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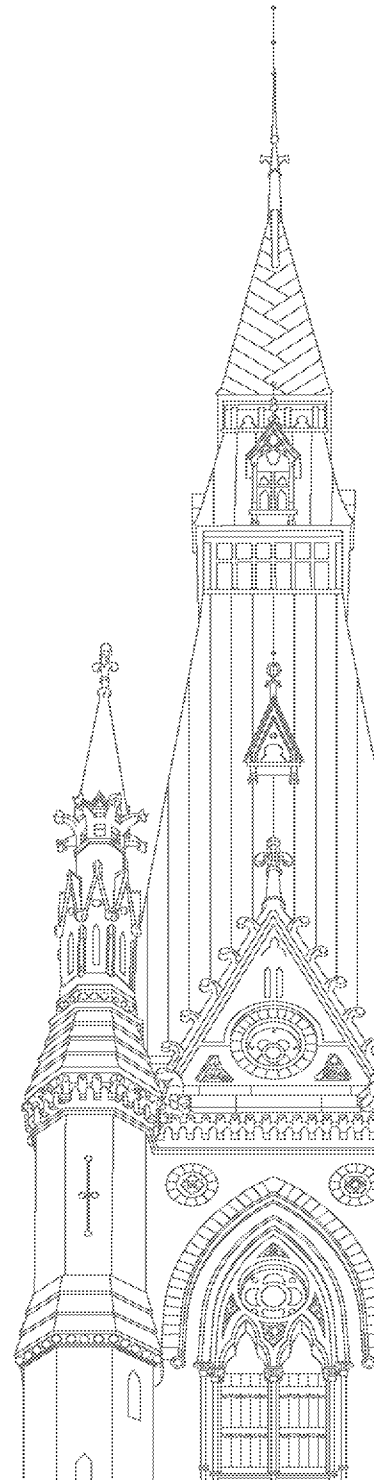
Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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Thursday, June 1, 2023

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1000)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 79 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.

I would like to remind all members and witnesses that care must be taken with regard to the earpieces for interpretation. Please be mindful to not place your earpiece near the microphone, as this can result in feedback that may cause an acoustic shock, which could in turn cause injury to the interpreters. Basically, if you're using an earpiece, keep it in. If you're not, leave it to the side. That's probably the best way. Playing with it may not be the best option right now.

I will remind you that all comments will go through the chair. The clerk and I will maintain a consolidated speaking list.

We have with us today Ms. Jody Thomas, national security and intelligence adviser.

Ms. Thomas, you have up to five minutes to present.

I really want to thank you and your team for responding to us so quickly with your availability. I'm hoping that others hear this message, because then they will get praise. I will give you praise for responding so quickly and for being here with us this morning.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Jody Thomas (National Security and Intelligence Advisor, Privy Council Office): Thank you, Madam Chair. It is a pleasure to be here again today.

[*Translation*]

The committee is studying one of the most serious issues, and I am pleased to be here today to participate in that discussion. This isn't the first time the committee has invited me to appear as part of this study. The issue is evolving, as is the public debate around it.

There have been a number of important changes since my last appearance.

[*English*]

As you know, the independent special rapporteur issued his first report on May 23, which reached a number of conclusions.

First, the independent special rapporteur concluded that foreign governments are undoubtedly attempting to influence candidates and voters in Canada, and that while much has been done already, more remains to be done promptly to strengthen our capacity to detect, deter and counter foreign interference activities in our elections.

Indeed, the government and the intelligence agencies have communicated regularly about the pervasive, growing threat of foreign interference, and while work has been done to mitigate and counter the threat, more work is required to effectively counter the evolving threats of our adversaries.

On April 6, Minister LeBlanc and the Clerk of the Privy Council submitted a report to the Prime Minister that outlined the progress made so far in implementing recommendations of previous reviews on foreign interference and election security and laid out a path for future actions.

This spring, Public Safety Canada launched and completed a public consultation on a foreign influence transparency registry.

Work is also well under way to develop legislative proposals to modernize legislation so that intelligence and law enforcement agencies can better detect the threat, assist Canadians in protecting themselves against it, and hold to account foreign interference actors.

In addition, the security and intelligence threats to elections—SITE—task force has begun enhanced monitoring and assessment of foreign interference threats, as four concurrent by-elections are under way.

The independent special rapporteur also concluded that there are serious shortcomings in the way intelligence is communicated and processed from security agencies through to government. We have already made a number of changes to improve how intelligence is communicated and coordinated in government.

Public Safety Canada has established a national counter-foreign interference coordinator, who will drive the government's proactive response to the threat of foreign interference.

We have also strengthened our governance. I have created a new deputy minister committee—the deputy minister committee on intelligence response—which will examine intelligence, direct appropriate response and develop related advice for the government.

In addition, the Minister of Public Safety recently issued a direction that parliamentarians will be informed of threats to them, whenever possible and within the law, while protecting the integrity of investigations. The direction also calls for the Minister of Public Safety to be informed of all instances of threats to the security of Canada directed at Parliament or parliamentarians in a timely manner.

As you are aware, the work of the independent special rapporteur is being complemented by the work of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, NSICOP, and the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency, NSIRA, which have both undertaken reviews of foreign interference in Canada's democratic processes. The independent special rapporteur has also recommended that the confidential annex to his report be referred to NSICOP and NSIRA for their review.

We are working to support the work of these bodies and the second phase of the independent special rapporteur's mandate unreservedly. We know that further longer-term changes are required to ensure that Canada and Canadians have the tools they need to stop foreign interference. The work of this committee, as well as the continued analysis of the independent special rapporteur and the ongoing reviews of NSICOP and NSIRA, will all contribute to informing these changes.

I thank you very much and I look forward to your questions.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now start the six-minute round with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mrs. Romanado, Madame Gaudreau and then Mrs. Blaney.

Mr. Cooper, you have the floor.

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

Through you, Madam Chair, to Ms. Thomas, we are here because of the July 20, 2021 CSIS memo that indicated that a Beijing diplomat accredited by the Liberal government was targeting a sitting member of Parliament, Michael Chong, by threatening to sanction his family in Hong Kong.

This memo was sent to the Prime Minister's department, the PCO, and for two years, the Prime Minister did nothing. The government did nothing. The Prime Minister repeatedly claims that he first learned about this memo in *The Globe and Mail*. When did you learn about the memo?

Ms. Jody Thomas: As I said to Mr. Chong at the time of the CSIS briefing to him, I learned about it in *The Globe and Mail*. I had not previously seen the report, nor had the Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You learned about it in *The Globe and Mail* and then, suddenly, after it was reported in *The Globe and*

Mail, two more MPs, Erin O'Toole and Jenny Kwan, were briefed by CSIS that they, too, were targets of the Beijing regime.

When did the Prime Minister first become aware that these MPs, including the former leader of the opposition, had been targeted by Beijing?

Ms. Jody Thomas: The Prime Minister was not made aware of the targeting against Mr. Chong or Ms. Kwan before recent events and reporting. That has been done by CSIS. CSIS has brought this forward to him in the last two to three weeks.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You said that the Prime Minister wasn't aware in the cases of Mr. Chong or Ms. Kwan. What about Mr. O'Toole?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Or Mr. O'Toole.... That is my understanding.

Mr. Michael Cooper: He would have learned about that, you're saying, since May 1.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: When did you become aware that Ms. Kwan and Mr. O'Toole had been targeted?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It was in the last three to four weeks.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It was in the last three to four weeks, and how did you become aware of that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It was through a briefing from CSIS.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It seems to me inconceivable that we have at least three sitting members of Parliament who were targeted by Beijing, including by an accredited diplomat, and you didn't know, and the Prime Minister didn't know, and only now, coincidentally, that it has been revealed in *The Globe and Mail* is action being taken.

How is that possible? How is that conceivable that the national security adviser, who is you, former national security advisers and the Prime Minister were completely in the dark about this? It seems to me, Ms. Thomas, and I'll let you respond, that this is a breakdown of the machinery of government under this Prime Minister's watch.

Would you at least agree with that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Mr. Cooper, as I said previously, I wasn't here in 2021. I cannot account for the lack of information flow to the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office, and I'm not going to speculate.

I agree that there needs to be a better management of intelligence that comes in to deputy ministers' offices, ministers' offices and the NSIA office in order to brief the Prime Minister and brief ministers.

We have taken steps to ensure that will happen, not only to brief but to provide advice on what should be done with the intelligence, because reading the intelligence is one element to this problem. Giving advice on what to do about it is the second part of the problem, and we have strengthened both of those processes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Thomas, you've said that the Prime Minister didn't know and that you didn't know. That's not just a matter of what to do about it or how to act on it. You said that he just didn't know, except for the fact that what we do know is that in the case of Mr. Chong, the Minister of Public Safety was emailed about it by CSIS in May 2021, but he didn't have log-in information to his email after 18 months on the job. Then this memo was sent by CSIS, not to anyone but to the PCO and specifically the Prime Minister's national security adviser.

Again, how is it that the Prime Minister didn't know? Why were those MPs kept in the dark, and, in the face of all of that, would you not at least concede that it is a colossal breakdown of the machinery of government under this Prime Minister's watch?

• (1010)

Ms. Jody Thomas: As I've said, I cannot account for and I will not speculate about what went on in 2021. I know you are seeing my predecessors and I know you're speaking to CSIS. I think there was a breakdown in process—not only a breakdown in process, but I think insufficient process—and so we have rectified those problems.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I would submit that it's more than a breakdown in process. It is a colossal failure on the part of this Prime Minister that we would have three MPs who have been targeted. How many more MPs have been targeted by the Beijing regime?

Ms. Jody Thomas: CSIS will speak to you about their holdings when they're here.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Are those MPs going to be briefed, or are we going to find out about it in *The Globe and Mail* and then be briefed?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think it's very clear from the direction given by the Prime Minister, and the ministerial directive from Minister Mendicino to CSIS and to the other intelligence agencies in his portfolio, that the expectation is, yes, MPs will be briefed on the totality of the holdings against them, regardless of the depth, the severity and the reliability of those holdings. Members of Parliament who are in the holdings of CSIS will be getting very thorough briefs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Romanado, go ahead.

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

Through you, I'd like to thank Ms. Thomas for being here and for coming back to PROC.

We've been hearing a bit about the process by which information flows and the amount of intelligence that someone in your position as national security and intelligence adviser would receive. At a macro level, how much intelligence would actually come to your team every day?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Our security agencies collect somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 pieces of intelligence, sovereign intelligence, a month. That's then compounded and multiplied by the intelligence we receive from Five Eyes.

I have a reading file in which I follow very specific issues. Obviously, I follow what is going on in Ukraine. I follow what is going on in China and foreign interference. I have a reading package put together for me, based on either subjects or geopolitics, or where we have, for example, Canadian Armed Forces troops stationed. My reading package on any given day can be somewhere between 50 and 100 pieces of intelligence. Sometimes it's smaller. Sometimes it's larger. There's no regularity to it.

Some pieces of intelligence that are sent to me in PCO only I can read, and then I make the determination on who it will go to. We are working to ensure that when there are pieces that must be seen by somebody, the client relations officers who work in departments for CSE and distribute intelligence make sure that the intelligence is seen and that it is acknowledged that it has been seen. I think that was a breakdown in process previously, that it was not seen.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Perhaps you could walk us through this. You receive intelligence that can be very vast with respect to anything with respect to our Canadian Armed Forces, with issues abroad or with domestic issues as well. How is that packaged and gotten to you? What kind of apparatus is sending you this kind of information? We know that obviously it's CSIS and CSE, but are you receiving it from multiple parties? How does that get to you in terms of your package?

Ms. Jody Thomas: There are people who are certainly far more capable of explaining the system to you, because they work in the system. Essentially, it is put into a system called Slingshot, or it is sent through a TS or secret method to certain addressees. In my case, it is printed for me. I can access it myself, but generally it's printed for me. I get a reading package every day, and I read that package.

There is a range of types of pieces of intelligence. We can get assessed pieces. The intelligence assessment branch in PCO does assessed pieces. That means they take the raw intelligence and they use the techniques they've been taught and the analytical methodology that they refine here in Canada and with Five Eyes to tell us what the raw intelligence means.

We also get single-source, uncorroborated pieces that say that X may have happened.

The intelligence agencies keep all of that. Their holdings are substantial. What they share is not everything that is in their holdings. It is critical to understand that they try to ensure that senior leaders in the intelligence and security world are aware of what they're capturing and they identify its credibility. They'll say, "We think you need to know this, but it's not yet credible." That will become the basis for potentially more reporting. It builds a dossier on any particular file or person.

It is rare that a piece of intelligence is a smoking gun. It is a story. It is built over time. It requires analysis and judgment on what to do with it.

• (1015)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

In that regard, it's like a puzzle piece. You have a small piece of the puzzle, so what may be interesting at first glance may not be a situation in which it needs to move up.

I'm assuming that when we have the other witnesses coming, we can ask them to explain to us how that judgment is made for when that meets the level of needing to send this up to the next level. I'm assuming they are making those decisions based on the little pieces of the puzzle they have and once they have a more accurate picture...unless of course, as you said, there is something very significant, very credible and very imminent that would require immediate attention.

Would that be correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, I think that's a very good summary of how the system works.

What we have now done, based on the Prime Minister's direction, is ensure that anything that mentions foreign interference and an MP gets briefed up, regardless of its credibility or how confident we are in the reporting.

We also then take that intelligence and ask CSIS or CSE for what else they have on that particular thread, to try to build a bigger picture and give advice to the government. Sometimes that advice will be that there is nothing to do yet. Sometimes that advice is that we should not brief yet. Other times it will be that they think we need to take action.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: That's something new that you've just put in place. Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, that's correct.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

I just heard that the Prime Minister gave a direction. One has to wonder why we are here, despite the measures put in place to try to increase the flow of intelligence.

What direction did the Prime Minister give regarding the level for alerting members? I'd like to know more. You may not have had a chance to talk about that during our first two meetings.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: The Prime Minister, I think, was quite unequivocal. He directed the intelligence agencies to ensure that MPs are briefed and that he is to be briefed on any information and intelligence that is received about foreign interference that targets a member of Parliament.

