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Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

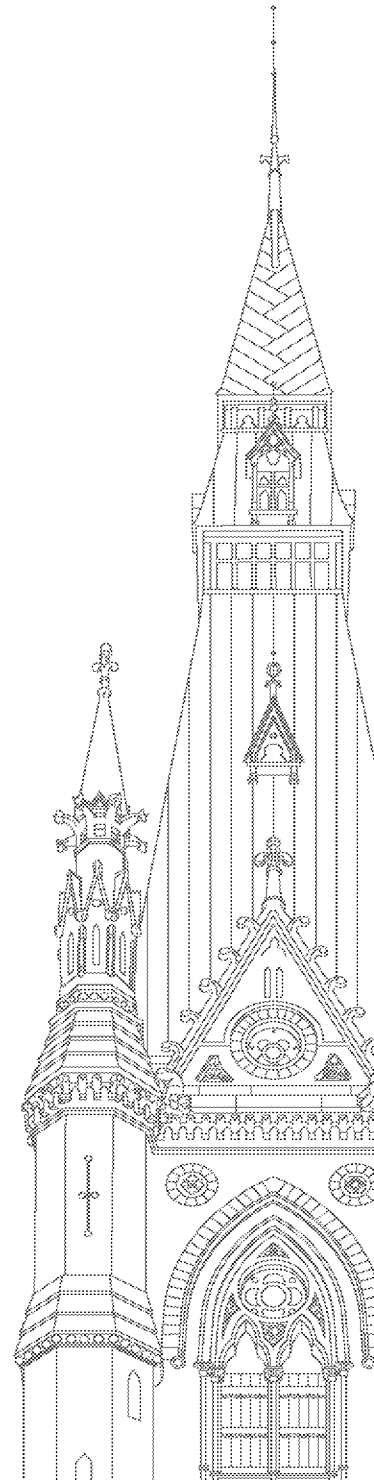
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Thursday, October 19, 2023

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 89 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.

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

We have with us today, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Rob Stewart, deputy minister, international trade.

DM Stewart, you will have up to five minutes for your opening comments. Welcome to PROC. We pass the floor over to you.

Mr. Rob Stewart (Deputy Minister, International Trade, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Since late last year this committee has been looking at foreign interference in Canada's elections, and I commend your commitment to this important issue. Ensuring that Canada's elections remain free and fair and Canadian is a critical part of keeping our democratic processes legitimate, credible and trustworthy.

I am here today to speak to my time as a member of the panel entrusted with administering the critical election incident public protocol, which is a role I occupied while I was deputy minister of public safety during the 2021 general election.

Madam Chair, before I begin, I wish to reiterate what has already been said in this committee by me and other witnesses in both 2019 and 2021. The panel concluded that foreign interference did not impact the integrity of the general election. However, we know that threats to democracies such as ours are real. To ensure Canada is in the best position to combat such threats, the government introduced its whole-of-society plan to protect Canada's democracy ahead of the 2019 general election. The critical election incident public protocol is a key initiative in this plan.

The protocol establishes a process by which Canadians are informed in the event of an incident or series of incidents that impact Canada's ability to have a free and fair election during the period

that the caretaker convention is in effect. The protocol is administered by a panel of five senior public servants. The panel is entrusted with exercising significant judgment and draws on information and intelligence sources from within and outside the public service in determining whether an incident or series of incidents meet the threshold for public announcement. This determination would be made on a consensual basis.

The threshold for public announcement by the panel is high and is considered to be a last resort. It is a last resort since the protocol, and the threshold outlined in it, must be understood within the wider context of Canada's federal election security infrastructure. During election periods Canadian laws apply, and Canada's national security and law enforcement agencies continue to carry out their mandates. Elections Canada independently administers the Canada Elections Act, and the commissioner of Canada elections investigates and enforces breaches of the act. Political parties, candidates and media engage in democratic debate and are in a position to engage in fact-checking or bring to attention false narratives circulating in the media or online.

