



## Interview Summary: Walied Soliman

Walied Soliman, KC, Chair, Norton Rose Fulbright Canada LLP and Co-Chair of the Conservative Party of Canada's 2021 general election campaign, was interviewed by Commission Counsel on March 7, 2024.

### Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission's mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Information provided during the interviews that relates to other aspects of the Commission's Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.

## 1. Background

- [1] Walied Soliman is the Canadian Chair of the law firm **Norton Rose Fulbright ("NRF")**. His legal practice focusses on complex M&A transactions and proxy battles. He was Co-Chair of the Conservative Party of Canada's 2021 general election campaign.
- [2] Mr. Soliman has been involved with the Conservative Party of Canada (previously the Progressive Conservative Party) and the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario since his late-teenage and early university years. Among other roles, he chaired Patrick Brown's successful campaign to lead the provincial PC Party in 2014-2015 and Erin O'Toole's successful campaign for the leadership of the **Conservative Party of Canada ("CPC")** in 2020.
- [3] The 2021 election was his first involvement in a federal campaign. He played no role in the 2019 federal general election campaign and has not been involved in federal politics since Mr. O'Toole was removed as the CPC leader in early 2022.

- [4] Mr. Soliman assumed the role of Co-Chair of the CPC's general election campaign a few months before the election, around the spring of 2021. The other Co-Chair was MP Michelle Rempel Garner.
- [5] Mr. Soliman remained active in his legal practice and as Canadian Chair of NRF while serving as the campaign Co-Chair. His responsibilities as Campaign Co-Chair included taking on special projects, acting as an ambassador for Mr. O'Toole, providing advice, and filling gaps that arose during the campaign. He did not direct the campaign's strategy. He took on roles like filling in for Mr. O'Toole to meet prospective candidates or donors and dealing with specific problems that campaign staff brought to his attention.

## 2. Representative to the SITE Task Force.

- [6] One of the special projects Mr. Soliman took on was acting as the CPC's representative to the **Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force ("SITE TF")**. The alternate representative was Tausha Michaud, Mr. O'Toole's Chief of Staff, but Mr. Soliman believes that she was never required to attend a SITE TF meeting in his place.
- [7] Mr. Soliman did not recall **foreign interference ("FI")** being viewed as a major issue in the lead up to the 2021 campaign.
- [8] Mr. Soliman met with SITE TF in a secure facility three times prior to the election and one or two times during the writ period. These meetings occurred in the presence of representatives from the other participating political parties. The only "one-on-one" discussions (i.e. between the CPC campaign and SITE TF) occurred after the election (discussed below). SITE TF was the CPC campaign's only contact with the national security agencies, and it was the campaign's only source of information from the federal government about FI. Mr. Soliman's understanding was that any concerns the campaign had about FI should be communicated to the chair of SITE TF.
- [9] Before and during the campaign, the information from SITE TF was that there was no FI in the 2019 campaign and that they were detecting no issues during the 2021 campaign. No actionable information was provided to the campaigns. The briefings were of a "general educational" nature, as opposed to identifying specific risks or incidents. There

were no details given about what to look out for, and the message to the campaign was essentially, “If you see something, say something.” When Mr. Soliman asked for more information, he was told SITE TF couldn’t provide more detail because of legislative restrictions, such as those in the *Privacy Act* and the *CSIS Act*.

[10] Mr. Soliman was asked about a SITE TF threat assessment from 2021, parts of which have now been made public, which indicates that there were “online /media activities aimed at discouraging Canadians, particularly of Chinese heritage, from supporting the CPC, party leader Erin O’Toole and particularly former candidate Kenny Chiu.”<sup>1</sup> Mr. Soliman indicated he was not advised of this information. His awareness of FI in the 2021 election comes from the public media reporting that has occurred in the years since.

[11] In the latter part of the campaign (around two-thirds or three-quarters of the way through the writ period), field organizers and regional organizers from the CPC campaign started reporting certain concerns to Fred DeLorey, the Campaign Director, and Ms. Michaud. At the meetings of the central campaign executive, which occurred every few days, Mr. Soliman was made generally aware of these complaints, which related to efforts in certain communities to push the vote away from the CPC candidate. Mr. Soliman does not recall the details of the complaints and does not recall being shown any specific media reports or social media posts. One of the complaints came from Kenny Chiu’s campaign, but Mr. Soliman does not recall which other candidates raised concerns.

[12] At the time he was made aware of these issues, Mr. Soliman was being told by SITE TF that they were not detecting any FI, so he discounted the complaints, thinking they were just a distraction to the campaign and probably not serious. He recalls bringing an issue (he does not recall the details) to the attention of SITE TF at one point. The message he got back was that there were no serious problems to be concerned about. As a result, FI was not a major issue on the campaign’s radar during the writ period.