Minister Mendicino then further put that into a formal document that is called a ministerial directive. The ministerial directive tells CSIS that regardless of the credibility of the threat, if there is something that comes in on an MP, he is to be briefed and that MP is to be briefed.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Am I to understand that's how it will work going forward, but that it didn't work that way previously?

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, absolutely. That is going to happen from now on.

It wasn't the case previously, because there is a range of information that comes in. Some of it isn't credible. It is concerning. It would worry the MP, if they were told.

I think the lesson learned out of this is that early reporting is better, even if the piece of intelligence that has arrived is not a credible piece or cannot be verified.

• (1020)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I fully appreciate that between 3,000 and 4,000 reports or memos come in a month, as you said, but what I'm finding out today is deeply troubling. We thought the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs had better things to do, but it turns out that the work we are doing is extremely important.

Previously, communication and reports weren't handled the same way. All the witnesses the committee heard from talked about the epidemic of over-classification by Canada's intelligence agencies, even describing it as a culture within the intelligence community. In fact, we are only talking about it now because someone was brave enough to bring it to the media's attention. Otherwise, we wouldn't be trying to put things right as we speak.

How did we get to this point? I'm giving you an opportunity to answer frankly, in order to restore people's confidence.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I would say, first and foremost, that the evaluation of the panel of five, based on the information given to the SITE task force—the two post-election reviews, the work done by NSICOP and the analysis by the independent special rapporteur—assures us that the elections were free, open and safe, and that the outcome of the elections should not be questioned. I think that's really important.

In terms of informing the Prime Minister, ministers and relevant MPs about particular pieces of intelligence.... Previously, CSIS has been very strict in interpreting their act about defensive briefings and threat reduction measures. Minister Mendicino has given them very stringent direction about how they are to move forward. I think that is reassuring.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We now know that at least three of our fellow members were targeted, and that's why we are here today. Is it not? We are here to consider a question of privilege related to the intimidation campaign against the member for Wellington—Halton Hills. Something was done because it came out publicly.

That makes me think that, ultimately, the government wasn't able to adequately protect parliamentarians before. Do you agree?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: First, it's an important point that you're making. It's important to note that the physical security of any of these MPs has not been in question, and there is no physical threat.

I understand completely that the information that has been leaked to the media, or now briefed to members of Parliament, is shocking and disturbing to hear. It should not have happened in this manner. I acknowledge that.

I cannot speak about what happened previously. We are going forward in a completely different direction, which I think will assist the government, all members of Parliament and all Canadians in understanding the threat that is foreign interference and how we are going to deal with it. It will be through more transparency and more discussion about what is actually happening.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Were you missing something in order to do your job and better understand the reports or threats themselves?

Our last witnesses talked about the large volume of information and the way it was analyzed to identify what required urgent or more urgent attention.

Were you missing something, or on the contrary, were you told that, because there was so much information, it was necessary to focus on what was most serious?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think what is important to note is that we should not be relying on any single individual to read intelligence and decide it's going to move up, and that if it's not read by that individual, it falls by the side of the table. If I miss my reading package for one day because I'm travelling, that should not mean that information is not shared with the Clerk of the Privy Council, ministers or the Prime Minister.

We now have a more robust process to ensure that actionable intelligence and non-actionable intelligence, particularly in the foreign interference space, are discussed and moved to ministers, the Clerk and potentially the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office—not only the raw intelligence, but advice on what to do about it.

• (1025)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mrs. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair. I thank you, Ms. Thomas, for being here with us today.

I'm listening and really trying to wrap my head around this, because this is incredibly serious. The impacts are profoundly concerning. The way in which people are learning and the timeline on which they are learning are highly concerning. I think when we look at this whole process, what I'm seeing is an increase of distrust in Canadians and parliamentarians. I think, hopefully, that's something we would want to see avoided.

I just have to go back to a couple of things. You're saying that the Prime Minister and you only found out about this two or three weeks ago. Then you're saying that now we are strengthening the process of intelligence receiving, reviewing and providing advice.

Are you really telling me that this was completely broken, and in two or three weeks you fixed the problem? That's what it sounds like to me. I just can't put that together. Can you explain how that works?

It just doesn't make sense, because if it was this simple to fix, then why on earth was it not fixed earlier? Why are we here today?

If you could explain that, it would be very helpful to me.

Ms. Jody Thomas: As I said, I was not in this job in 2021. I was the deputy minister of national defence. In July 2021, I was most concerned about Afghanistan. I didn't read the intelligence on foreign interference. As I said, everybody has their reading packages, and there are things that are relevant to them.

As the national security and intelligence adviser, I certainly have to have a broader view and see different and more intelligence than I did in the past.

What my predecessors did.... They will be here. You will have to speak to them.

My observation, even before the foreign interference issues were in the press and were a priority discussion, is that we collect and assess a lot of intelligence. What we don't do a good job of is giving advice to government. The intelligence agencies don't give advice. The deputy ministers give advice to ministers, to the Clerk of the Privy Council and to the Prime Minister. I felt that was a gap. We were moving forward on, for example, advice on what to do on intelligence that we saw on Ukraine, in a different way. It wasn't significantly different from what I've described to you in terms of assessing the intelligence—deputy ministers and the chief of the defence staff, in the case of Ukraine, having a discussion about what the intelligence means and what the government should do with it. What you do with it is the critical part of intelligence.

Sometimes the answer is nothing, because you need to continue collecting, because you need to investigate further. Sometimes it is—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry. I have only a few more minutes.

I guess that your answer is, yes, we've fixed the problem. I'm really interested in seeing how that works. I don't know if you're going to tell us as clearly as I was hoping you would.

You keep saying as well that you can account...and I hear that the folks previously in this role will be here for us.

My question to you, then, is this. When you arrived on the scene, did you have discussions with your predecessor? When you had those discussions, was there no moment where there were discussions about intelligence and how it might be impacting parliamentarians? There were no concerns brought forward to you. Did you just come with a clean slate, and all of a sudden these things erupted?

I'm hoping you can clarify that.

Ms. Jody Thomas: The director of CSIS certainly spoke to me about foreign interference, and not only threats against parliamentarians, but foreign interference writ large. These sorts of activities that are taken on by adversaries are much broader than just elections.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I understand that, but we're actually talking about a point of privilege, so I think it's important that we stay clear on that.

Was there any passing on...? Again, it feels like this was a bit of a surprise. Emails were sent out to ministers. They didn't know how to open the emails.

It's just so confusing, but the impacts are profound. It does create a sense of distrust. I think when we look at this, perception matters. We can debate a whole bunch about what this and that means, but perception matters. In our systems right now, parliamentarians are feeling concerned that they don't know. I remember asking a question several weeks ago in which I said that I could happily be walking down the street doing my job as a member of Parliament, as a candidate in an election. I could be targeted, and no one would tell me.

How do you fight something that you don't know is happening to you? What I'm trying to understand is how this got left behind. How is it that all of these things have happened? They've been reported in the media. We can talk about the source of those reports and where they're coming from, but the real issue for me is why this was not caught as an issue.

Why do we have to be here? How are we going to fix it moving forward but also take accountability for the history?

• (1030)

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think everything you are saying is very important, and I don't disagree with it.

I would not characterize it as ministers being unable to open their email. The top secret email system means we deliver email to them. That's a responsibility of the public service.

The transparency with which we need to speak to parliamentarians is evident. I would say that CSIS has been limited by their act. They are not able to share all their intelligence, except through a formal threat reduction measure. They are now using those more aggressively than they have in the past.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cooper is next, followed by Mr. Turnbull, Madame Gaudreau and Mrs. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Thomas—through you, Madam Chair—on May 3, two days after *The Globe and Mail* reported that MP Chong had been a target of the Beijing regime and that CSIS had been aware of this, the Prime Minister told reporters 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.”

We know that statement isn't true. Why did the Prime Minister say that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: In the early days of our understanding what the scenario was and the intelligence that led to the document written in July 2021, which referenced an MP... It did not reference Mr. Chong. Nonetheless, it talked about an MP being targeted. We were not aware that the underlying intelligence had been moved from CSIS into the system and distributed. It was an error in terms of the information provided to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Did you tell the Prime Minister that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Did you specifically tell him it had not been raised to a higher level?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I told him it had not been briefed to him and that I didn't know what had left CSIS.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, that's very different from what the Prime Minister said. He didn't say he wasn't briefed. He didn't say he didn't know where it went. He made a very specific declaration that it had not been raised. He said more than that.

Again, why did he not state what, in fact, happened? Why did he mislead Canadians?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Madam Chair, I don't think that's an appropriate question.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I think it is an appropriate question. Canadians have a right to know why it is that the Prime Minister would make such a statement, when it has turned out to be patently false.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think the Prime Minister reflected the information he had at the time. He told us to keep working. He organized a meeting with Mr. Chong, and we briefed Mr. Chong.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Yes, and suddenly, 24 hours later, you called MP Chong and advised him—contrary to what the Prime Minister had said only 24 hours earlier—that it wasn't so and that, in fact, the memo had gone to PCO, specifically to the then national security adviser to the Prime Minister.

What happened between the Prime Minister's making the very affirmative statement that it had not been raised to a higher level and your phone call to Mr. Chong, in which you said, in fact, that it was exactly the opposite of what the Prime Minister said?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Madam Chair, Mr. Chong, in his briefing, asked me whether the memo had been distributed and who received it. I told him I did not yet know. Upon finishing the review of where it had gone, I briefed the Prime Minister and returned the call to Mr. Chong, as I'd promised I would.

• (1035)

Mr. Michael Cooper: What did you find out, and how did you find that out?

Ms. Jody Thomas: We traced all the addresses. We found out who it had been sent to and tried to determine why it had not been briefed up.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Upon tracing all the addresses, you discovered it had gone to the national security adviser. Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: We did.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Who else did it go to?

Ms. Jody Thomas: As I told Mr. Chong, it went to several deputy ministers. It's incumbent upon the deputy ministers to brief those ministers.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It went to several deputy ministers. Which deputy ministers...?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It was the deputy minister of public safety, the deputy minister of foreign affairs and the deputy minister of national defence.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It went to three deputy ministers, plus the Prime Minister's national security adviser.

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's right.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That happened in 2021—

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: —and it went nowhere.

Ms. Jody Thomas: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you want Canadians to believe that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Madam Chair, I don't think the integrity of my statements here and what I said to Mr. Chong are in question. It is absolute fact that the memo was distributed, and it was not briefed to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Was it shared with any ministers?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Not that I am aware of.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, you were a deputy minister.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I was. I was on leave in July 2021 when it was sent to my office. When I got back, I focused on Afghanistan. It was not put in front of me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Whom did it go to in your office?

Ms. Jody Thomas: No one, it was—

Mr. Michael Cooper: It went into a black hole.

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's right.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Is that your answer?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I was not briefed. I told you there was a flaw in the process. We've corrected that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: A big flaw.

The Chair: I'm going to take a minute, because I think we do pretty decently, but then there's this giving the question and giving the answer.

I think we invited someone here today who comes with a really serious role, at least for me, so Ms. Thomas, your time and your being here means a lot to me and, I think, to most members.

I would say that, when we ask a question and we say we're going to give them time to answer, then we give them time to answer; we don't provide them the answer.

From the best I know, Mr. Cooper, you are not in the role that Ms. Thomas occupies, and she is here today to provide us the insights we have asked for.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, I respect Ms. Thomas, but she is in a very serious role, and what we're dealing with is a very serious matter. I'm posing serious questions, and I think that's quite appropriate.

The Chair: I think you let her answer; you don't provide her answers for her.

Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, the floor is yours.

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

Thanks, Ms. Thomas, for being here again today. We appreciate your participating in this important, ongoing study.

I have numerous lines of questioning, but before I get into some of them, I want to clarify something. What you've said to date is that there's a new directive from the Prime Minister that's leading to essentially more thorough briefs being given to MPs when they or their families may be under threat. That sounds like there's a change in process there. I'm repeating back to you what you've said, if I have it correctly.

You're now briefing MPs on those threats, whether they're credible or not, whether the information has been verified or not, whether it's a complete picture or not and whether it requires any action on their part or anybody else's part. Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, that is the approach we're trying to take. It requires some trust, because the investigations that are going on with regard to some of this intelligence mean that sources can be compromised, so we are trusting that when the information is shared, it is not then made public by the member of Parliament.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: There's a responsibility that goes along with sharing that level of information and a level of trust that you're pointing to that's important, and I would agree with that. With the disclosure of information comes responsibility, and I think it's a pretty important one when dealing with national security, so I appreciate that.

I also appreciate that members of Parliament would appreciate that information—I know I would if I were in Michael Chong's shoes—and I think you've acknowledged that.

One flip side of this is that if information and threats are not credible, do you worry that there's a risk that members of Parliament would then feel threatened in a situation that has been uncorroborated? Essentially, you are letting them know about a threat that is not real, and that could psychologically and emotionally impact them and the way they do their work.

• (1040)

Ms. Jody Thomas: It's a really important point. I think the clarification would be about the word “threat”. That a foreign government is speaking about a particular member of Parliament doesn't necessarily mean that there is a threat against them, and I think the criticality here is going to be how CSIS briefs the information.

I think that as we get into a process where we are more transparent, this will become less frightening and less worrisome. There will be some situations, as we have learned with Mr. Chong, for example, when it is more serious, but for the majority of parliamentarians, if there is a brief to them, I hope that, through practice, through transparency and through this being a bit more routine—certainly not an everyday event, but a more routine kind of briefing—if we give it to an MP, we will be able to reduce the amount of anxiety it causes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

We've heard from Mr. Johnston's report...and you've acknowledged fully that the coordination of information and communication is a challenge and there are some shortcomings, and that you're already moving to address those in implementing new processes, which I appreciate.

I also appreciate, based on your other testimony, given the questions from Ms. Romanado, that there are vast amounts of intelligence, that there are numerous agencies involved, that there is a funnel of information that's quite large, and that not all of it is always shared with you—CSIS has a lot of it that it may sit on for a while.

I'm wondering how you see your office's relationship with the Prime Minister's Office and how information is ideally supposed to flow to the Prime Minister's Office.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think it's an important element of this process. The Prime Minister can receive intelligence through the reading package of the issues that he is tracking. That would go to the Prime Minister's Office. It is shared with him. As Katie Telford said, intelligence is not held back from him. If there is something in particular that I feel he needs to see, that a fellow deputy minister or agency head feels he needs to see or that the Clerk of the Privy Council determines that he should see, then we ensure it is put in front of him via his office.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Madame Gaudreau.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Is that the end of my time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes, it is, Mr. Turnbull. It went quickly.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It did.