The protocol does not replace Canada's laws or national security agencies. The information the panel relies on to inform its discussions and deliberations can come from a variety of sources. In 2021, the panel received briefs from the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force, SITE, which consists of the Communications Security Establishment, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the rapid response mechanism at Global Affairs Canada.

It is important to understand that although the SITE task force comes together to brief the panel, the agencies may also directly inform an affected party of an incident. As this committee is aware, there is always a baseline threat of foreign interference occurring in Canada. Our national security agencies continually work to combat and address the threat to keep Canadians safe both outside and during the election period. The protocol is one of a larger system in place to protect Canada's elections, and it must be understood within this context.

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to talk about the protocol and the role of the panel in the 2021 general election. I welcome your questions.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

I would be happy to answer in English or French.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy.

We appreciate your having worked with the clerk and our team to find the time that worked for your schedule and making yourself available.

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

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Stewart, for coming back to committee.

Mr. Stewart, you were the recipient of a May 2021 issues management note from CSIS indicating that the member of Parliament, Michael Chong, and his family were being targeted by the Beijing regime. That issues management note had been sent to you in your capacity as deputy minister of public safety, as well as Bill Blair, the then minister of public safety, who is now the Minister of National Defence, and his chief of staff.

Further, you were the recipient of a July 20, 2021, CSIS intelligence assessment further indicating that MP Chong, as well as at least two other MPs, were being targeted by the Beijing regime.

Despite this, MP Chong was kept in the dark for two years, resulting in what is now before this committee upon the Speaker of the House's finding of a prima facie question of privilege.

Let me begin with the issues management note. On what date did you read that note?

Mr. Rob Stewart: I am unable to answer that question in specificity. I would tell you that, in the river of intelligence that crossed my desk, it could have occurred at any point in time subsequent to when it was written.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The issues management note was not any piece of intelligence information; according to the CSIS director, an IMU is something that is flagged as something of high importance.

Did you read that note, yes or no, as a starting point?

Mr. Rob Stewart: Again, I do not recollect reading it, but I think I would have because I saw a lot of intelligence.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You would have seen that. Would that have been in May 2021?

Mr. Rob Stewart: In all likelihood.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you have any recollection of briefing Minister Blair about the IMU?

Mr. Rob Stewart: I did not brief Mr. Blair about the IMU.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You did not brief him. Why did you not take it upon yourself to brief Minister Blair?

Mr. Rob Stewart: The intelligence moves in the system through various channels, and one of the channels that it moves through inside the Department of Public Safety is to the minister separately from the deputy minister.

In the context of our discussions with CSIS is when issues management notes are generally raised, not by me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The issues management note was sent to Minister Blair directly. Minister Blair, when he appeared before this committee, made the incredible assertion that the director of CSIS had made “an operational decision” not to share the IMU with him despite the fact that it was sent to the minister via the top secret email network and Minister Blair didn't see it because he didn't have the log-in credentials to the top secret email network. Nonetheless, he made the assertion that the director of CSIS had made an operational decision not to inform him.

When Mr. Vigneault, the director of CSIS, appeared before this committee, he flatly said that wasn't so, that he had every intention of the minister seeing that IMU. In fact, Vigneault stated, “I conveyed the information to the Department of Public Safety along with the very specific directive to forward it to the minister.”

Do you recall or are you aware of any operational decision not to inform Minister Blair?

Mr. Rob Stewart: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Were you aware that Minister Blair did not have access to the top secret email network? Can you explain why, after 18 months into the job, Minister Blair and his chief of staff would not have had their log-in credentials?

• (1110)

Mr. Rob Stewart: It would not be the fact that, in the normal course, a minister or their staff would have access to the system. The access is tightly controlled and generally run by bureaucrats.

The way the intelligence moved through the department was in paper form, so I would receive briefing binders on a regular basis with the contents of intelligence produced by various systems, because we have more than one.

Mr. Michael Cooper: But the IMU was, in this instance, sent by email, and it was sent to Minister Blair. Can you explain how it is that he didn't see it?