[13] A short time after the election, Mr. Soliman and Tausha Michaud had a call with SITE TF to advise them that they were hearing from CPC candidates who suspected that FI had occurred during the election campaign. The only candidate he could specifically recall

---

<sup>1</sup> CAN003781

complaining was Kenny Chiu. The CPC campaign put together a PDF of materials that they sent to SITE TF a few days after the call. Mr. Soliman could not recall the details of the information that was passed on to SITE TF and did not recognize the memorandum dated September 24, 2021 produced by Sadiq Valliani entitled “Foreign Interference in Our Election”.

- [14] Mr. Soliman and Ms. Michaud had a final videoconference with SITE TF representatives a few days before the new Cabinet was sworn in. At the meeting, SITE TF responded to the information presented by the campaign with “shrugged shoulders,” saying they did not think any FI had occurred during the election campaign. Mr. Soliman did not have any basis to doubt their judgment and was conscious of looking like a “sore loser.”
- [15] Mr. Soliman was not aware of the existence of the “Panel of 5”, established under the **Critical Election Incident Public Protocol (“CEIPP”)**, or its mandate.
- [16] After the election, Mr. Soliman was contacted by either the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections or Elections Canada about whether he wished to make a complaint. He declined to speak to them, as he believed SITE TF was the proper entity to receive the CPC’s complaints.
- [17] Mr. Soliman advised that he does not believe he ever communicated with the Independent Special Rapporteur, David Johnston, or with Morris Rosenberg, who wrote a report assessing the 2021 Critical Election Incident Public Protocol.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Soliman stated he has great respect for Mr. Rosenberg’s integrity but felt that his report was inaccurate in saying that the political party representatives were “generally pleased with the information sharing with government.”” This did not accurately reflect Mr. Soliman’s views.
- [18] Mr. Soliman declined to speculate on whether or why the CPC was the subject of FI in the 2021 election. He said this is a matter for experts to determine. He did not have an opinion about whether FI had contributed to the Party’s loss in any particular riding. Mr. Soliman emphasized that he does not believe FI caused the CPC to lose the election.

---

<sup>2</sup> Morris Rosenberg, *Report on the Assessment of the 2021 Critical Election Incident Public Protocol*, Privy Council Office (2023), DocID#COM0000320.

### 3. Views about the flow of information from the SITE TF Task Force.

- [19] Mr. Soliman said that SITE TF should have provided more concrete information to the parties. Having encouraged party leaders to handpick responsible representatives, and having gone through the rigorous process of obtaining Secret security clearance, his expectation was that SITE TF would share useful information with those representatives and trust them not to misuse it. He would have expected this to include identifying people or groups the campaigns should avoid or watch out for, and identifying specific risks the campaigns faced. Mr. Soliman suggested that the security establishment should have recognized that those put forward by party leaders are trusted intermediaries who can help address the problem of FI. Security officials should be flagging possible problems and suggesting ways that political parties can stand up a team to counter the threat they face. Instead, much of the information he received from SITE TF was no different from that available through the media.
- [20] Mr. Soliman was critical of the apparent inability of SITE TF to share information with the political party representatives because of legislative constraints. He acknowledged the danger of creating a system in which someone from the national security apparatus can secretly tar a person as a “bad Canadian” to party leadership. But he said there should be a mechanism by which the security services can warn a political party to be careful of certain persons or groups, to scrutinize them more closely, or to take precautions with some at-risk communities. He suggested there should be a threshold for providing such warnings short of having enough evidence to arrest and prosecute the person. The parties vet candidates based on publicly available information and don’t have the resources or capacity to determine if candidates, staff, or volunteers pose a national-security risk.
- [21] Mr. Soliman is aware of recent news reporting alleging there was FI in the 2019 general election. He said the failure to notify the political parties that FI occurred in the 2019 election was SITE TF’s “biggest failing” during the 2021 election. Mr. Soliman said that if he had been told FI had occurred in 2019, it would have dramatically changed how the CPC campaigned in 2021. The CPC campaign would likely have set up a team devoted solely to the issue of FI, which would have monitored social media and instant messaging

platforms. The campaign would have trained candidates and their staff to pass on anything suspicious to this team, and it would have considered how to campaign to counter FI.

[22] Mr. Soliman had no objection to the SITE TF meetings being held with all the representatives of the political parties attending together. SITE TF was intended to protect the integrity of our democracy, and Mr. Soliman expected it would not be treated as an opportunity to secure partisan advantage. In fact, Mr. Soliman appreciated the exchange of questions and information across parties. He felt he had the ability to reach out to SITE TF privately if necessary. He did not feel constrained by being briefed in a group with the other security-cleared party representatives.

#### 4. The impact of foreign interference on Canadian democracy.

[23] Asked about the view he has expressed that political parties cannot formulate public policy under the threat of losing a riding because of foreign influence, Mr. Soliman explained that political parties are in the vote-getting and fundraising business. If proper mechanisms are not in place to protect against FI, some political actors may shy away from or not amplify certain issues that may draw the ire of a foreign government for fear that it will compromise their ability to win votes and raise money. He expressed concern that even the perception that there is a risk to the security of our political system could detrimentally affect the behaviour of political actors. Some politicians are brave and will tolerate the risk of taking a position that may make them targets of FI, but the integrity of our politics shouldn't depend on the bravery of our politicians.