Thank you, Ms. Thomas.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau.

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

I'd like to again discuss the culture within Canada's intelligence community, specifically within the Prime Minister's Office.

Are people outside the Prime Minister's Office who have expertise able to understand all the raw intelligence you have to sift through in order to identify what is really serious? I'd like to know, because my sense is that something in between is missing. It's coming to light that there was an empty space, a gaping hole, and now you're trying to fix it.

I'd like to hear your views on that.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you.

I think what's important to note is that senior members in the Prime Minister's Office have daily reading packages on daily intelligence, similar to mine, generally on geopolitics—where we have troops stationed, points of interest in terms of the Prime Minister's international work—the same as every G7 leader.

Specific with FI—foreign interference—what has not happened and is now happening is that the unverified pieces of intelligence, or the unnamed sources or the unnamed individuals, are now being shared with him in a more regular manner.

The Prime Minister's Office gets reading packages. They're put together by the client relations officers. It's the same process everybody follows. They also get weekly briefings by a group that works for me—the intelligence assessment secretariat in PCO—and either they will have a weekly brief on a range of issues or they will ask for a curated package on a specific issue.

• (1045)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have just a few seconds left.

What wasn't that information systematically identified before, when it's being done now?

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Again, I can't speculate on previous practice, and you will hear from my predecessors.

In my opinion and per the direction of the Prime Minister, he wants to be briefed, period, whether it is credible or not, and so he will be provided that information.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Blaney is next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to go back to the discussion we had about the fact that you gave the example of being away on leave for a month and there was information and nobody was there to read it, so it was a bit of a black hole. I'm just wondering if you could explain if that's been remedied, if there's a process in place to remedy it, but also, is that not an issue of security in itself? Was that not something that was sort of concerning when you came back after being gone for a period of time, and you saw, oh, there's this stuff...?

I understand what you're saying. There are big things happening all over the world, and you have to respond, and Afghanistan was hot, but you don't know what's hot in what's left that hasn't been read, so I'm just trying to understand.... Was that not something that was concerning about security? Again—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Sorry, but the interpretation isn't coming through anymore.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Is it working now? Can you hear what I'm saying now? It works again.

I think it's fair that Ms. Blaney go from the top. Thank you.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Well, hopefully you got most of that question, but I know that my friend did not, so I will repeat it.

I'm just trying to get clarification. What we heard from your testimony is that you were on leave for a month. During that time there was information provided, and it sort of fell into a black hole. I acknowledged that when you returned there were important things happening in the world that, of course, were brought to your attention.

My concern is that when things are left behind, isn't that an issue, potentially, of national security? If nobody is reading, the group isn't reading, so that you can draw attention to things, that's concerning to me.

I also want to know if that has been remedied, or if you're in the process of remedying that. How are you doing that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think that's a really important question.

Number one, there should be, as I said previously, no single point of failure in terms of intelligence. That's why we are now bringing critical intelligence to deputy ministers to analyze and to give advice on.

That piece of intelligence, in July 2021, named the only people who could read it, so the deputy minister of defence was the only

person in defence who could read it. That's different from “must” read. Sometimes there are pieces of intelligence of which the collectors—CSIS or CSE generally, sometimes the RCMP, sometimes CFINTCOM—say, “No, you must read this,” and then it's put in front of me.

That particular piece of intelligence was less pertinent to my job as the deputy minister of defence. I was the only one in the department who could read it, but it wasn't necessary for me to read it in order to function as the deputy minister of defence. There is a difference there.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Then what I'm hearing you say to me is that things can get lost. That's what worries me. Again, I go back to that point. We're talking about a point of privilege for a member of this place who did not know the circumstances in which he was living. Really, that's how I perceive it. There are other names that are being added to this list.

It wasn't pertinent for you, so where is the stopgap to make sure that nothing falls through? Again, what I'm hearing is that we have a black hole. If nobody says we must read it, then the black hole will continue, and one day, hopefully, somebody will figure it out.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you.

That's not exactly what I said. I said we have fixed this going forward. For particular pieces of intelligence that reference members of Parliament.... That one in July did not mention MP Chong by name. Going forward, when there is a reference to a member of Parliament, it will be brought to the attention of the deputy minister community. It will be read by me, or whoever is acting for me, and by other deputy ministers. It will be discussed, and a plan on what to do about it, going forward, will be made. That will often include informing the MP about the situation. It certainly includes informing ministers and the Prime Minister, per their direction.

● (1050)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Calkins, followed by Monsieur Fergus.

Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you, thank you, Ms. Thomas, for being here today.

I want to talk a bit about Zhao Wei. When did the Prime Minister first become aware that Zhao Wei was the accredited diplomat at Beijing's Toronto consulate, and that he was the diplomat involved in the foreign interference activities?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I can't give you a precise date. In the analysis and the discussion of the information regarding Mr. Chong, it came to light that there was a particular individual. I would have to go look at my notes to give you an exact date.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Would you be able to provide that to the committee after you leave today?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I would be able to provide you with the date on which it was discussed by me. I can't tell you if it was discussed previously.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

We know that Zhao Wei was targeting a sitting member of Parliament and his family. He was spying on Chinese Canadians.

The Globe and Mail reported, on May 12, 2023, that CSIS was providing information to Global Affairs on Zhao Wei's activities as early as 2020. In the same report, Dan Stanton, a former manager in counter-intelligence at CSIS, said that this information would have been shared with the Privy Council Office.

Why was it only when The Globe and Mail reported that Zhao Wei was targeting Michael Chong and his family that the government saw fit to expel Zhao Wei?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think that question is best directed to Global Affairs Canada.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: It looks a lot to me like it's political damage control. It's very hard for me to believe, Ms. Thomas—and maybe you can shed some light on this—that only one accredited diplomat from Beijing is currently acting in this way. Are you aware and can you tell this committee of any other diplomats who are behaving in this way?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't think I can speak about that in this open forum.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Illegal police stations.... The government has made a claim, as well.... We've already heard Mr. Cooper talk about the fact that the Prime Minister made a claim that we knew a day later was actually not true. It seemed like he made a statement that he was fully aware that information wasn't passed up and then was trying to lead Canadians to believe that he actually didn't know. He made a very specific statement about something, and then he said as his defence a day later, when it turned out to be false, that he didn't know.

We see the same pattern happening here with illegal police stations. The government has said that they have shut down. The Minister of Public Safety has appeared before this committee and actually said that the police stations have shut down. We learned almost immediately after that statement was made that there are two Beijing police stations still operating in Canada.

You're the national security adviser. How many of these police stations are still operating in Canada? Can you tell us? The government won't tell us.

Ms. Jody Thomas: There are continual investigations by the RCMP into the police stations. We are aware of two in Montreal, and work is being done to ensure that they cease to operate. Unfortunately, they're not police stations. They're often staffed and managed by Canadian citizens, and what we have to do is shut down their activities.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: If they are conducting United Front operations, whether they're using Canadian citizens or not in their employment.... Are you saying that because of who they're using in their employment, they're not running a covert police station in Canada?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm saying that sometimes the individuals who are working these are unwitting, coerced or forced.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: It that sometimes, or is that what's actually happening? I don't mean to interrupt you, but is that what is actually happening, Ms. Thomas?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Every situation is different. There is no one pattern.

The tools used by the RCMP to shut down the police stations, reduce their impact and reduce their credibility are different in every situation and every scenario. There would be value in our ability to arrest people for them, and those investigations are under way by the RCMP.

● (1055)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Early in your presentation, you made a statement about—and we can refer to the document that the public safety minister has made—where there's been a change in directive. The directive has been issued now that parliamentarians are to be made aware if there is any foreign influence intelligence that they should be advised of. However, you didn't say anything at all about political parties and the infiltration of political parties. I don't see the directive from the government on that at all. Is there going to be, or am I unaware of, a directive whereby political parties will be informed of any infiltration into either their nomination processes or their financing mechanisms?

Ms. Jody Thomas: In terms of their financing mechanisms, I think that belongs with Elections Canada as opposed to the national security adviser and the security committee.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Elections Canada would get that intelligence from you—

The Chair: I'm sorry. The time has—

Mr. Blaine Calkins: —would it not, Ms. Thomas?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It has to be actionable, so that something can be done.

The nomination process is a distinct problem that has to be examined, and I think we will have to have some significant conversations with the parties. What we have done as a first step is stand up the site process to analyze the by-elections, which is a new measure that we put in place to keep by-elections safe.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fergus.

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

Thank you, Ms. Thomas, for being present here today and for your service as the security intelligence adviser and previously as deputy minister of national defence.

From your testimony today, as well as from previous testimony, we've heard that everyone would agree that when information is brought in and when intelligence is brought in that is partial, sometimes it doesn't tell the whole story, and it can actually be wrong. It's laden with caveats and cautions and the like. How does one paint a complete picture to assess the information that is arriving in, admittedly, a piecemeal fashion?

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's a really important question.

CSIS and CSE, as I said, have significant holdings, not all of which, by a long shot, are released to officials like me. What they do is that over time, using the techniques they need to keep highly secure to protect both the methodology and sometimes individuals, they continue to collect. Often the action taken out of a single piece of intelligence is to continue to collect.

Within CSIS, they have a process where they analyze what they're going to release and what they're going to continue to investigate and just hold. I think it's fair to say that they try to release things that are pertinent to the geopolitics of the period in time, or relevant to other investigations and other concerns by government, but it is an art rather than a science.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm a bit of a public policy nerd. Going forward now, you're going to be informing the minister responsible for public security and the Prime Minister if any intelligence comes up that relates to a member of Parliament—or senator, I would imagine. That information, by its very nature, is going to be partial or incomplete.

When you come to me and say, “Greg, here's some information that we've collected,” I'm going to have a lot of questions. I'm wondering if you're going to provide the same caveats that you would normally provide to the member of Parliament, to say, “We've heard this, but we want you to understand that this is based on one piece of information, or perhaps two pieces of information, which we can't confirm, can't assess and don't have a complete portrait of.” Is that the kind of briefing members of Parliament and senators will receive?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, that's a really critical element that needs to be discussed. By being more transparent, you can raise the level of anxiety, but I hope we normalize the kinds of briefings that we have with members of Parliament, whether they are caucus briefings, briefings to all parliamentarians or just individual briefings on intelligence that has been gathered. We rely on parliamentarians to keep that information protected so that investigations can continue.

Hon. Greg Fergus: That's a big demand. As we've seen since these partial bits of information have made their way into the media, some people have taken that as the gospel truth.

● (1100)

Ms. Jody Thomas: There is absolutely a risk to transparency. There is a greater risk to not talking about foreign interference.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Going on another angle on this, can you identify some of the systemic barriers that prevent a fluid exchange of intelligence between agencies and actors? What checks and balances are going to be necessary going forward? How can we better streamline the intelligence-gathering and intelligence-sharing on a go-forward basis?

Ms. Jody Thomas: In terms of intelligence-gathering, I think it's important to have the agencies who collect speak to that, rather than have my observations on collection. The work that is done is difficult. It's highly technical. People put themselves at risk, and it's really important to the security of Canada that they be able to continue to do that job.

In terms of the analysis and the advice that is given based on what's been collected so that Canada's national security is protected, individuals are protected and investigations can continue, I think some of the processes we've laid out will be useful and will in fact help close some of the gaps we've seen.

We're not going to rest on that. I'm going to contract with some security experts to come in and look at our process and give us advice on how we can make it even better. I'm certainly working with my colleagues in the Five Eyes to help us improve our process, based on their experiences.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Ms. Thomas.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Thomas, we're entering into our second hour. Are you good to go? The rest of us are able to at least get up in between our rounds.

You're okay. That's perfect. If you need anything, we'll get it to you after the second hour.

We'll enter back into a six-minute round. That's best, I think, so that people can maximize their time here.

We will start with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mrs. Sahota, Madame Gaudreau and Madam Blaney.

Mr. Cooper, you have six minutes through the chair.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Thomas—through you, Madam Chair—correct me if anything I'm saying is inaccurate. As I understand it, the July 20, 2021 memo from CSIS that indicated MPs were being targeted by a Beijing diplomat—one of those MPs being Michael Chong—went to you, as the deputy minister of national defence at the time. It was a “read only” for you. In other words, no other official in your department was authorized to read that memo, but you were on vacation.

Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Presumably, you came back from vacation. What happened to the memo?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It would have been destroyed through destruction processes. It wasn't lying around as a risk. If it had been relevant to the operating of the Department of National Defence, or information we had to provide to the then minister of national defence, somebody else in the Department of National Defence would have read it and actioned it.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. It was destroyed by the time you came back. It went to the Prime Minister's then national security intelligence adviser.

What happened to the memo when it reached his desk? Did it go into a black hole, as well? Do you know?

Ms. Jody Thomas: No. As I said to you, I'm not going to account for what happened with my predecessors.

We know it was not presented to a national security and intelligence adviser until mid-August, for various reasons, and I don't.... That's just because of the reading packages being created.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Who would have been in that role?

Ms. Jody Thomas: At that time, David Morrison was acting in the job.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It didn't actually get to PCO, you're saying, for almost a month.

Ms. Jody Thomas: No. It arrived in PCO in July.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It would have arrived in July. To whom, then, did it go, and from whom did it come? I'm just trying to get an understanding of where these things go. This was a very significant memo. The information contained in it ultimately resulted in a diplomat being expelled from Canada.

Where did it go?

Ms. Jody Thomas: In August, it was presented to the acting national security and intelligence adviser.

• (1105)

Mr. Michael Cooper: It was in August. Okay.

You reviewed the transmission records. Is that right?

Ms. Jody Thomas: We've done some forensics on what occurred.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would you undertake to provide the transmission records to this committee, or at least provide—

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm not sure I can call them “transmission records”. We'll provide what we have.

Mr. Michael Cooper: As far as where the memo went, to whom and when, on what dates—

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Do you have access to the top secret network email? Do you have your log-in credentials?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I have log-in credentials up to secret. Everything that is TS is presented to me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you think it is appropriate that then minister of public safety Bill Blair did not see an issues management note from CSIS, sent in May 2021, which indicated that Michael Chong was a target of Beijing, because he didn't have his log-in information?

