Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions | Enquête publique sur l'ingérence étrangère dans les processus électoraux et les institutions démocratiques fédéraux

Public Interview Summary: Mr. Lyall King, Ms. Tara Denham, Ms. Gallit Dobner, Mr. Eric Gordon, CSIS Representative[1]

Lead officials from the **Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force ("SITE TF")** were interviewed in a panel format by Commission counsel on February 12, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to classified information. This is the public version of the classified interview summary that was entered into evidence in the course of the Commission's in camera hearings held in February and March 2024.

Notes to Reader:

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

- This summary has been prepared pursuant to subclause (a)(iii)(C)(II) of the Commission's Terms of Reference. It discloses the evidence pertinent to clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of the Commission's Terms of Reference that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, would not be injurious to the critical interests of Canada or its allies, national defence or national security.

- 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 interview 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.

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[1] The identity of the CSIS Representative has been suppressed for national and personal security reasons.

- This summary should be read in conjunction with the unclassified Institutional Reports prepared by the Government of Canada and the public summary prepared following the interview of officials from the 2021 SITE TF.

1. Background

[1] SITE TF consists of members from the **Communications Security Establishment ("CSE")**, the **Canadian Security Intelligence Service ("CSIS"), Global Affairs Canada ("GAC")** and the **Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("RCMP").**

[2] **Lyall King** was appointed Chair of SITE TF in August of 2018, and served in this role until March of 2022. He also served as the SITE TF representative for CSE during the same period.

[3] **Gallit Dobner** was the Director of the Centre for International Digital Policy from 2019 until the end of August 2022. The Centre for International Digital Policy houses the **Rapid Response Mechanism ("RRM")**. RRM serves as the permanent secretariat for the G7 RRM [G7 RRM is a G7 body dedicated to strengthen coordination among G7 countries in order to identify and respond to diverse and evolving threats to democracies, by sharing information and analysis and identifying opportunities for coordinated responses]. She also served as a representative of GAC on SITE TF from August 2019 to August 2022.

[4] **Tara Denham** was involved in the creation of RRM within GAC and attended SITE TF meetings through to the end of August 2019.

[5] The **CSIS Representative** served as the SITE TF representative for CSIS in the lead-up to and during the 2019 federal election period.

[6] **Eric Gordon** served as the SITE TF representative for the RCMP in the lead-up to and during the 2019 federal election period. He served concurrently as the Director of **Federal Policing National Intelligence ("FPNI").**

2. SITE TF Background and Mandate

2.1 History of SITE TF

[7] Mr. King explained that SITE TF was created in August 2018, in part, as a response to documented incidents of foreign interference (**"FI"**) that occurred in relation to the 2016 election in the United States. It was formally announced in January 2019. The CSIS Representative added that intelligence collection related to Canada's 2015 federal election revealed efforts by threat actors to interfere in Canada's electoral processes. This, too, informed SITE TF's creation.

[8] Mr. King believes that the Chief of CSE, Shelly Bruce, and the Director of CSIS, David Vigneault, were responsible for conceiving the idea of SITE TF. To his knowledge, SITE TF was not modelled after any other body, national or international.

2.2 Mandate and Role of SITE TF

[9] SITE TF's mandate is found in its terms of reference.

[10] Mr. King confirmed that SITE TF's role is to collect, analyze, share, investigate, and brief, in accordance with existing mandates and Canadian laws. He clarified that the investigative component of SITE TF's mandate refers to the capabilities of individual organizations that form SITE TF rather than those of SITE TF itself. For example, CSE brings **signals intelligence ("SIGINT")** capabilities to SITE TF that could then inform the activities of other organizations at the table.

[11] Mr. King and the CSIS Representative referred to the 2021 SITE TF After Action Report, which they advised sets out four bullet points that accurately portray SITE TF's mandate during the 2019 federal election:

    a) "Providing a clear point of engagement with the security and intelligence community for Government partners engaged in related work."

    b) "Reviewing and focusing intelligence collection, assessment, and open-source analysis related to FI in Canada's democratic process in a coordinated manner."

c) "Providing situational awareness for Government partners, senior public servants, and other relevant partners."

d) "Promoting the use of intelligence, assessment, and open-source information analysis in the protection of electoral processes through sharing with partners or, when respective mandates permit, take action to mitigate the threat."