Mr. Rob Stewart: I would not believe that it was sent by email, to be clear. It would have been sent on one of our top secret systems, and it would have been downloaded, printed and then packaged for Minister Blair. That would have been the normal course.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I'm going to ask you now about the July 2021 memo from CSIS.

On what date did you read that memo?

Mr. Rob Stewart: I'm sorry. Again, I cannot answer with specificity. The volume of intelligence, and I really have to emphasize this point, is very large.

Mr. Michael Cooper: There is a large volume of intelligence, but this was a matter that is about as serious as it gets involving the targeting of a sitting member of Parliament, and it was not any memo that was sent; it was an IMU initially in May 2021, and in July 2021 followed up with another intelligence memo.

Would you at least concede that you cannot recall seeing the latter memo? You thought you read the first one, but you said you didn't talk to the minister about it. Michael Chong was left in the dark, and that amounted to a complete breakdown in process as far as what should have happened that didn't happen is concerned. Would you concede that?

Mr. Rob Stewart: My comment on your question, Mr. Cooper, would be that there are many people in Canada who on an ongoing basis are being targeted by foreign interference. It was not my job to inform them. There are processes and ways of doing so. In this instance, I was not tracking what other people were doing.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like you, at a later time, and I'll provide you time if you would like it, to reiterate the other point that you were trying to make but you were not able to make. Perhaps you could keep that written down somewhere as I think it is important for the work that we're doing.

Mr. Gerretsen, six minutes go to you.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Mr. Stewart, for being here.

I want to jump in a little bit to the exchange that you just had with Mr. Cooper. You mentioned it a number of times. You said a "river of intelligence". You talked about "a lot intelligence". The picture that's trying to be painted here by my colleagues on the other side of the table is that a memo shows up on your desk. It's unique. You don't often get memos. It's sitting there. You read it, and then you say, "Oh, I don't need this," and throw it in the shredder.

Can you tell us a little bit more about the river of information, about how the process works, about how much you're getting on a daily basis?

Mr. Rob Stewart: Sure. We collect two kinds of intelligence in Canada by Canadian agencies: human intelligence and signals intelligence. That turns into both raw reports of the information that's obtained and assessed intelligence which are distilled and analyzed for credibility and verifiability. There are also stand-alone pieces that are done by a couple of units in the government that generate views of the world with top secret and informed by intelligence top secret information embedded in them. Then there are many things that we obtain through the Five Eyes network which are the product of various agencies in those countries. Those things all tend to be bundled into a binder maybe with some tabs.

Every couple of days you get a binder. You flip through the binder, and you try to detect trends or issues of interest. Those tend to be from a public safety point of view, the larger ones.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Every couple of days you get a binder. How thick is that binder?

You're showing about four inches.

Mr. Rob Stewart: A couple of inches.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You said you get intelligence. Is intelligence evidence?

• (1115)

Mr. Rob Stewart: No.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Explain the difference, please.

Mr. Rob Stewart: I don't know what you quite mean by evidence.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Just because you get a piece of intelligence, does that mean it immediately becomes evidence to go out and arrest somebody?

Mr. Rob Stewart: No.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Can you explain the difference between the two things?

Mr. Rob Stewart: Intelligence, particularly raw intelligence, can be anything and a range of things from something that you have some certainty about or something that sounds very speculative. This is why we assess intelligence, to make sure there's credibility. When we use language, it's typically used by the community as, "We assess this to be the case," as opposed to "We know it to be true."

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You must put the various pieces of intelligence on a ranking system of some sort in terms of how credible it might be versus how not credible, how it distributes amongst your trends that you were talking about.

I won't ask you to get into where you ranked anything, but do you do some sort of process like that?

Mr. Rob Stewart: Again, for my part, in my role, I'm monitoring. It's the agencies, particularly CSIS and the Communications Security Establishment, which report to different ministers, by the way, who are kind of the first order briefers of the ministers when there are issues of importance. I would not presume to take their place.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You're part of the group that comes together during that caretaker mode during an election to monitor in real time and respond in real time. I think that a lot of people would like to portray this as five people, you being one of them, who sit around a table and just look at Facebook and Twitter all day long and then make decisions on what looks like a threat.