Do you think that's acceptable?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't think that is, in fact, what the reality is.

Mr. Michael Cooper: What is the reality?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Minister Blair would have been given a reading package.

What happened in the Department of Public Safety at that time, I can't speak to. You'll have to speak to the officials who were there at the time.

Minister Blair doesn't walk around with a secret laptop, logging into it. No minister does. We give them the information they need to read.

Mr. Michael Cooper: At the time of the July 2021 memo concerning Beijing targeting MPs, Mike MacDonald was the acting director. Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Last Thursday, a job opportunity was posted for Mike MacDonald's job within the office of the NSA.

Why did he depart your office?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Mike MacDonald is leaving for a different opportunity in the national security world, having done the job he is in—which is a 24-7 job—for three years.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Do you agree that the failure to alert Michael Chong that he and his family were targets of the Beijing regime was a serious failure? Will you at least concede that point?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I acknowledge that Mr. Chong should have been told.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Who is ultimately responsible for this failure?

Ms. Jody Thomas: There is no one person. There's no single point of failure. I've said that already.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you accept that the Prime Minister is responsible for the machinery of government?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I do.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you accept that the Prime Minister has special responsibilities when it comes to national security?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I do.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you accept that the Prime Minister has special responsibilities for the government relationship with Parliament?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You must acknowledge, then, that this failure ultimately rests with the Prime Minister if that is so. Isn't that right?

Ms. Jody Thomas: The Prime Minister cannot brief parliamentarians on things he's not been told.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Sahota, you have six minutes.

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

Through you to the witness, I'm sure she's looked at the independent special rapporteur's report. In his report, the special rapporteur noted, "There has been too much posturing, and ignoring facts in favour of slogans," when it comes to foreign interference.

As our most senior and non-partisan public servant on national security matters, do you believe that the polarization we're seeing right now on this topic has made your work and the work of our security agencies more challenging or more difficult?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm not sure how I'd characterize it. I think the partisan nature of the discussion we're having clouds the ability to discuss foreign interference in a mature way, as a G7 country should. I hope the work of this committee will bring to light the seriousness of foreign interference and the work that needs to be done going forward to ensure that Canada is safe from foreign interference.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you for that. I appreciate your honesty.

It's been questioned many times what the proper forum for this is. Whether it's an independent investigation, like the special rapporteur had, or anywhere, for that matter, polarization has gotten so strong that it's been difficult to really find a venue where it doesn't exist right now. It's been challenging, even for us as members of Parliament, I think, to dig through this and get to a place, like you said, where we can discuss this in a sophisticated manner.

The Right Honourable David Johnston also wrote, "Canada requires a more sophisticated approach to national security," and we've just realized this through the current challenges we're having.

Would you agree with that? What kinds of changes do you think should be made, other than the ones you have mentioned that have been made recently, in the weeks prior to coming here?

• (1110)

Ms. Jody Thomas: I have outlined process changes that have been made to ensure that the material is put in front of the right decision-makers, so that decisions can be taken as to how to action intelligence. I also think that it's time, and this has been said by Minister Mendicino and others, that we have a foreign interference transparency regime, that we look at changes to the Security of Information Act and that we look at CSIS changes. The CSIS Act came into being before the Internet age and the movement of information we see now, the polarization we see now and the rise of China that we see now, so I also think that it is time to look at how we modernize CSIS to be able to respond to the threats of today.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Do you have some ideas, when it comes to how we could modernize? What particular changes should be made to the act, since it has been so long?

Ms. Jody Thomas: There are a few things, in particular.

Number one, with the foreign interference transparency regime, there need to be Criminal Code changes that make it a Criminal Code offence not to disclose. Other countries that have this same regime have taken that step, and it has given some meat and teeth to the regime itself.

In terms of CSIS, there are a few things that need to be done. CSIS cannot disclose information that is protected to other levels of government or opposition parties. That was created in its day for a reason, but I don't think it meets the need any longer. They need to be able to discuss classified information.

It would be very useful if they had a method of disclosing that somewhere between their defensive briefs—which is the kind of brief you hear from CSIS when they speak to parliamentarians about, "Here is the threat," and they speak about it in very general terms—and the threat reduction measures, which are a very formal process, because there is a specific threat against a specific individual, for example.

There should be something in between to allow them to have more general conversations with some protected, classified material, not necessarily disclosing the totality of it but allowing them to have a conversation that is less general.

One of the things we hear from members of Parliament when they have conversations with CSIS is, "I don't really understand at this point if I'm under threat." That's not because CSIS doesn't want to share information. It means it is limited in what it can share, so that modernization of the CSIS Act would be extraordinarily useful.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Your answer is very informative. I appreciate that, and I think it's very useful in enabling this committee to take some action and recommend some steps the government can take.

I don't remember whether you said there was a need to modernize NSIA as well. Do you have any comments on that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm not sure I'm the best person to analyze what should be done with this job. In other countries, it is a job that has more authority, perhaps. PCO convenes. I don't direct the security agencies, although we are giving more direction to them now in terms of the communication flow and the dissemination and management of material.

I heard Mr. Wernick say it should be a five-year job. I'm not sure anybody should do this job for five years, again, because it's a 24-7 job, and you need to be a senior person in government to do it. That said, recommendations, I'm sure, would be appreciated.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: We thank you for your service. We hope that you can stay well while doing it.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Thomas, we certainly hope that you'll be on the job as long as possible for the sake of all the changes you're making.

The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs has been studying foreign interference since November, and I've come to three conclusions. A number of witnesses told us or confirmed that the thresholds for reporting cases of interference were much too high. They told us that there was no culture of sharing intelligence, as we talked about earlier. In any case, sharing intelligence is obviously not the mantra here, in Canada. They also told us about the chaotic manner in which the various departments and security mechanisms carry out their intelligence analysis, something we also discussed.

We want to get to the bottom of the situation and bring in legislation to protect the integrity and credibility of our democracy. This morning, we are finding out about a new protocol and new measures in order to keep the same thing from happening again. We are finding that out only because we asked the witness to appear before the committee.

I also want to talk about the culture of silence. The media are watching, and thanks to them, the public will be informed. It's a fact that two out of three people in Canada think the Chinese government is trying to interfere in our elections.

Do you think it's appropriate for parliamentarians to call for an independent public inquiry, so that you can enshrine the process you're undertaking and ultimately reassure the public?

• (1115)

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: There are lots of questions there, Madam Chair.

First of all, our threshold is too high, potentially. It is something that has to be examined. Again, CSIS is limited by the act. I know the director will have a view of this for you when he is here.

The culture in the intelligence community is to protect information and to continue to collect more information. I think that changes to the CSIS act, working with RCMP, perhaps, and the ability to move intelligence from intelligence to evidence will aid in our ability to do something of consequence with this intelligence.

I don't agree with chaos as a characterization. There are some extraordinarily good, analytical minds working on intelligence analysis in CSIS, CSE, the Privy Council Office and other departments. What we do with that analysis is where we need to raise our level of sophistication and our level of clarity.

I agree that we need to speak more about national security. We have to do it in a manner that is transparent, clear and understandable in French, English and other languages. We are not good at that, because we are protecting information all the time. That leads to my concern about a public inquiry. There would be very little more than what I've said here today that I would be able to say in a public inquiry. The Security of Information Act protects it. Protect-

ing the sources of the intelligence is critical. Protecting the techniques in terms of how we collect intelligence is critical.

I think, with the hearings that Mr. Johnston has recommended and will be undertaking, it's really important that they be as open and transparent as possible with stakeholders, with diaspora communities and with you, about what the next steps are.

I think an inquiry could mean that we are examining this rather than moving forward with change. I think we have an opportunity right now to make change in how we do things that would be very important to the national security discussion and the level of understanding and sophistication of Canadians about national security issues.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I just want to clarify something, Madam Chair. When I referred to chaos, I really meant chaos. I wasn't characterizing the expertise of the people doing the analysis. Rather, I was referring to a missing link, a void, information that's overlooked because someone is taking a well-deserved vacation, as was the case for the witness. When people hear that, they think two things: one, changes are needed, and two, the general public needs to be made aware.

I'm a member of Parliament, and even I don't know what's going on right now. That is why I am making this appeal. It's only right for us to want to see this through and call for an independent public inquiry so we can get to the bottom of what's going on. My constituents tell me that they know what's going to happen and that nothing will change when it's all said and done. That is deeply troubling. There's going to be another election, and it's not four years away. I am deeply concerned.

I'm going to use my last few seconds to ask you a question. You'll be going on vacation again soon, so what are you going to do to make sure nothing goes wrong while you're gone?

• (1120)

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Again, if the intelligence that had been received when I was on vacation was pertinent to how we did our job in defence, it would have been actioned.

There is a difference between “must read” and “may read”, and that's really important to understand. I am being transparent with you when I say I was on that list in July 2021.

I think it's important for Canadians to understand that the work done by our security agencies and senior public servants, through the SITE committee and the panel of five, to ensure that elections are safe and sound is critical. It also has concluded that there was no—

I'm sorry, Madam Chair. I'll conclude. I will say that cleared parliamentarians in NSICOP have access to this material. NSICOP should be listened to and used to the benefit of all parliamentarians.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Blaney is next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

You mentioned earlier that Mr. Wernick had suggested that the government should legislate the position, and you said that you thought that five years might be a little too long, which is fine.

You also spoke about how other countries give this role a bit more authority. I think, when Mr. Wernick was talking about this, he was talking about a higher level of accountability, especially in the giving and receiving of information, which seems to have a bit of a gap within the system.

If you look at what other countries are doing—and I expect that you're focusing on our Five Eyes partners—what kind of change in this role would you see making sense for us, moving forward?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I would like to say, first of all, that I am accountable, and I take my accountability very seriously. If there is a failure—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry, but I want to interrupt you on that. I apologize. I'm not talking about your accountability.

I think what Mr. Wernick was saying was that by legislating it, there would be a formal process of accountability that would track the exchange between information given and how it's received. One of the challenges we are hearing very clearly, from your testimony today and from other people's testimony, is that sometimes things don't go where they're supposed to go, and that's causing this problem.

You're also saying that you're working very diligently to fix that issue. I want to make it clear that I'm not calling you personally in to question about accountability. That can be a conversation for another day.

What I'm trying to get, firmly, is what we need to have within the role you now fill so that we have some accountability that we can measure. Right now, it feels like we're trying to get to a moving target, instead of having something very clear and precise, so that accountability can be there.

I hope that helps you.

Ms. Jody Thomas: It does. Thank you.

Deputy ministers have accountability as accounting officers in the department. That is, of course, different in the Privy Council Office, because the Clerk is the senior public servant. In my role, I think that more ability to direct within the national security community would be useful.

The Privy Council operates under Crown prerogative. There's a whole series of things that need to be examined, and the Clerk has directed us to look at it.

After hearing Mr. Wernick's comments, I have not yet given it perhaps the thought it needs, as he said this just two days ago. I'd

be happy to discuss it in the future with you, once we've had a chance to look at the range of options for what the structure of this job should be.

I will note that the Prime Minister announced yesterday a deputy national security and intelligence adviser, so that we are able to operate at both the tactical level and the strategic level.

• (1125)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

You mentioned—and I just want to clarify—during your initial testimony that there will be new staff coming in for intelligence review and to provide advice. That seems to be one of the gaps. That advice has not necessarily been provided.

I'm trying to understand the structure better. Is this your team? Is it expanding the people who work with you directly? How does that relationship work? Again, I'm coming back to how we measure the accountability.

It is unclear, because of the way the information is being shared, where information is going, when it arrives, who sees it, and why they don't see it. I'm wondering, is this going to work, and is it working as a team, and what role do you play within that team?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, intelligence collection, dissemination and analysis in Canada, and with all of our Five Eyes allies, is a team sport. Various agencies collect, analyze and make determinations about that intelligence.

In my team, we have directed what information needs to come to deputy ministers for discussion and advice, so that it is not, as I said, a single point of failure when something isn't briefed, and that it is not only one person's view of what we should do with that intelligence.

We've also recently—today—given direction to agencies and collectors of intelligence on how it will be disseminated and logged in terms of who has read it. There's an accountability framework that we're putting in place for the individuals who are named who should read a piece of intelligence to ensure that they have or have not...and so that we have a weekly report that tells us who's reading, who isn't, and what has happened to that particular document.

It is a system that has operated for years, and we're bringing more structure to it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

One of the things we're trying to figure out... I understand now that you're saying MPs will be briefed immediately. My question is around the threshold level. We've heard again and again that sometimes the threshold level is far too high and it doesn't really meet the needs that we have within our systems.

I'm wondering, with MPs now being briefed immediately, does that mean you're changing the threshold, or is it specifically just for this? How are you going to manage educating members of Parliament and other parliamentarians about how to receive this information in a way that is helpful to them?

Ms. Jody Thomas: If I said “immediately”, I apologize. They will be briefed, but there will be a period of analysis about what can be briefed and what should be said. The threshold can be too high, and that's a limitation within the CSIS Act. As I said, there is work to be done on that front.

The education element that you raised is, I think, the most critical in all of this. We do not brief members of Parliament frequently enough on national security issues, foreign inference and their own threats.

You saw yesterday an article in the CBC about ministerial security and public official security. It's not just ministers, by a long shot.

Another thing that we don't talk about enough is the physical threats to members of Parliament.

We are embarking upon a transparency regime to share more information and to talk about this differently in Canada.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now go to Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

After him will be Mrs. Romanado.

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

Good morning, Ms. Thomas.

Ms. Thomas, my fellow member Mr. Cooper asked you earlier who was ultimately responsible for the failure to alert Michael Chong that he was being targeted? If I'm not mistaken, this is what you said:

[*English*]

no one person is responsible for the failure.

Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm sorry. I didn't hear the last part.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You said that no one person is responsible for the failure.

Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I said, “There's no single point of failure.”

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I've heard that before, Ms. Thomas.

I represent the riding of Mégantic—L'Érable, the site of the Lac-Mégantic disaster that cost 47 people their lives. After extensive study and analysis, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada determined that the process had been riddled with mistakes, but no one ultimately took responsibility for all of those failures.

