasonable, in a request for production of documents, that this committee should adopt that production of documents? Is it also reasonable that both unredacted and redacted copies be sent to the parliamentary law clerk so that the law clerk can then discern, and compare and contrast, between the redacted documents—which we have seen some of, and which aren't particularly helpful—and the unredacted documents? It would be at the discretion of the law clerk to make that information available to this committee so that in looking at this question of privilege on your behalf, we may come up with the proper findings and the best recommendations.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you. I think that's exactly the procedure that should be undertaken.

Parliament has the unfettered right to call for the production of documents and for witnesses. I remember when a witness—one Karlheinz Schreiber—had to be released from the custody of Her Majesty in right of the Province of Ontario from, I believe, the Mimico correctional facility because the Speaker had issued a warrant, I believe, for this individual to appear in front of a committee.

Parliament has always had the unfettered right to call for the production of documents and for individuals. In this case, I think the government should provide documents, under lock and key, to the parliamentary law clerk, who would then, in consultation with government officials, make the decision about redactions of anything that would be injurious to national security in order to protect national security. I think that's an appropriate process to follow.

If NSICOP were ever to be brought into Parliament, it would be a good procedure for Parliament to follow. It's one that was recommended by former law clerk Dufresne, and I think it's a good process to follow.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** Thank you, Mr. Chong.

My next question is more about your opinion and your feelings about the matter at hand.

As members of Parliament, we hear from our constituents all the time. Sometimes we hear things that appear to be horror stories. I've had people come to me saying that they've been under threat. I do not have a large Chinese-Canadian diaspora in my constituency, but I have some. Some of them are very reluctant to talk to me over the phone. They're very reluctant to send me an email. They're trying to find ways to talk to me without anybody knowing we're talking. I found that odd when it was first happening.

The brazenness of trying to intimidate a sitting elected MP in the House of Commons of Canada tells me there is no fear by the PRC. If they're willing to do this to you, what are they willing to do to intimidate a Chinese-Canadian citizen?

● (1930)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you.

Look, I think that's the real thing we need to be focused on. It's not just my case; it's the fact that, behind my case, there are many Canadians—it's hard to quantify—who have suffered in silence for years.

We've heard stories about people in tears who've been targeted by authoritarian states. For too long, the government hasn't taken action to defend them here on Canadian soil. We don't have any jurisdiction outside Canada to enforce Canadian law, but surely we can do a good job of defending Canadians here on Canadian soil who are being targeted at home by agents acting on behalf of authoritarian states.

Madam Chair, if I could indulge you, in addition to the June 24, 2021, meeting, which CSIS reached out to me to have—that was the meeting on the general nature of foreign interference threat activities—I can confirm that I reached out to CSIS three other times to convey to them information about threat activities that I believed were being targeted at me by the PRC. The meetings were on August 5, 2021, February 25, 2022, and July 18, 2022.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Chong, for providing that insight.

I will note that oftentimes I give Mr. Calkins four minutes instead of five. Today he had six minutes and 39 seconds. He's way ahead of the game. That's a minute and 39 seconds extra.

I'll work on that. Better is always possible.

Mr. Turnbull, I give five minutes to you.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Madam Chair, I hope I'm afforded the same generosity with regard to time.

Mr. Chong, I want to say thanks for being here tonight. I appreciate your testimony. I note that you've been around Parliament Hill and serving for quite some time—I think about 19 years, if I'm not mistaken. Thank you for your service.

As this session tonight will form part of our study on foreign interference, which we've been studying for some time, I want to take the opportunity to ask you a bit more about foreign interference in the Harper government, which you obviously served in.

We haven't had a lot of opportunity to hear from officials or representatives from that period, with the exception of Ms. Byrne, whom we were happy to hear from recently. Last week, she said

she was never briefed on the potential of foreign interference. She also said she never received any reports and there were no briefings by CSIS. She went on to say that foreign interference never came to mind. Essentially, it wasn't a major concern at the time.

Would you agree with that?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I recall that former CSIS director Dick Fadden publicly raised concerns about certain elected officials in Canada at the provincial and municipal levels being targeted by the PRC in Canada. I recall that *The Globe and Mail*, at the time—some 10 years ago—reported that CSIS had advised the government of the day that a certain Liberal MPP in Ontario was involved.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I don't mean to cut you off, but I think what I'm hearing from you is that you acknowledge that it was a concern—that there was foreign interference during the Harper era.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** That's correct.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I would agree with you on that. From my perspective, going through public reports, I can count no less than eight CSIS annual reports provided to the government and Parliament that outlined foreign interference as a major concern for the agency.

In fact, the 2009-10 annual report states:

Canada has also traditionally been vulnerable to foreign interference activities. Foreign powers have engaged in covertly monitoring and intimidating various communities. In many cases, these activities are designed to support the political agendas of foreign governments, a cause linked to a "homeland conflict" or to unduly influence Government of Canada policies.