Tell me about the resources that go into providing you with the intelligence that you have. Are we talking about departments and networks? What goes on in order to provide you, the five people sitting at that table, with intelligence? What's the apparatus like that supports that?

Mr. Rob Stewart: The SITE task force is composed of the Communications Security Establishment, CSIS, the RCMP and Global Affairs. Each of those is an army of people and a whole process of distilling information and bringing it into a report that is presented to the panel of five, which is what we call it. It's quite an exhaustive and large effort on an ongoing basis from early in... It's on an ongoing basis, frankly, but that heats up as you get into an election and then becomes active once the writ is dropped.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You receive intelligence, and then the five of you, based on the various different inputs that you get, have to make a determination as to the credibility of that and how to act on it. That's your primary job. Is that correct?

Mr. Rob Stewart: That is the role of the panel.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You are saying before the committee today that, during the elections in 2019 and 2021, yes, you received information, but there was nothing that signalled that it had any influence on the outcome of the elections. I heard you say that earlier. I just want to give you an opportunity to repeat yourself and to—

Mr. Rob Stewart: I was not part of the panel in 2019, but I can say that I was part of the panel in 2021, yes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: They gave a report to that effect.

Mr. Rob Stewart: It has been subsequently reported and assessed by people who look at the operation of the panel *ex post* that the panel did not determine, in either election, that there was a threat to the integrity of the election.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: The panel did not determine there was a threat, so there was no threat.

I'm sorry. Can you rephrase that? There are too many negatives there for me.

Mr. Rob Stewart: There is an ongoing level of foreign interference. It's a very serious problem. There are clandestine and deceptive efforts to influence our democratic processes in society on an ongoing basis. We should take it very seriously. It was not judged by the panel that it had an influence on the election.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Ms. Gaudreau for six minutes.

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

Thank you for being here, Mr. Stewart. Currently, you are with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, but you were a deputy minister at the department of public safety. You were at public safety when China started using all these tactics. That said, I do recognize you've had a distinguished career in the public service.

I am trying to get some clarity to help me better understand things. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the impression I've gotten from the previous witnesses is that the structure the government put in place to fight foreign interference is dictated by circumstances. There was Russian interference in the U.S. in 2017, but now, we're dealing with many more tactics—more subtle and targeted tactics.

They're being carried out at the local level. The public is following the committee's proceedings, so I would like to know whether we are equipped to respond to that. Do our services have the ability, as we speak, to tackle those methods?

• (1120)

Mr. Rob Stewart: I would say they absolutely do, but I'm no longer in that role.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You say yes, but you seem to be shaking your head no.

Mr. Rob Stewart: No, I'm saying yes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Very well.

Mr. Rob Stewart: From what I've heard, measures were recently taken to strengthen the intelligence sharing system to be more mindful of what is happening. That includes the creation of a cabinet committee.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What do you mean by “more mindful”? Reassure me or enlighten me, please.

Mr. Rob Stewart: Obviously, we receive a lot of information daily, so we have to put it into context and determine what the really important information is. That's hard to do, and sometimes it takes time, but that's the key process in the system. Right now, we have a lot more processes to specifically address that.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If I understand correctly, when you determine what's really important, you're making a judgment call on the information you've collected, or you're interpreting it in a certain way.

Mr. Rob Stewart: It's about figuring out what we need to do.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That means a red flag doesn't go up automatically to signal that further investigation is needed.

Tara Denham was here on Tuesday, and she told us that the G7 rapid response mechanism, or RRM, relied solely on open-source data to monitor foreign interference. Why don't the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, a.k.a. CSIS, and the Communications Security Establishment share more information with agencies to flag more threats? Maybe they're doing it now, but it worries me.

Have things changed since to better detect threats? Currently, the information is limited to what is seen, what is read and what is heard. There are trolls, different methods and other information that isn't open-source.