How has the situation in the country come to this? No one has the courage to accept responsibility for their failures.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I will say that if a lack of information flow to the Prime Minister were to happen while I'm the national security

and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister, it is my accountability.

I will not speak to what happened in the past, but I can speak about what happens during my tenure working for the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Prime Minister.

● (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Nevertheless, you do acknowledge that, ultimately, certain individuals are responsible for these failures. Imagine if something had happened to Mr. Chong or his family when he was unaware of the threats against him. We would all feel very guilty today for not doing something.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: If the intelligence collected had indicated that there was going to be imminent action, Mr. Chong would have been briefed under the CSIS Act threat reduction measures.

Should he have been briefed on the information that was available at the time? I think the conclusion now is yes. There was no physical threat to him, and I want to make that very clear. That doesn't mean this is not serious.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: However, we can't assume there was no such threat. We can't assume that CSIS has access to every measure that's employed or every discussion that takes place on foreign soil.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Absolutely. That is why the direction from Minister Mendicino is quite clear that MPs are to be briefed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Don't you think an inquiry should be held to determine who exactly did not do their job?

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think you will be hearing from my predecessors. You need to ask them what their logic was in the moment and at the time that these reports came forward.

I think it is critical—before we leap to conclusions that there was negligence—that you hear from them on why they made the decisions they did in that moment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I heard the same thing regarding the Lac-Mégantic tragedy, so that's why I'm worried, Ms. Thomas.

I want to pick up the discussion on Beijing's secret police stations. You acknowledged earlier that two secret police stations were operating in Montreal. I'm having a lot of trouble understanding why the Minister of Public Safety stated on April 27 that the police stations had been shut down when they were still active. The member tried to find out how many secret police stations were operating or had been operating in the country, and you said two, but the discussion ended with Montreal.

Are there others operating elsewhere in the country?

The *Journal de Montréal* painted a clear picture showing that police stations were operating in Toronto and Vancouver. Are those police stations still active?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: My understanding, as of today, is that the ones that had been operating in Toronto and Vancouver are no longer operating.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Do you know whether members of the Chinese diaspora are still being monitored by police officers, diplomats or people with diplomatic protection who are still on the job? Yes or no?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I do not have any further information about police stations. New information could come to light as soon as I leave this room, but as of today I do not know of any others.

There are, yes, proxies of diplomats who are working contrary to the interests of the diaspora community. That is a significant element of—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: How many?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I could not give a number.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Is it because you can't or because you don't know?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Do I know a precise number? No.

Proxies work in a range of ways, so I can't give you a number.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Romanado is next.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, again, to the witness, focusing on the question of privilege, I want to pick up a bit on where my colleague MP Blaney was focused in terms of educating members of Parliament. We heard testimony, very clearly, that the intelligence community doesn't understand the business of politics, and politicians don't understand the business of intelligence.

When Mr. Chong came to testify before our committee, he mentioned that he had four briefings with CSIS, the first one initiated by CSIS on June 24, 2021, and three subsequent meetings that he initiated with CSIS.

Now, having been a parliamentary secretary in the defence portfolio, and having sat on the defence committee, I have had various intelligence briefings, so I understand what they are. Would you not agree to perhaps having all members of Parliament, senators and their staff be briefed on what to look for, on what foreign interference looks like, on whether it's to be on the lookout for someone who is trying to be involved very much in your campaign, or putting up information that's a bit erroneous so that you will correct it, or things of that nature?

As you understand, the intelligence community is always looking at gathering intelligence. There's a lot of information that members of Parliament probably have, but they're not aware that they have that information, because they're not aware of what to look for. Once they have the understanding of what intelligence agents are doing, they are able to provide the appropriate intelligence agencies feedback also. We heard from another witness that Canadians writ large may be privy to information that would also help the intelligence community.

This is a sort of whole-of-Canada approach. We have a state actor that is trying to undermine our democratic institutions, and I think all Canadians would agree that we need to work together to counter that, to deter and counter. Those missing pieces of the puzzle all together might be able to ensure that in two years' time, when there's another election, we're not in the same situation that we are in here today.

Could you elaborate? In your opinion, do you think providing members of Parliament, senators and their staff, but also Canadians writ large, with at least a better understanding of what foreign intelligence looks like...? Also, then, what would be the channel for them to feed information through, so that they can help and be part of the solution?

• (1135)

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think you make a very important point or series of points. The director of CSIS has been before this committee and other committees, and certainly in the public, talking about the need to talk about foreign interference and the national security of Canada. It's not a conversation that we generally have. We talk about a lot of other things in Canada. Raising the level of understanding of what national security threats are, who is interested in Canada, who could possibly be working at cross-purposes to Canadian interests, is a really critical conversation.

It is absolutely a criticism of the national security community that the conversations we have with parliamentarians are potentially anodyne, not specific enough, not descriptive enough in terms of the things to watch for. That is something we are working to change. I think some of the things we have done with regard to elections and that continue to evolve are really important for Canadians to understand. The panel of five and the SITE task force are normally connected to a caretaker convention when there is a general election. Well, we stood up the SITE panel to analyze what's going on in five by-elections right now.

It was recommended by Mr. Rosenberg that the panel of five actually meet between elections. The panel of five will begin to meet this summer, to ensure that there is continuity of the period before a general election, so that the panel members, when they see a piece of intelligence during that election period, understand what's come before them. They'll see the totality of the picture. It's critical that this kind of action, I think—which we could certainly report back to parliamentarians—be transparent, to raise the level of awareness, to know what to be on the lookout for, and to know what techniques are being used by adversaries, so that, in the election, we can not only watch for them but prepare all of you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

I have two and a half minutes.

I want to say this again. How is it that this is the place, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, where we are finding all of this out, as the public watches? I want to thank the media. The idea is to provide transparency and information to reassure the public, but this is not at all reassuring.

I want to use my time to ask the government to state clearly which measures it's taking right now and what its game plan is. We can get that information out or make an appeal.

You can have the next few minutes to talk about what's coming in three months, six months or a year, not what you've just done.

• (1140)

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't have a crystal ball. I would hope that members of Parliament and Canadians—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have a point of order. Sorry, the interpretation isn't coming through.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm pausing the time.

Ms. Thomas, did you get the question? Did you hear the question? Is it working for you now? Okay.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you.

I don't have a crystal ball. I would hope that I can reassure you that over the next months you will see more communication from the national security community; that you'll see more dialogue with Canadians, with diaspora communities; that we will talk about foreign interference in a more open and transparent manner; that it can be done without revealing national security classified information; and that the briefings we give to members of Parliament will be more specific and in plainer language and give you examples of what to look for and what the concerns are.

I hope that members of Parliament will be briefed more frequently if they are a target, and the direction from Minister Mendicino is very clear about that. I would hope that, in terms of internal process

and dynamic, we will have a steady flow of information and advice to government—and the advice part, as I say, is critical—about what to do about particular scenarios and situations; and that we will start to address and change the tools that are needed by the national security agencies in order to be able to do their jobs.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'll just conclude by saying I would hope to see real transparency and the truth uncovered, so you can reassure the public, given your expertise and influence. As it stands, the situation is extremely worrisome.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I have a brief comment before I ask a question. I heard what you said earlier about a public inquiry. I agree that this discussion has become far too partisan, which is part of the reason the NDP feels it's important to have a person leading this process who is selected by all parties. We need to move out of this rhetoric and really deal with the issue, but we are also at a place where Canadians' sense of trust in our systems has been profoundly impacted. That, I think, can be solved only by a public inquiry.

I appreciate your sharing your opinion. I just took my opportunity to share mine.

My question to you is... Mr. Chong, when he spoke, talked about the fact that he was briefed generally quite a while back about what foreign interference looks like. He said he heard that about 40 MPs received that briefing to just alert them... It was not on specifics around his own reality, but just in the broad strokes of what it looks like when that could be happening to you.

It makes sense to me that all parliamentarians should be briefed on what that looks like, so that there is a better understanding. Again, part of what I'm hearing in a lot of the testimony is that we need to raise the literacy of parliamentarians and Canadians on how to address foreign interference and how to start to see it. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on whether that's a good thing to move forward on.

We also heard testimony that more parliamentarians should be going through a process similar to what they do in NSICOP. Go through that, have clearance and have more access to information, so that we can, again, remove the partisan reality and have more parliamentarians...not understanding top secret issues necessarily, but having a better understanding of what's going on and taking that promise and oath not to share that information.

When you look at this, do you not feel concerned that maybe parliamentarians themselves are not being given the right tools to address this issue and to better understand it when they are briefed?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you.

That's a complex set of questions you've asked. I think that NSI-COP could be used more effectively with its cleared members to understand the intelligence being collected and how it's being actioned within the national security community. I think that it's a very critical committee.

Clearing more parliamentarians is complex. Intelligence is, of course, based on the need to know. I'm not sure that clearing more parliamentarians is the answer. Talking about the threats in an unclassified, but very clear and precise manner, I think, is part of the solution.

I don't think one-on-one briefs with parliamentarians are necessarily needed or possible, but when we speak to parliamentarians as a group, I think we have to change the way we do it.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll have Mr. Cooper and Mr. Turnbull, and then we'll have Ms. Thomas on her way.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Thomas, through you, Madam Chair, I want to pick up from my last round on a few points.

When I raised the fact that Minister Blair did not have his log-in to access the issues management note provided by CSIS that indicated that Michael Chong was being targeted by Beijing, you said something along the lines that my question wasn't grounded in reality, or that it was not the reality.

At page 27 of Mr. Johnston's report, it states:

Neither the Minister nor his chief of staff received the IMU. Both indicated (and we have confirmed with the public service) that they do not have access to the Top Secret Network e-mail on which it was sent.

What part of what I asked you is not grounded in reality?

Ms. Jody Thomas: The way I heard your characterization was that they simply didn't have a log-in and, therefore, did not access the system. They don't have access to the top secret network. The material is printed and provided to them as is appropriate.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Johnston goes on to further indicate:

It is certainly the most prominent, but not the only, example of poor information flow and processing between agencies, the public service and Ministers.

Would you dispute that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: No. It's why we're changing process.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's quite late in the game.

To follow up on my last round, when I asked you about the July 2021 memo that indicated that MPs were being targeted by Beijing, including Michael Chong, you indicated that the memo had been presented to David Morrison, who was then national security adviser to the Prime Minister.

You then said that the Prime Minister was not briefed about it, had no idea about it. I would remind you that the memo from July 2021 was a month before the federal election campaign and involved allegations of interference targeting democratically elected

members of Parliament. If that doesn't get to the Prime Minister, then what does?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Madam Chair, I've said I'm not going to speculate, and you have the opportunity to ask the incumbent of the job that question when they are here.

I ensure, as the national security and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister, that he receives the information he requires, particularly on foreign interference but also on a range of other subjects.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You said, when you last appeared before this committee, that the Prime Minister is briefed frequently on matters of foreign interference. The Prime Minister's chief of staff, Katie Telford, has said that the Prime Minister reads everything and that nothing is held back, and there we were, one month before an election in which MPs were being targeted by Beijing, and suddenly the Prime Minister hasn't been briefed. Suddenly the Prime Minister, who reads everything, hasn't read this memo.

How is that believable? What does it say about this Prime Minister and how seriously he takes Beijing's threats to our democracy and interfering with the ability of members of Parliament to do their jobs? They were being targeted because they were doing their jobs, speaking on behalf of their constituents and speaking on behalf of Canadians, and the Prime Minister suddenly, conveniently, was in the dark. What does it say about him?

Ms. Jody Thomas: You're drawing fallacious conclusions.

The Prime Minister cannot make determinations about information he was not given, and he was not given the information, period.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The Prime Minister, who's responsible for the machinery of government, who establishes information flows to his office and who is so concerned about national security suddenly knows nothing. How convenient.

I think that Canadians can very easily draw the conclusion that this is a Prime Minister who doesn't take Beijing's interference seriously and that this is a Prime Minister who very conveniently acts as though he didn't know. I think he did know. I think most Canadians believe that he did know, and if he didn't know, it's just as big of an indictment on his total lack of leadership.

Moving on, are you involved in political discussions with the Prime Minister, the PMO, the cabinet or Liberal MPs?

• (1150)

Ms. Jody Thomas: I have a couple of things I'd like to say.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I asked you a question.

Ms. Jody Thomas: The Prime Minister was not provided that information. This isn't question period, so the conclusion that you drew is political; it's not based in fact. The Prime Minister wasn't provided the information.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's based in fact that he supposedly didn't know, and he should have known, and that's an indictment on his lack of leadership.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think it's an indictment of the process—

The Chair: I'm sorry; I am going to just pause.

Ms. Thomas, please keep your train of thought.

Mr. Cooper, the buzzer has gone off. I did provide you your 12 seconds back that you had earlier given to me.

With that, Ms. Thomas, please, the floor is yours.

Ms. Jody Thomas: When political conversations are occurring, I am not generally in the room.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, you have the floor.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think what we just witnessed was both fallacious arguments and salacious conclusions drawn from those deeply flawed arguments that Mr. Cooper, while pounding the desk, has been making in this committee over and over again. It's shameful, if you ask me.

I would like to get down to the facts.

Ms. Thomas, in Mr. Johnston's report, he says very clearly, "There is no intelligence indicating that the PRC took steps to threaten his family", referring to Michael Chong.

Is that your understanding?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, that's my understanding.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: There was no actual threat or action undertaken to realize that threat.

Ms. Jody Thomas: That is correct. There is no doubt the information that was provided to Mr. Chong is disturbing, but there was no action taken.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: We can all agree that it's disturbing to think of any elected official or their family even being considered in terms of threatening activity or intimidation, and I agree completely with you on that.

In terms of this top secret network email, which seems to be the source of a bit of confusion, you have said clearly and very consistently with Mr. Johnston's report that the ministerial direction in place at the time should have meant that CSIS would have briefed the minister at the time.

Would you not agree with that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: CSIS should have briefed him, yes, probably, and there was a role for the deputy minister in there.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

You're saying you don't have access to that top secret network either. I think you said you have access, but it's a lower level of access. Is that correct?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I can log into the secret network, but I don't log into the top secret network. Top secret material is provided to me by what we call a CRO, a client relations officer, from CSE.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that clarification.