Could you perhaps point to one or two examples from the Harper era that responded to the concerns brought forward by CSIS?

● (1935)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you.

You are correct in saying that CSIS identified foreign interference as a threat during the time Prime Minister Harper was in power.

If I recall correctly, the primary foreign interference threat activity taking place at the time was directed at the provincial governments. The Harper government authorized CSIS to brief the governments of Premier Dalton McGuinty and Premier Kathleen Wynne on these foreign interference threat activities.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

I note that in the summer of 2010, the public safety and national security committee held a high-profile meeting to hear testimony from the CSIS director at the time, Richard Fadden.

In that meeting, Mr. Fadden testified that he had information that provincial—just as you said—and municipal politicians in various provinces had come under the influence of foreign interference. He also confirmed that he had briefed Prime Minister Harper's national security adviser and had sought advice from the Privy Council Office on how to deal with foreign interference. Mr. Harper, though, claimed that he had no knowledge of these matters.

Do you think that reflects a failure of former PM Harper and the machinery of government at the time?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, if one were to take the prime minister at his word, then clearly that information should have been relayed to the prime minister, but I do know that action was taken on that foreign interference because it was a bit of a controversy at the time.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Today you've said that these are symptoms of a system that is not working and that these things should have been put in place a while ago.

Given what you've said today about your particular case, would you have the same criticism for PM Harper and the era in terms of the breakdown of the machinery of government?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Well, that's a good question. No, I wouldn't, and here's why.

I think the nature of the PRC changed significantly in and around the time of the expiry of the first term of President Xi, around 2017, when President Xi assumed his second term in power. The form and the nature of President Xi became much clearer, and it became clearer that this was a much more authoritarian state that was using foreign interference threat activities as a way to promulgate its authoritarian model of governance around the world and to defend its interests.

I think the era up until 2017 was a different era, because I followed this situation closely and I wasn't at all concerned about things like Hong Kong prior to 2017-18. I wasn't concerned about Canadian journalists in the PRC prior to that point in time. I don't think the foreign interference threat activities here on Canadian soil were nearly as intense as they have become in the last five years.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Madam Chair, is my time up? Am I not afforded the same generosity? Do I get another 10 seconds?

**The Chair:** It would be another 25 seconds.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I just want to ask if... I feel like we could spend some more time with MP Chong and hopefully get some more testimony. I wonder if we could invite him back, perhaps in camera, to get into a bit more detail.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Please, no.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** I feel like I have additional questions. I have quite a few other questions.

**The Chair:** I will... I'm still 10 seconds shy, but it was a little bit of a different story, and Mr. Chong was also providing us insights when he was responding to that.

Mr. Chong, would you be inclined to come back if members were to ask you to come in back camera?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'm happy to appear in front of the committee in public.

**The Chair:** But you would not want to come in camera. You don't feel that you can add anything in camera that you can't do in public.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes. I think I can add.... All the useful information I can provide to the committee I can provide in public.

**The Chair:** But the details you don't want to provide to us.

I think what you have undergone has been a little bit disturbing. I think this has actually raised an understanding as to what MPs do

deal with. I think you have been courageous in actually sharing that. I know you have a young family, something that I personally don't have. I think it's just a matter of trying to get into the details of it, but is that something you prefer not to do?

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Yes. I prefer to not speak about the specific details of the threats directed at me or my family. I'm happy to mention that there have been threats, but I don't think the details of the threats are useful for the committee in its work.

● (1940)

**The Chair:** Okay. We'll just let members figure out whether we're inviting you back again, but I do appreciate your sharing with us where you stand.

Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Madam Chair, if the committee would allow... I'd just like a quick point of clarification, because I don't know when the scheduling would happen again.

Mr. Chong, you said at the beginning of your recommendations that you would recommend having a public inquiry to into the interference by the PRC, and then later on in your testimony you broadened the scope a little bit. I'm wondering if you could clarify whether you think a public inquiry should just be—

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I have a point of order, Madam Chair. The meeting has ended.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** —on the PRC or whether it should include all countries and threats to other members of Parliament as well.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** She's intervening with the witness. The meeting is over. The time is up for the Liberals.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'm happy to answer the question.

**The Chair:** Mr. Berthold, I think she's asking because a comment was made in regard to members—

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'm happy to answer the question.

My experience with public inquiries is that if they are focused, they can achieve results that benefit Canadian institutions, and if they are unfocused, they don't. My view is that any public inquiry should focus exclusively on PRC foreign interference threat activities and not those of other states in order to keep the inquiry focused.

**The Chair:** Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Chong, we want to thank you for your time and attention today. We wish you the best.

If there's anything else you want to add, please send it to the clerk and we'll have it translated in both official languages and shared with all committee members.

With that, we wish you the best. Thank you so much for your time today.

Members, we will suspend very quickly before we switch to the in camera portion of our meeting.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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