Mr. Rob Stewart: There are links between the activities Global Affairs Canada undertakes and the open-source intelligence mechanism. There are also links with other security agencies and their activities, to be sure.

The social media realm is very opaque. It's not at all easy to understand. We can't be certain as to how social media work or who's doing what. Consequently, when a situation arises, we have to take the time to carry out an in-depth investigation, using our tools.

• (1125)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You said you can't be certain. Do you have any recommendations to address that, since this is a growing phenomenon? What I'm hearing is that things are too fast-paced, that there's too much intelligence to process with the tools at your disposal. I don't find that reassuring. How do you plan to fix things?

Mr. Rob Stewart: I think the recent measures strengthen the system and improve our ability to focus on what we need to do.

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

Thank you, Mr. Stewart, for answering me in French. I really appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

I really do appreciate that all members were able to provide unanimous consent to work through bells.

We could get through your six-minute round, Ms. Blaney, if you would like, or would you prefer to return after the vote?

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Well, I don't know how long it is until the bells—

The Chair: It's 10 minutes.

Is your screen not showing it yet?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's not showing.

The Chair: There are about nine minutes and 50 seconds.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm fine with that. I think we can get to the House pretty quickly.

The Chair: Perfect.

That is six minutes to you, through the chair.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Stewart, for being here. I really appreciate it.

I've listened very closely to your testimony today. I heard very clearly that there is a huge amount of information that comes in on a regular basis and that you have an army with different categories of people that is working on that information. We've heard repeatedly that one of the challenges, of course, is going through all of that information and finding out if there actually is a threat. There is a minimum threshold, and it sounds like everybody is waiting until that threshold is hit before any action is taken.

I am trying to understand this, and I hope that you can help me.

I want to recognize that this is a changing reality, and technology is changing so quickly that across the planet I think everybody is trying to figure out how to catch up to this new reality.

What is the process specifically for MPs? Why I ask that is that we're here on a question of privilege of a member in this place who did not get information that would have been helpful for him to have. As we are in this reality, I think it's important that Canadians trust our institutions, trust the processes that are in place, and that people who put their name forward to sit in these seats have some assurance that, as they're doing their work, there are processes that

are looking after what's happening in terms of foreign interference in the work they do.

Could you help us in any way to understand the process? Is there a particular process for MPs? I understand that a lot of people are targeted, and I would assume that different categories of people being targeted would have streamlines of how that process unfolds. I'm wondering if that's the case for elected officials.

Mr. Rob Stewart: I'll apologize in advance, because this is not an area in which I am familiar in terms of the processes. I'll speak to the panel and the 2021 general election.

The panel's job is to determine whether there is a threat to the integrity of the election, in broad terms. It was not interpreted to be our job to determine whether there is a threat to the election in a specific riding, although we were informed of questionable activity in various ridings. The way the panel works is that it's supposed to tell the Canadian public if there is a threat to the election. That's its primary job.

There are meetings with the political parties by the SITE task force on an ongoing basis. There is an expectation that, were it determined to be a material threat, that would work in that fashion. As it happens, we did not come to that determination.

I think the question you're asking today is an open question, for which an answer is merited.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It seems to me that a lot of these concerns are coming through social media. I know that is a hard thing to quantify and that there are different methods for every different type of social media. I also understand that social media themselves have regulations or rules that are internal to their organizations.

When it comes to elections, how is that monitored? If a social media site is not doing its work to monitor these issues that they have a commitment to doing, what is the recourse in Canada? Do you have any sense of that, or who would be the right person to talk to?

• (1130)

Mr. Rob Stewart: In the context of the 2021 general election, we had an open line of communication to the social media platforms through the Privy Council Office. There were conversations prior to and probably during the election about the need to maintain awareness and take action where abuse of their systems was detected.

The RRM was our eyes and ears to look at social media and to see whether there were trends in social media that looked like they were promoting misinformation or disinformation. That would have been a tool to use had we come to that conclusion.