You have said that the minister should have had whatever intelligence was related to this printed out, and you would have viewed it in a secure location.

Is that correct? It would not have been through the top secret email?

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's correct.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

From your testimony today, I have become interested in statements about credibility ratings on intelligence.

Is a credibility rating always included in intelligence documents?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes. When we receive raw intelligence from any of the agencies, they normally tell us a range of things about the credibility or the soundness of the report.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: How important is the credibility rating?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It allows us to draw conclusions about whether something is actionable, whether we need to wait for more information, and how we should assess what we are reading. If it's a single source or it's not a credible source or there's no further intelligence about a particular element or any allegation or any action that could be taken, we gauge ourselves accordingly.

One piece of intelligence, as we said, is generally not a smoking gun, for lack of a better term. There is a totality. As a member said, it's a puzzle piece.

• (1155)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes, you have said that. Thank you for that.

How useful, then, is intelligence that doesn't come with a credibility rating?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It could be, at the end of the day, enormously important and significant in a total picture. In and of itself, it gives you an indication of something that might happen or that maybe is happening or maybe is not. As I said, it's an art, not a science.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It could be as irrelevant as it is important, so it's a bit of a coin toss in terms of how relevant it will end up being, given the fact that it doesn't have a credibility rating.

Is that right?

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's right in that you have to see the totality of anything that came before it and what continues to be collected. That credibility is part of how the agencies determine, with limited resources, whether they are going to continue down this particular thread of investigation and collection.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I think it's notable that the leaks in the media haven't included a credibility rating, as far as I know. I think Mr. Johnston said something about drafts having been made. Does that point to the source of the various leaks that have come through the media, how credible that information is, and maybe where it originated from within the security and intelligence environment?

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull, I would usually give the floor back to Ms. Thomas, but our time has come to an end.

Ms. Thomas, if there is anything else you would like to share with committee members, please just send it to the clerk and we will—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Madam Chair, could I have a quick answer to that last question? It's a pretty important one.

The Chair: Yes, if it's really quick.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm not sure I actually understood the question. I apologize.

The Chair: I can't have you repeat the question, Mr. Turnbull, because we just don't have the time. I apologize.

I apologize, Ms. Thomas, but we have Minister Blair joining us for the next hour, and our resources are very limited. I will have to deal with that, and I don't want to.

With that, on behalf of PROC committee members, we thank you for your time and attention. Again, if there is something else you would like to share, please send it to the clerk and we will have it put out in both official languages.

We're suspending really quickly. We will be back at noon.

Thank you and have a good day.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: Good afternoon. I call the meeting back to order.

In our next panel, we have the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of Emergency Preparedness and, from the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Tricia Geddes, associate deputy minister.

Minister, you have up to five minutes for your opening comments. The floor is yours. Welcome to PROC.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Emergency Preparedness): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, colleagues, for the kind invitation to appear before you today.

I will try to be brief in my opening remarks, to give us all sorts of opportunities to ask lots of questions and have a conversation.

There is a single, core issue at the heart of this study. Let us be clear: no parliamentarian or their family should ever be threatened for advocating their beliefs, for representing their constituents or for acting on behalf of their constituents.

Colleagues, Canadians elect us to speak on their behalf about the future of this country. We can and do disagree often, but it is utterly unacceptable that any member of Parliament be made the target of possible violence, and I want to assure all of you that I stand behind anyone who is the victim of such malicious behaviour.

I first learned about the possible threats against the member for Wellington—Halton Hills when they were published in *The Globe and Mail* last month, on May 1. They were serious claims and particularly disturbing, as they named both the member and his family.

While security considerations restrict the information I am able to share, I can tell you that at no point was I ever briefed on a threat of violence by a foreign actor against any parliamentarian. I want to assure all of you in this committee that if I had ever received such intelligence, I would have asked that it be swiftly referred to law enforcement and that action be taken to protect that member and his family. If there is ever evidence of a threat of violence against a Canadian, it is critical that the matter be referred to the police immediately for further and appropriate action.

Foreign interference has been a significant threat to Canadian interests since before this government was elected, and it has become even more serious in recent years. In our very first mandate, we took our first steps towards addressing this problem, including investing in cybersecurity capacities and passing legislation to strengthen the security of our elections.

Shortly after I became the Minister of Public Safety, COVID-19 drastically changed all of our lives. The national security landscape evolved rapidly, and new threats emerged at a near unprecedented rate. There was an observable increase in activity from hostile foreign actors attempting to interfere with Canada's national interests.

In response, in 2020 I sent a letter to each member of Parliament to advise them on the severity of this threat and to explain our government's efforts to combat it. As I wrote at the time:

This Government values above all the wellbeing and safety of Canadians. Whenever malign foreign states seek to harm our communities, undermine our values or jeopardize the very institutions on which our country is built, we will take action.

This remains true today.

We were—and still are—seeing interest from malicious foreign actors to attempt to intervene in Canadian politics, behaviour that went well beyond normal diplomatic activity. That's why I explicitly instructed CSIS to provide awareness briefings to those they believed could be a target, so that they understood those risks and knew how to defend themselves against these attempts.

Let me be clear again, though: I was never informed of any attempt by a foreign actor to harm a parliamentarian or their loved ones. While CSIS made the determination of who should have a briefing, I understood that several MPs received one in advance of the 2021 election.

Our government's work on this issue is far from done. We have continued to make important progress since the last election.

Budget 2023 included \$13.5 million to establish a national counter-foreign interference office at Public Safety Canada. The RCMP has also received \$48.9 million to strengthen its capacity to protect Canadians from hostile foreign actors.

Also, my colleague, Minister Mendicino, has been holding consultations on a foreign interference transparency registry, and I am pleased to report that these consultations were wrapped up earlier this month. We have received positive support to proceed.

Colleagues, as the Right Honourable David Johnston said in his report last week, there are questions that are “too important for partisanship”. In his words: “What hangs in the balance for all of us is confidence and trust in our democratic institutions. The very confidence and trust that foreign interference seeks to undermine.”

We must continue to review these matters in a way that respects all of our national security obligations, including for those who put their lives at risk collecting intelligence in the field. While I will caution that I am limited by what I can speak to in a public setting, I very much appreciate and respect this committee's work to raise awareness of the serious threat to all Canadians and to Canadian institutions.

Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll happily respond to any questions my colleagues may have.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Blair, for keeping your comments so concise.

We're now entering six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

[*Translation*]

Then we will go to Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours through the chair.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Through the chair, Minister, you very specifically stated that you had not been briefed about any MPs who were the subject of threats of violence. However, were you briefed about intimidation or interference concerning MPs? “Violence” is a very specific word.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes indeed. Thank you very much for the question. I appreciate the opportunity to provide clarification.

I had a number of discussions with the director of CSIS with respect to the issue of foreign interference and particularly the activities of the Chinese government, but I did not receive any specific information about interference targeting any individual MP. I was aware that there was concern within CSIS that interference could be directed towards unnamed MPs. That's why I asked CSIS to conduct awareness briefings for those individuals.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Minister.

You indicated moments ago that you first learned that member of Parliament Michael Chong had been targeted by Beijing through The Globe and Mail, but we know that CSIS had attempted to inform you that MPs were being targeted, including specifically MP Michael Chong, in an issues management note that was sent to you and to your chief of staff via a top secret email, and that you didn't see that note because you didn't have the log-in information, and neither did your chief of staff.

How is that possible?

• (1210)

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, what you have just described is not correct. You have your facts wrong, but I'm happy to have the opportunity to explain how that actually works, if you'd like me to.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Please explain.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, of course. First of all, there is no email account in which top secret information is shared with ministers. There is a secure terminal that is located in certain offices, but not in any political office, and certainly not in the minister's office. I had no access to a terminal in which this information was shared.

The way in which the information was brought to the attention of the minister was that it was determined by the director of CSIS what intelligence information the minister needed to know. They would then print out a copy of that and have me attend at a secure location, and the director of CSIS would brief me—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, with the greatest respect, Mr. Johnston in his report stated that CSIS had sent this to you and your chief of staff, presumably because they wanted you and your chief of staff to see it, and you didn't see it, because you didn't have access to it.

That's what Mr. Johnston said. Is he wrong?

Hon. Bill Blair: Allow me to clarify that the information was not shared with me. It was authorized by CSIS to be shown to me, but they determined... I would leave that question as one that perhaps you might want to put to the director. The director determined that this was not information the minister needed to know, so I was never notified of the existence of that intelligence, nor was it ever shared with me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Johnston said you didn't have “access”. You didn't have “access”. Those were Mr. Johnston's words.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes. In fact, that is factually correct. There's no terminal where such information would ever be made available in a political office, and certainly not in the minister's office. It was in a secure location. I did not have access to that terminal. The only way in which the top secret intelligence provided on that terminal would ever be brought to my attention would be if a positive decision were made by CSIS to bring it to my attention, and then I would attend either at a SCIF, a secure location, or at their offices, where that information would be briefed to me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Johnston characterized this as the “most prominent” example in terms of a breakdown in information flow. You were the Minister of Public Safety. It was under your purview. It was under your watch as minister.

What does ministerial responsibility mean to you?

Hon. Bill Blair: My responsibility is to deal with information that our national security and intelligence agencies bring to my attention. In this case, the national security and intelligence agency made a determination that this was not information that needed to be shared with the minister, and they did not share it with me. It is a concern, and I think that concern has been well addressed by a recent ministerial directive issued by my successor in that role, Minister Mendicino, in which he has directed, by—

Mr. Michael Cooper: With the greatest respect, Minister, I take it from your answer that ministerial responsibility means to you that you just don't take responsibility.

Hon. Bill Blair: I would submit that that is completely incorrect. I take a great deal of responsibility for every matter under my mandate and my responsibilities.

This is a situation where it's an operational decision of CSIS as to what information needs to be passed along to government. In this case, they made an operational decision that this was not required. Two years later, when it was leaked to the press, that information was subsequently shared with me.

At the time, I had no knowledge that it existed. I had no knowledge that it was not being shared with me, because I wasn't aware that the information was available. CSIS, quite appropriately, made a determination that they didn't believe it was necessary to pass that information along.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Minister, I would submit to you that the buck stops with you, as Minister of Public Safety. It is quite an indictment of this government that you, as Minister of Public Safety, the Prime Minister and the current national security adviser found out about this in *The Global and Mail*. It's quite an indictment.

• (1215)

Hon. Bill Blair: That wasn't in the form of a question, Madam Chair. Did you want me to respond?

The Chair: The way committee works is I try to provide some opportunity for people whom we have invited to provide some responses. Sometimes what happens is...we are individuals in political fields and it's tough. I need the information you are providing.

Hon. Bill Blair: Then if I may respond—

The Chair: Quickly.

Hon. Bill Blair: —I disagree, Mr. Cooper.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, go ahead, through the chair.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Blair, through the chair to you, I think what we've just heard is another fallacious argument coming from the Conservative benches, which we hear quite regularly. It's unfortunate.

I want to go through a few of those, but before I do I'll ask you a quick question: Can you act on what you don't know about?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think, rather obviously, Mr. Turnbull, I cannot.

However, I think the collection of intelligence is important, but it's all.... The RCMP, for example, which also reports to me as the Minister of Public Safety, don't brief on operational investigations. They come with the results of that. It's very similar with the national security intelligence agencies. They make a determination based on their own assessment of the intelligence.

Intelligence can take many forms. It can have many sources, and CSIS has a responsibility to determine its validity, its credibility and whether in fact it needs to get action from the government in response to the intelligence it has gathered. CSIS makes that determination.

Quite clearly, if they determine that information is not required to be shared with us and I have no knowledge of that, I would not have the opportunity to act on it if it's not being shared.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's very clear.

I guess what is implied here is that they did not think that information needed to reach you. For what reason would you be able to cite that this was the case?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, I'm a bit reluctant to speculate. I think that's a question more appropriately put to the director of CSIS with respect to the decision he made not to share that with government, with the minister responsible or with anyone else. I would not want to speculate as to how they came to that determination.

I am aware, having worked, frankly, in the intelligence field for a number of years myself, that various assessments are made about the validity of intelligence, its importance and the urgency of taking other actions with respect to that.

One can only conclude by the decision not to share this information that CSIS did not believe that was in fact necessary, but I think that's a question better put to the director.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's very fair.

There's been another allegation in relation to surveillance of an elected official, namely, Michael Chan. The allegation is that it took too long to sign off on that surveillance. There have been allegations on this that have circulated in the media. Basically, the implication the Conservative Party has made is you dragged your heels on this and you should have signed off sooner.

I believe there's a whole process of due diligence you've spoken to. This would be a very serious matter that you wouldn't take lightly when making a decision about choosing to surveil an elected official at the provincial level.

Could you speak to the process without getting into specifics? I know you can't speak about that, but what is the due diligence that would be necessary?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you for acknowledging that, Mr. Turnbull. I have, in fact, taken an oath not to discuss the particulars of any investigation or any warrant that may or may not have been issued. I'm not going to break that oath. There's a good reason those matters are kept confidential.

However, I can state categorically, first of all, that the information reported in *The Globe and Mail* was false. It contained factually incorrect information. I can also advise you that, quite appropriately, in all warrant applications—not any one in particular or specifically—there is an appropriate process of due diligence and also, always, an acknowledgement that this work must take place expeditiously.

I would like to assure Canadians that, notwithstanding the false suggestion put in the newspapers, there was never any unnecessary delay. In no case were the timelines described in the paper even close to what actually may or may not have transpired in this case—and I have taken an oath not to discuss its particulars.

• (1220)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Something else we've heard quite regularly from the opposition party is the false claim that our government has done nothing when it comes to combatting foreign election interference. I note that you spoke about this briefly in your opening remarks—your response to the December 18, 2020 motion on foreign interference. I've read that, and it's quite detailed.

By way of dispelling, again, this myth the opposition parties seem to be trying to perpetuate out there in the public that our government has done nothing, could you speak to some of the particulars of the very real things and the steps we have taken to demonstrate the seriousness with which we take this matter?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Turnbull.

I would like to assure this committee, my colleagues in Parliament and all Canadians that we took this issue very seriously right from the outset of our forming government in 2015. Some very positive steps were taken with the establishment of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians and additional authorities for NSIRA. Some very positive steps were taken in order to deal with this. There have been a number of legislative remedies brought forward that, I think, also strengthen Canada's resiliency.