We did see some things, although we were not able to determine their source in terms of who was doing it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think that's going to be the hardest part of the next few years. It's figuring out how to source that information.

I understand—and please correct me if I'm wrong—that RRM Canada works with academia and civil society to conduct research. I'm wondering if you could share any information about what those partnerships might look like and what the research is telling us.

Mr. Rob Stewart: I'm sorry. No.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You have nothing.

Mr. Rob Stewart: That would be a question for Ms. Denham.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's fair enough.

This is my next question for you. I noticed that in your testimony you talked about the fact that information is not emailed, and that it's downloaded, I think you said, printed out and then provided to the people who are supposed to have it.

Can you talk about, first of all, why it's not emailed? Second of all, it's downloaded from where?

Mr. Rob Stewart: We, as all countries do, have systems that are secure. The information travels over secured communications technology. The end points for those systems are themselves in secure spaces. I guess when I hear the word “email”, I think of the conventional version of email. There is mail on those systems, but the mail is contained within the systems.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Here is what we are going to ask of you, Deputy. We'd like to be able to vote and then return. The motion had asked for an hour of your time. I would like to be able to complete 60 minutes with you.

When we return from the vote and once all the members are in the room—so please try to come back as quickly as possible, members—we will then proceed to that second round, and then, hopefully, we can send you on your way. Is that okay?

Mr. Rob Stewart: That's fine.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Have a good vote, everyone. We'll see you back in this room.

Thank you. The meeting is suspended.

• (1130) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1155)

The Chair: We're going to return to our meeting.

Thank you, Deputy Minister Stewart, for staying with us.

We're into our second round.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Berthold for five minutes.

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

Mr. Stewart, thank you for being here and answering our questions. I need some things cleared up, because, since we began our study on foreign interference, the answers we've gotten from a number of senior officials have surprised me. Everyone here recognizes that Parliament is the heart of our democracy. Everyone here

also recognizes that elected representatives are focused on other things at election time, so they rely entirely on senior people in the federal public service to ensure the integrity of our elections, from the Commissioner of Canada Elections and the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada to the various groups that are put in place.

What really surprised me was what you said about the river of intelligence on foreign interference and national security matters. You used it to justify the fact that no one noticed anything when a foreign communist regime targeted elected representatives during an election campaign. No one wants to take responsibility for not doing their job.

This is what the director of CSIS had to say regarding intelligence that Michael Chong and three other MPs, one with family in China, were targeted:

As I mentioned a little earlier, CSIS and I conveyed the information to the Department of Public Safety [you were the deputy minister at the time] along with the very specific directive to forward it to the minister. I don't doubt that the minister didn't receive it. His comment was very clear. However, it's important for the committee to understand that we shared the intelligence and the briefing note.

You said that there was a river of intelligence and that the briefing note didn't make its way to the minister. The CSIS official told us the agency sends only zero to three of these briefing notes a week. CSIS sorts through the river of information and goes to the trouble of identifying zero to three important notes to be sent to the department. How is it possible that you didn't see this one and didn't forward it to the minister?

• (1200)

Mr. Rob Stewart: Mr. Berthold, I wouldn't want to be seen as a deputy minister who doesn't take their responsibilities seriously or doesn't do their best every day.

Under the system in place at the time, I wasn't really involved in briefings to the minister. The director was the one who briefed the minister. It was up to them to decide what the issues and concerns were. I was there at the time, but I wasn't responsible for that.

The first question I answered was about the situation that occurred in the spring or summer of 2021. I think we identified the problems with the system that the agencies used to share information.

Mr. Luc Berthold: If I understand correctly, it's up to the minister to decide which briefings he wants and which he doesn't.

Mr. Rob Stewart: Exactly.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much, Mr. Stewart.

Madam Chair, I propose the committee resume consideration of Mr. Cooper's motion, since we didn't finish discussing it at our last meeting.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're just calling the question on whether we want to switch to the other motion or maintain....

The clerk will call the question.

An hon. member: Are we debating this?