In response to the motion that was passed in Parliament, I thought it was very important to fulsomely respond and specifically name the issue of foreign interference and some of the countries, particularly China, involved in that. I had a number of discussions with the director of CSIS on how to respond appropriately.

I also thought it was so important for me to not just table the report but also mail a copy to every parliamentarian. I thought that information was critically important to them in doing their jobs. I wanted to make sure they were all well informed, and subsequently—

Oh, we're done.

The Chair: Yes, thank you.

Go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

Would it be possible, Madam Chair, to ask the minister to slow down? That would help the interpreters, who are doing a great job, but they have been at it for nearly two and a half hours. It would also help me, so I don't miss anything.

I want to follow up on a comment that was made earlier. I may have misunderstood what was said about how long it took to get authorization and the much talked-about four-month time frame.

The committee heard from Richard Fadden, a former national security adviser and former CSIS director, and he said he found the time frame to be quite long. What do you say to Mr. Fadden about that very long time frame?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I will try to speak more slowly, and I apologize to the translators. It is a very important point. Thank you for the reminder.

First of all, I don't disagree with Mr. Fadden. The timeline described in *The Globe and Mail* was a very long one. I want to assure you that it's not true. It just didn't happen. That timeline is absurd. There is, however, important work of due diligence undertaken by CSIS, the Department of Justice, Public Safety Canada and even officials in my office to ensure.... The signing of any section 12 warrant is a very significant intelligence effort, but it's also a significant intrusion upon people's privacy and therefore requires due diligence.

There were also issues the Federal Court raised with respect to the duty of candour, for example, that CSIS has a responsibility for. There is always an appropriate level of scrutiny and diligence that must be applied. I can't speak specifically to any case—you will forgive me—but when these matters were brought before me for my approval, it was always done in a secure location. Frankly, it took hours, not days, weeks or months, to form that approval.

I recognize the importance of being diligent and of acting expeditiously. I want to assure you that this took place in every case.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Minister, you have extensive experience, so I'd like to hear your thoughts on the expert opinions the committee heard. The experts said that documents from the intelligence community were over-classified. Ms. Thomas said earlier that up to 3,000 or 4,000 pieces of intelligence came in a month.

Is the culture of intelligence sharing deficient in cabinet? Tell us about that. We'd like to know.

● (1225)

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I wouldn't necessarily characterize it as deficient. However, let me make some acknowledgements, if I may.

I think transparency is very important. Canadians want to see evidence of the actions that their government takes, so I think we should always attempt to be as open and transparent as possible. I also know, having worked in that area for a number of years prior to becoming a politician, about the importance of maintaining secrecy around the collection of information, the people who may be involved in that collection, investigative techniques and how that information is collected. Some of that information is of a very sensitive nature and could impact the reputation of our government or our country or private Canadian citizens.

There are some things, quite frankly, that must be kept secret and should always be kept secret. However, I think we should also reflect on things that can.... We don't, in my opinion, have a good system of declassifying secret material, and not everything is as sensitive as some things are. I think that's work that we need to reflect upon and work that we need to do.

As this committee has heard from many witnesses, transparency and trust are at the heart of everything we do. I think it's important for us to explain to Canadians why some things must be kept secret and why other things should be more publicly available.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to use the little time I have to talk about transparency and confidence.

The statistics say it all. I mentioned this earlier: two out of three Canadians think the Chinese government is trying to interfere in our elections. Nearly half of people feel the next election will be less free and fair. I find that troubling, Minister.

From the previous discussion, we learned about a host of new measures I didn't even know existed.

The public clearly isn't aware of them either, so how do you plan to make them aware? Are you humble enough to say you're fixing the situation and announce what's coming?

People need reassurance because, right now, they can't keep track of it all. What would you tell people about what you're doing?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: It's a very important question. I think public trust is the currency of the work that we all do as politicians and the work here in Parliament. Without the trust and consent of the public, we don't have the ability to do our job.

There are a couple of points that I would clarify.

You said that the Chinese are intent on doing this. It's the People's Republic of China. It's the government of a foreign nation, a hostile nation, that is actually targeting...and they are targeting to interfere not only in our democratic institutions and our elections, but in many other aspects of our society as well. We have an absolute responsibility to protect those Canadian institutions and to protect Canadians.

I think to earn that trust—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much to the chair. As always, everything that I say goes through the chair.

Minister, thank you so much for being with us today.

I think public trust is the very essence of what we're discussing. That is why the NDP put forward a motion that said every party has to agree on the person who's leading this process that we would like to be a public inquiry.

I think it's become fraught with political rhetoric. The key issue for me is that I want to have Canadians trust their institutions. If they don't trust their institutions, that becomes a very scary place to be.

We're here today, specifically to talk about the question of privilege, but also to try to unpack what happened and where the gaps are.

My first question is around how you received information from CSIS in that role. What is the process, and is there a problem with this process that needs to be addressed?

We heard testimony, which was shared from experts who said that intelligence is going...but there's not necessarily appropriate advice. When intelligence is going over to someone, there doesn't seem to be a very good process of making sure that this intelligence was consumed, how it was consumed and what came out of that.

I'm wondering if you could talk about the process part, from the history you've lived through, where we might want to see that improved and whether you felt at any time that this was a concern for you.

● (1230)

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me explain perhaps how intelligence was shared with me while I was the Minister of Public Safety. I would receive information, usually from the director of CSIS or one of his staff, that they had information they needed to share with me. There is a secure room for those types of briefings here in Ottawa—actually, there are a couple of them—and there's one in Toronto. I would very frequently, depending on where I was at the time, go to that secure location. At that location, I would then be brought into a room, and in hard copy—never by email—that information would be shared with me. I would have the opportunity to read it and ask questions about it.

The question you raise, I think, is the most important one. It's just consuming intelligence and information—what people think is happening or might have happened, or what someone suggested is happening to them. This really raises questions. Then what? What's next? What do we do about this?

For example, Mr. Johnston asked me, if I had become aware of any threat to any parliamentarian or their family, what my response would be. I said, “Call the police.” How could you not? Our first responsibility is to protect people, and we cannot leave people in jeopardy. That question arises with every intelligence briefing.

I think there are ways to improve how that information is shared with various people in government, particularly the Minister of Public Safety and others.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: This leads me to a second question.

Of course, I heard what you said about wanting to call the police and hoping that it would be addressed. The concern, of course, is that we now know MPs were being targeted, and they didn't know for an extensive amount of time. It's hard to respond in any way if you don't know that you're being targeted.

The other issue, which Ms. Kwan and Mr. Chong have both brought up, is that there are ethnic communities being targeted, and people have come forward to the RCMP—to the police, as you noted. When they come forward with this information, what they're finding is that actually there isn't a lot of awareness of how to respond to that. People get a file number, and then they never hear back. They feel under threat. They may have more experiences, but they stop going to get help, because that help doesn't seem to be there.

I wonder if, in your previous role, there was any discussion about what we need to do in terms of building our infrastructure within Canada, so that when we call the police or the RCMP when things like this are happening, there's actually the capacity and the understanding of foreign interference in a meaningful way to respond to it. That's where I'm concerned. I appreciate what you're saying, but it seems to me that what we're hearing is that the police and the RCMP actually don't have the skills necessary to respond to that. Why would we be hearing from so many communities saying they've gone for...they have a file number, but nobody ever called them back?

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam, there are a couple of things.

First, when CSIS advised me that there were activities of a hostile state, the People's Republic of China, in particular, directed towards Canadians, and it could include parliamentarians—although they didn't name any individual or...any specific interference on any individual in most of those cases—I asked that, in fairness to those parliamentarians and in fairness to those Canadians, we conduct awareness briefings. You had to tell people that this is what interference looks like; here's how to recognize it; here's action you can take to protect yourself from it. You can't just leave people vulnerable to such attacks, because they can be quite insidious and quite serious. I asked that intelligence briefings take place. I think that was important.

Secondly, I think you've identified a significant challenge, and it's this issue of intelligence to evidence. It's where the national security intelligence agencies collect intelligence, and the ability to then take that intelligence and use it for a criminal investigation or prosecution can be quite challenging—it's ongoing work. I think there are some legislative and judicial responses and considerations we need to concern ourselves with.

Let me also acknowledge that I also work very closely with that diaspora right across the country. There have been situations in which they have been intimidated or threatened, and those are very serious matters. We have a responsibility to protect all Canadians, and our national institutions, like the RCMP and CSIS, have a responsibility. We have to make sure they're adequately resourced.

As you said, and as I mentioned in my opening remarks, we are putting significant additional resources into the RCMP, for example, to enable them to do those investigations and to protect those Canadians, but I would also acknowledge to you that there's more work to do.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We have Mr. Cooper, followed by Monsieur Fergus.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

To the minister—through you, Madam Chair; always through the chair—are you familiar with the 1988 Supreme Court Vanweenan decision, otherwise indexed as R v. Chesson?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, I'm not.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. The Vanweenan decision stipulates that CSIS must identify the individuals it believes will be intercepted talking in the surveillance process while applying for the warrant.

Does that ring a bell?

Hon. Bill Blair: I know what you're talking about now, yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

Are you aware that CSIS has to provide a list of third parties who may be intercepted talking to a target of surveillance during the application process for a warrant?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: In the warrant application for Mr. Chan, which you approved, did CSIS identify any individuals who may be intercepted in the course of surveillance who are members of cabinet, any sitting members of Parliament or senior officials in government?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Cooper, I took an oath not to discuss or disclose any information—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I understand, Minister—

Hon. Bill Blair: —relating to any of those matters, and I intend to uphold my oath.

Mr. Michael Cooper: —so I'm going to put this to you in general terms.

Hon. Bill Blair: There's nothing general about your question, Mr. Cooper, and I'm not going to answer it.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I will ask you a question—

The Chair: I'm going to pause the clock really quickly. I feel that sometimes that helps.

As we know, one person speaks at a time.

Minister Blair, I know you don't frequent this committee, but we appreciate your taking the time to come, and you responded really quickly. That's something I said to Ms. Thomas as well.

Because of the culture of this place, members who sit on the committee tend to, I guess, have the time. Whenever I see that you're not getting time, I will make sure that some is provided to you to answer, but sometimes, just with the importance of this topic, we know where it's headed.

I'm just going to let us get through this together. Okay. That's all of us. That's great.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is back to you.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I will pose the question more generally.

In any CSIS warrant application that you approved, did CSIS identify any individuals who may be intercepted in the course of surveillance who were members of cabinet, any sitting members of Parliament or senior officials in government?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper. That information is something that I am not prepared to discuss in a non-secure setting, simply because I've taken an oath not to, and I intend to uphold that oath.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Are you aware of Mr. Chan in any way communicating with members of cabinet, any sitting members of Parliament or senior officials in government?

Hon. Bill Blair: Is there any context to your question? Mr. Chan has been around for a long time. I will tell you that when I was police chief, I encountered Mr. Chan on a number of occasions.

Is that the nature of your question?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. How long have you known Mr. Chan? Has he been involved in any of your political campaigns?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't believe so, directly, but I'm aware of the man. Like I said, I've known him since I was the police chief in Toronto.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you consider him to be a friend?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, sir.

Mr. Michael Cooper: How long has your chief of staff known Mr. Chan and worked with him?

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't have any idea, sir.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You have no idea. Okay.

Minister—through you, Madam Chair—did you receive the PCO daily foreign intelligence brief dated February 21, 2020, which stated there was an active foreign interference network by Beijing in the 2019 election?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'll have to check. I don't recall that particular date.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Maybe to help refresh your memory...on December 21, 2022, you were quoted in a Global News article, acknowledging that you had received certain information from that memo, so I presume you have seen that memo.

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, it's a classified document, and I can't discuss classified documents in this setting.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I certainly appreciate that you're not able to talk about classified documents, but what has been produced to this committee in that memo—so it's not classified—spoke of an “active foreign interference...network” by Beijing in the 2019 election. That isn't classified.

Did you see that?

• (1240)

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper. I've seen quite a number of documents. I can tell you that during that period of time, we were taking action to respond to foreign interference by the People's Republic of China against our government, but I can't speak to this particular document.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, this is not intended to be a prop. I'll try to refresh the minister's memory. This is a document, a memo, that is one of the very few documents that have been produced to this committee, so it has been asked about multiple times. I'm surprised you're unfamiliar with it, given that fact, given that you're appearing here on foreign interference, given that you were the minister of public safety, and given that you stated on December 21 that you acknowledged having received certain information.

I'll put it to you again. Did you receive that memo? Were you aware of that interference network by Beijing? What did you do with that information?

Hon. Bill Blair: I would like an opportunity to confirm. I want to give a forthright answer to this committee on whether, in fact, that particular memo was shared with me. Again, I can't see, from this distance, what you've held up, and it appears to be heavily redacted in any event. However, I'll certainly determine whether or not that briefing, in fact, took place and when it took place, and I'll happily report back to this committee.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Just very quickly—

The Chair: No, there's no “really quickly”. The members who sit here.... You guys know that the beep goes off, and then you know how I am. If I don't run a tight ship, then you guys complain to me that I didn't run a tight ship and that we didn't get all our rounds in. I wouldn't sit on the fence for too long because after a while it starts to hurt.

Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and through you, I'd like to thank the minister and his ADM for being here today to answer our questions on this important issue.

Minister Blair, can you go into more detail about the steps the government is taking to combat foreign interference?

Hon. Bill Blair: There have been a number of very significant efforts on how we've been dealing with foreign interference, and election interference in particular, in this country. They began as early as 2015.

There was, for example, the establishment of NSICOP in order to provide parliamentarians with insight into all of the intelligence that we were receiving and the actions that we were taking.

I actually have quite a list here that I'll be more than happy to share with you, but there have been a number of fairly significant investments made, as well, into how we respond to this. In particular, the RCMP, as I mentioned recently, received \$48 million to strengthen its capacity to protect Canadians from hostile actors. There's been a significant investment of \$13.5 million in the national counter-foreign interference office at Public Safety Canada. We have also made a very strong attempt to improve our intelligence collection and our intelligence sharing to the extent possible.

I would simply point out that during my tenure, Mr. Fergus, when I was the public safety minister, CSIS continued to advise of a growing threat of interference from a number of hostile state actors, including the People's Republic of China in particular. We made a very conscious decision to be very forthright and public about that threat, to tell people about it. That's one of the reasons I tabled a report before Parliament in December 2020—to make sure that people had an awareness. I worked very closely with the director of CSIS, who made a number of very significant public pronouncements, and in July 2021, there were also reports that were published that particularized the nature of this threat.

While the government was making significant investments and taking significant steps to protect our elections.... As well—as you're well aware—I should have mentioned that there was also a group of officials that was stood up in order to monitor the impact of political interference on our elections. They did important work on our behalf in order to determine it, and as well, Elections Canada was notified of information that could also be relevant to its important work of maintaining the integrity of our elections—where foreign money, for example, might be contributed. There are a number of significant steps that have been taken, and what has clearly been identified—which we fully acknowledge—is that there's more to do.

That's why I would respectfully suggest that the important work of Mr. Johnston going forward, in examining the issues and bringing expertise and information forward, will enable us to identify additional steps that we can take as a nation in order to protect these important institutions.

• (1245)

Hon. Greg Fergus: This is really important in terms of the “going forward” aspect of things, but there also has to be some accounting for the past. You mentioned in your testimony, in response to questions from some of my colleagues across the way, that you weren't provided this information beforehand.

How can you act on information you don't have?

Hon. Bill Blair: Very obviously, Mr. Fergus, you can't.

I want to be very careful though. I'm not suggesting that CSIS purposely withheld information from me. They make a determination on the credibility and the seriousness of the intelligence they've gathered, and they make a determination as to what needs, therefore, to be shared with a minister or with the Prime Minister, or even publicly.

In this case, they did not come to that conclusion.

Hon. Greg Fergus: This is going to be a really tough question to answer in a short period of time, but why is it that within the system there is a reluctance to share national security allegations that are unproven, uncorroborated, with government?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think there are two very valid considerations in that question.

The first is that the information is sensitive in its nature and it can have a significant impact on our reputation, on our international relations and on the interests of Canadians. I think there should al-

ways be thoughtful consideration of how intelligence is being used or shared.

There's also the issue of not wanting to compromise investigative techniques or those who risk their lives to collect this information or who are the source of that information to our government.

There's a process in intelligence gathering. Intelligence is not, in and of itself, facts and evidence. It's information that is assessed by our officials, who do their best to determine what it means.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, out of fear of rebuke, I thank you very much for letting me have that extra time.

The Chair: Madame Gaudreau, we'll go to you.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, on Tuesday, the committee met with the former clerk of the Privy Council, Michael Wernick—whom you know well—for a second time.

In answering one of my last questions, he said that the Prime Minister should bring forward strong legislation in the House. He even said that, during yesterday's caucus meetings, it was urgent for members to press the issue to show the importance of being transparent, taking all the factors into account and, above all, restoring confidence.

Where do things stand on that front? We can't know what was discussed during a caucus meeting, but is there something on the horizon?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, ma'am. It's an important question.

I think Parliament does have a very significant role to play here, and a responsibility. We've already identified, and there have been consultations on the establishment of, a foreign agent registry, which I think is going to be very important and which will provide us with very important tools.

I think there's also been some reflection on the application of the CSIS Act. It was written in 1984. The world has changed quite significantly, and we believe there are some legislative remedies that would be appropriate and that need to be brought forward.

There are significant impacts and implications for Canadians, for our privacy rights and for our Charter of Rights and Freedoms with respect to this type of legislation. That's why it's so important not only that we bring forward legislation but that it be subject to vigorous debate in Parliament and to the work of our committees. We all need to make sure that the legislative response to these circumstances is robust and effective, but it also has to be done thoughtfully and carefully.

I also hope that Mr. Johnston's review is going to provide us with insight and advice from a wide variety of Canadians and perspectives that will inform the important work of how we should respond to these issues. It's not just an operational issue. There is a legislative response that I think we need to consider very carefully.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to point out that, if all parliamentarians together had chosen an individual, a commissioner or a judge, we would've been satisfied. The committee even heard that a non-Canadian could be appointed to lead the inquiry to ensure impartiality.

Whenever we talk about the special rapporteur appointed by the Prime Minister, my constituents can't believe it.

The government can do something, and I think the government knows what that is, but the government doesn't want to do it.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's now over to Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, when you were in the role of Minister of Public Safety, the government launched the Nova Scotia Mass Casualty Commission. Of course the mandate was to find out what happened on those two days.

I'm just curious about the process. For this commission, did they have to deal with any secure documents or information that couldn't be made public? If so, what sorts of protections were in place so that the commission could deal with those and see those sensitive documents that couldn't be made public?

Hon. Bill Blair: For the public inquiry headed up by Justice MacDonald for the Mass Casualty Commission, there were a number of primarily RCMP investigative documents that were relevant and that were made available to the commission, some in a redacted form. The circumstances of that tragic event, and the information and evidence that was brought before the commission, did not cross as significantly into the realm of that which would be considered highly sensitive top secret information. Some of it was of a secret nature, which is a different level of classification, and we were able to work very carefully, through the Department of Justice, with the Mass Casualty Commission to make as much information available to that commission as possible.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

My next question is probably my last, with the limited amount of time that I have. You spoke earlier, when we were having that discussion back and forth, about the intelligence and how it moves into evidence. I think this is something that is very interesting, because it is the part that really allows action to happen.

When we look at things such as foreign interference in our systems and in our elections, where are the gaps in that, and what do we need to look at more broadly? Have any of our Five Eyes partners, for example, done any of that work that we could look at? Is it a legislative remedy, or is it something else?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think it's a question perhaps better directed towards our Justice officials, because there are fairly significant legal impediments to the.... The way in which intelligence is gathered, and some of the legal authorities used for the gathering of intelligence, actually preclude that intelligence information from being used as evidence in a court of law on a criminal charge.

There are some legislative remedies, but I don't consider myself an expert on how to navigate through those things. It's a question better put to Justice.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Blair, if I understood correctly, you basically said earlier that you didn't deny that the warrant application you received to monitor Michael Chan referred to other members and other Liberal ministers.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I suspect not, sir. I was neither confirming nor denying it. It's information that, quite frankly, I had no intention of discussing. I've taken an oath not to.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I see. You're not denying it either. Had it been that easy, you could've denied it.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: To be very clear, sir, I'm neither confirming nor denying. I'm simply not speaking to it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: You said earlier that the Globe and Mail article in which it was reported you took four months to approve the warrant was fundamentally incorrect.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: That's correct. It's correct that it was incorrect.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: It's quite handy to call the story false and to hide behind confidentiality when it's time to talk about the facts surrounding the warrant.

I want to point out that your government did the same thing in the SNC-Lavalin affair: deny the Globe and Mail story. We all saw the outcome in that affair. We all know how it ended.

You said you had been advised that the regime in Beijing had interfered with unnamed MPs. When were you informed?

• (1255)

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I don't believe that I actually said that. I said that they were undertaking.... They were conducting an effort to interfere.

I was concerned that there would possibly be some members of Parliament who might be interfered with without any knowledge. I wanted to make sure they were given sufficient information and awareness of that interference, of how to recognize it and of how to take steps to protect themselves. I asked CSIS to conduct awareness briefings, but they did not tell me who, or tell me the nature of any interference they might be experiencing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: When, then, did CSIS advise you that those unnamed MPs, as you called them, were possibly being targeted by the regime in Beijing?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: To be very clear, CSIS did not advise me of any individual MP or even any number of MPs. My concern was for all of us, for all of you and us. If you could be subject to it, we should provide you with awareness to protect yourselves.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: You didn't just wake up one morning and think that you should warn all the members of Parliament. You received a report, and it worried you enough to decide that members needed more information.

When were you advised that those activities could be going on? It's a straightforward question.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: You may recall, because I sent you and every other member of Parliament a letter in December 2020, in which I outlined political interference by the People's Republic of China. It was a 12-page letter. I tabled it in Parliament; I posted it on the website and I sent you a copy.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I know. When did CSIS inform you that it would need you to inform the MP that this happened?

Hon. Bill Blair: CSIS did not tell me that they needed me to inform the MP. We discussed—

Mr. Luc Berthold: No. When were you informed that something had to be done? Someone has to have told you that.

[*Translation*]

Someone must have advised you, as the Minister of Emergency Preparedness. You didn't just take it upon yourself one morning to send a letter to every member of Parliament telling them to be careful.

What happened? How did you come to that conclusion? Who advised you to send that letter?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: As the Minister of Public Safety, I received information with respect to the activities of hostile state actors, including the People's Republic of China. No one told me to act to

warn you. It was a decision that I made. It was my job to protect you and to protect all Canadians and our institutions.

I believed the best way to do that was to provide you with information so that you could have an awareness of the threat. I also then suggested to CSIS that if there were individuals who they believed would be particularly vulnerable to threats of interference, they should conduct awareness briefings with those individuals. They did not tell me who or why, but I have learned subsequently that they in fact did a number of those briefings.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Why didn't you ask? It was a threat to our democracy. It was a threat to members of Parliament. Why didn't you ask if there were some MPs who were specifically targeted? That was your responsibility as minister. Why didn't you?

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, these are operational matters of intelligence and a responsibility for CSIS. They were collecting intelligence and they were taking the steps and working with other national security intelligence agencies in order to protect the members.

I did not have any information that any individual MP was targeted or in any way threatened with interference. However—

The Chair: I am going to end that. Sometimes it's just nice to get a fulsome answer without my speaking in between. Members know that when the beep goes off they don't get to comment again, but it's just a matter of giving somebody from whom we say we want important information the opportunity to give us the information.

Minister Blair, I'm sure you're noticing that one o'clock is approaching. Are you able to provide me some leniency, please?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, ma'am, of course.

I have some responsibilities in about 15 or 20 minutes' time, but I'll be happy to give you what I am able to.

The Chair: Our interpreters have been going for almost three hours, so we don't want to leave it too long, but just quickly, five minutes will go to Ms. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you, I'd like to thank the minister for being here.

I want to touch base just in following up on the previous round of questions.

Minister Blair, I know the communication you sent out to members of Parliament was actually your initiative in response to a December 18, 2020, motion in the House on foreign interference. I want to thank you for taking that initiative at the time to bring awareness to the issue by tabling a report in the House and writing directly to members of Parliament. I believe, if I remember correctly, that we even received it through snail mail, with an actual printed copy, to make sure we received it, given the number of emails we receive. I want to thank you for bringing it to the attention of members of Parliament.

We heard a little earlier, when I was speaking with the national security and intelligence adviser, about the importance of making sure that members of Parliament, senators and their staff understand what foreign interference is, what it looks like and what kinds of tactics are used by hostile state actors in terms of trying to get information from members of Parliament.

Can you elaborate a bit on what your thoughts are on its being a reciprocal responsibility? For instance, intelligence agencies really don't understand politics, and politicians sometimes don't understand intelligence agencies. Members of Parliament may be privy to information that would be useful to intelligence agencies, but we're not aware of the fact that the intelligence might be helpful.

Again, could you talk a bit about the importance of increasing awareness about it among parliamentarians, and what we can do to help each other make sure we are working together to combat and deter any foreign interference?

● (1300)

Hon. Bill Blair: It's a very important question.

As politicians, first of all, we work in very diverse communities with diasporas that have come from all over the world to make Canada their home. They also have representation from various governments and government officials from their home country. It is one of our responsibilities as politicians to work with that diaspora but also with some of those other government agencies or actors.

Every government, I think, attempts in a positive way to gain some influence with the Government of Canada. It's something that we're all aware of and subject to, but it's very important that politicians be aware that sometimes that attempted influence can exceed the limit and take the form of interference. Sometimes it's important for people to understand nefarious intent and who is in fact a hostile state actor. It's not just normally trying to have good relations or serve their communities; they may have other intents.

Educating and informing parliamentarians so they recognize when that influence attempt that we all experience every day can translate into acts of interference.... We need to be aware of that. We need to make sure that we protect the integrity of what we do, the integrity of our institutions and, of course, the integrity of our elections. Keeping people aware of that, I think, is our first line of defence.

There are other things that we can do and we do in order to protect our Canadian institutions, but our best line of defence is informing, first of all, those of us who are working in the communities, and, as well, sharing information with Canadians so that they know how to protect themselves and how to be more resilient in the

face of some of the interference attempts or even some of the things we know have taken place in our country. Shining a light on that, informing people on that, is very important. I think it's an important question.

It's what I was trying to do when I issued that.... I tabled it in public. It was on our website. I wanted to make sure Canadians could see it, but I also knew that sending it to all parliamentarians was the best way to extend that information out to every part of Canada, into every community, through our colleagues in Parliament.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

On another point, I know we talked a little earlier about this reference to a secret email that you didn't access. You've made it very clear; that is not, in fact, how it works.

Information that needs to get to you doesn't go into some email, like your Gmail account, that only you have the password to. This is a physical terminal that is not located in your office. It is located in a secure location and, to be able to access that information, someone with top secret clearance would get the information printed and make sure you're briefed on it in a secure location. Is that correct?

Hon. Bill Blair: That is correct. There was no top secret secure terminal located in the minister's office, nor should there be. That information is highly classified and sensitive, and needs to be handled with great care. CSIS would, in fact, identify that which needed to be.... With this concept of need to know, national security intelligence agencies would make an assessment that this is information the minister needs to know, and they would bring it to me. If they didn't make that determination, I would not get the opportunity to see it.

● (1305)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Ms. Geddes, you didn't get any questions or comments, and the minister didn't need you to provide any insight, so he's well aware of his file. Did you want to add anything today?

Ms. Tricia Geddes (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would underline that it is the department's and the agency's responsibility to be able to access those networks to be able to provide information. In fact, as a deputy minister, I don't have access to those terminals either. We rely on our staff to ensure that we're provided with intelligence in a timely fashion.

The Chair: If there is anything that comes to mind, whether it be later or whenever, please send it to the clerk, and the clerk will have it translated in both official languages and shared with members.

With that, we thank you, on behalf of PROC committee members, for your time and attention today. We wish you the best of everything.

For PROC committee members, Tuesday, June 6, we will have the Right Honourable David Johnston appearing. We have been

successful in our deviation request, so it will be a three-hour meeting that morning.

We will see you soon. Keep well and safe. See you next Tuesday.

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