The Chair: We're calling the question. If you want to do it, say yes. If you don't want to do it, say no.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm just confused because we have a witness here.

(Motion negatived: nays 7; yeas 4)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, you have a point of order.

Mr. Michael Cooper: On a point of order, Madam Chair, what we have is the cover-up coalition at work yet again seeking to go behind closed doors rather than to deal with this matter—

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoynes, Lib.): Point of order.

The Chair: Okay—

Mr. Michael Cooper: —openly and transparently to get to the bottom of one of the greatest international embarrassments—

The Chair: Okay—

Mr. Michael Cooper: —brought upon by this Prime Minister with an SS soldier addressing Parliament—

The Chair: Okay—

Mr. Michael Cooper: —and it's really disgraceful.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, you no longer have the floor when the chair starts to speak.

You know the Standing Orders very well. We know how committee functions.

Mrs. Romanado, you have a point of order.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: My intervention was going to be to ask Mr. Cooper what standing order was being broken, but I understand that you've already intervened.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I am going to remind members that all of us came together to choose who would be on our witness list and to choose how we were going to proceed. Time was consumed and we agreed upon the way to do that.

Prior to leaving for the vote, I asked whether we wanted another round of questions or the deputy minister could go on his way, because the motion had asked for 60 minutes.

I believe it was your motion, Mr. Cooper.

Therefore, I confirmed that I would make sure members got their 60 minutes at minimum with this witness, and today I am seeing now for the second time this week that Conservatives believe that they can ask their questions and that no one else gets to. That's not how this committee works—and I do observe a lot of other committees.

As the chair of this committee, I am reminding members that we have a question of privilege that was not referred to us by another

committee. It was referred to us by the House of Commons, to which we have been elected to serve the people of this country.

A member of Parliament stood in that place and said they felt threatened and felt unsafe, and felt that their parliamentary privilege was violated—parliamentary privilege that the average Canadian will never experience, yet we serve in the House of Commons.

We are going to respond to that question of privilege, and I never want to have to give this spiel again. We have witnesses coming and I want everyone to be honest about their intent towards it or to be honest as to what they are suggesting.

Mr. Cooper, go ahead.

• (1205)

Mr. Michael Cooper: On a point of order, the only reason it's been necessary to bring this motion at this time or to resume debate is that every effort has been made on the part of Liberals and New Democrats to have an in camera meeting to deal with the issue of the former SS soldier who was introduced before the House of Commons—

The Chair: This is debate.

Mr. Michael Cooper: —in what is Justin Trudeau's biggest international embarrassment.

The Chair: This is debate.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Cooper: We want transparency.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Point of order.

[*Translation*]

With all due respect, Madam Chair, You've questioned our honesty twice now. I think it's entirely appropriate for Mr. Cooper to explain his reasons given what you said about us not being honest. I think that Mr. Cooper was entirely within his rights to explain himself and that his point of order was entirely warranted.

The Chair: I didn't call you dishonest. I said that other members of the committee wanted to ask questions. They, too, have to have an opportunity to ask questions.

[*English*]

I have Mr. Gerretsen on a point of order.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I'm just incredibly embarrassed, on behalf of everybody, when we do this stuff in front of a witness.

Would it be possible to either allow the witness to leave or finish the questions? We can then get back to the petty stuff among ourselves without having to subject the witness to this.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Lauzon for five minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here today, Mr. Stewart.

I think you've clearly outlined the flow of the river of information that comes across your desk. You were asked several questions about that relevant piece of information, but you've said little about how the information is processed.

You talked about the panel of five senior public servants who process the information. You also talked about the fact that the information comes in from all over, different departments and such. You named some of them, as did some of my fellow members in their questioning.

Nevertheless, I'd like you to describe how you manage the information. What's the process for handling the information once you receive it? How complex is the process for the panel?

Mr. Rob Stewart: Certainly. First, I'd like to clarify something, if I may.

Earlier, in response to Mr. Gerretsen's questions, I explained how the system as a whole works. I talked about the intelligence and the analysis process overall.

The system works differently when it comes to the panel and the work done during writ periods. The SITE task force is made up of intelligence agency and RCMP officials. They analyze the intelligence extensively as it relates to the election, and their process revolves specifically around election interference.

• (1210)

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: In terms of the process for identifying electoral interference or threats against an MP, can you talk about how you deal with the information you receive from the task force?

Mr. Rob Stewart: During a writ period, the panel receives weekly briefings from the task force, very detailed briefings. They include intelligence from a number of sources and it pertains specifically to interference.

Then, the panel discusses the intelligence, the situation in general and the level of interference, specifically. Interference throughout a writ period happens in a number of ways. China, in particular, uses a number of methods to harm Canada's interests. When we are in the room with the other panel members, we endeavour to determine whether the interference rises to a certain threshold.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you.

I'm going to follow up on what we heard from Tara Denham last week. She told the committee that false and misleading information had been spread and that it was highly likely that foreign interference had taken place.

We want to get a clearer sense of all this. How do you determine when to designate something as "highly likely"? Do you have a process to verify the information? Is it complex? How do you verify whether something is highly likely or unlikely since the information could be from any source? Simply put, can you explain how complex the process of verifying the information is once you receive it? Can you talk about the time frames, as well?

Mr. Rob Stewart: It's always tough to verify intelligence with accuracy in order to get to the truth. To some extent, it's always a grey area, and we use every tool we have to analyze the intelligence.

The role of the RRM Canada team, which my colleague Tara Denham talked about, is to do its best to understand who is doing what on social media and whether the Chinese government, say, is at the source of a foreign interference activity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stewart.

We now go to Ms. Gaudreau.

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

Mr. Stewart, I'm truly sorry you've had to go through this twice during the same meeting. I hope there isn't a third time.

I have a question, and I'm going to be constructive. It's very simple. The answers I got cover changes that were made recently. I'd like to know when those changes were made. What does "recently" mean? When exactly was it? Can you give me a date, a month? I just need to know that.

• (1215)

Mr. Rob Stewart: This summer, the Privy Council Office created a committee of senior public servants focused on national security threats. Then, the Prime Minister established a national security cabinet committee, which he, himself, chairs.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It was after May, but during the summer. Great.

That's all for me, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

It is now over to Ms. Blaney.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

This is of particular importance to me as well because one of my members was also targeted. I know that it is a growing concern. I think that as we look at democracy, we have to do all that we can to protect it, and that means protecting the system.

Of course, the focus right now is on the election period, which I understand and I think it's important, but we also know there are activities happening in between elections. Even if it's targeting a particular member, it creates a trend that is concerning to me.

I know that RRM Canada leads the G7 RRM. I'm wondering if you could share with us how are those folks coming together to talk about best practices with what's happening. Is there any discussion about having more work done in between elections to address some of these trends we're seeing that are concerning and that add up to a bigger impact during the election?

What I'm worried about is if we simply are waiting to address this at election time, without that understanding that between election time is also very important for election time, we're going to be missing important factors.

Mr. Rob Stewart: I can't answer the G7 part of that question because it's not in my role at the moment, but I can speak to the more general point and start with the point that many reports have been written and notice given of the need to do more on a continuing basis to track foreign interference. It isn't as if it's ignored in any way by the agencies that are responsible for national security, but to amplify the messages, for people to understand better the threats, including parliamentarians.... You have those written reports that were written after the 2021 and 2019 elections, as well as by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians.

The point here is there are layers to defend against foreign interference, which, as I have said before, goes on all the time. One of

those layers, if you'll permit me, Madam Chair, is just people's understanding and ability to recognize when it's happening, and then there's the question of the *diagnostique*, when it occurs, and how we respond to it.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

With that, Mr. Stewart, we would like to thank you for your time and attention today. If anything comes to mind, let us know. We wish you the best and appreciate your making time.

The meeting is suspended. We will continue with committee business when we return from the suspension and it's been switched over.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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