[12] Although the report was released after the 2021 election, the CSIS Representative and Mr. King confirmed it accurately represented SITE TF's role during the 2019 election period as well.

[13] Mr. King explained that SITE TF was set up to coordinate different security and intelligence departments and agencies, and leverage the full scope of their respective activities. To illustrate, he noted that when SITE TF was created, he was responsible for groups within CSE that focus on foreign countries of interest. The channels of communication for these groups were narrow, given their subject-specific focus. SITE TF was meant to create broader channels of communication that supplemented existing channels. It was also meant to help close any gaps in communication of FI-related intelligence.

[14] Mr. King noted that SITE TF has no independent power separate from its constituent organizations. Stated another way, SITE TF does not have the authority to implement or approve actions. Instead, SITE TF coordinates information sharing between organizations, and enables that information to move upward through appropriate channels.

3. SITE TF Capabilities and Activities

3.1 Priorities and Threshold for Information Relevant to SITE TF

[15] Mr. King explained that SITE TF defined FI according to the *Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act* (the **"CSIS Act"**).[2] SITE TF's main priority was to create a robust picture of FI in the Canadian electoral space. To fulfill that priority, SITE TF

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[2] RSC 1985, c. C-23.

representatives discussed their respective roles and conducted tabletop exercises to clarify the different roles members would play during an election period. Generally speaking, SITE TF did not recommend actions to its member organizations. Instead, SITE TF served as a focal point for each of those organizations to share information and de-conflict the actions each organization planned to take.

[16] Ms. Dobner spoke about the provision of information relevant to SITE TF's mandate. She explained that GAC/RRM casts a broad net when defining relevance, because in the early stages of a disinformation campaign, it is often not clear whether information assessed reveals a concrete instance of FI. To illustrate, she explained that a foreign country would not use a government handle to spread disinformation on social media. To identify FI in such a case, RRM would have to draw inferences from various assessment techniques to uncover potential coordinated and inauthentic activity in open-source spaces. For this reason, RRM would flag for SITE TF information that might reveal a connection to FI.

[17] Mr. King stated that CSE also casts a broad net for the purposes of SITE TF. CSE searched for any activity that was covert, deceptive, involved a threat to any person and was detrimental to the interests of Canada, and done at the behest of a foreign state. CSE looked at a range of actors/states to understand their activities, intentions and capabilities. By looking at the broad range of activities (from legitimate diplomatic interaction, to covert operations), Mr. King explained that one can begin to identify areas of FI.

[18] The CSIS Representative explained that CSIS based its threshold on s. 2(b) of the *CSIS Act*. They also noted CSIS's "strictly necessary" limitation, which limits CSIS to collecting and retaining only that which is "strictly necessary" to fulfil its mandate. When sharing information with SITE TF, CSIS did not limit its information collection to the federal election space.[3] Instead, it shared information related to municipal and provincial elections as well, in addition to information on the motivations and capabilities of threat actors. CSIS shared this information at SITE TF to create a clearer picture of threat actor

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[3] Mr. King confirms the same applied to CSE.

capabilities and tradecraft, as well as what SITE TF might expect to see during elections. These pieces of information, taken together, helped to inform SITE TF's operations.

[19] The CSIS Representative added that a clear understanding of the tradecraft of threat actors can be useful when attempting to identify or attribute certain actions. If a threat actor is known for using a certain tradecraft, and an incident utilizing that tradecraft arises, it may be easier to attribute the incident to that threat actor.

3.2 Daily and Weekly Meetings Leading Up to and During Writ Period

[20] Mr. King explained that SITE TF representatives set an agenda before SITE TF meetings. The CSIS Representative noted that in August of 2018, most SITE TF meetings consisted of set-up work, solidifying roles, and meetings with partners. The meetings also helped to create a baseline threat assessment for the upcoming 2019 election.

[21] During the election period, meetings revolved around intelligence sharing and coordinating the content of SITE TF daily reports, called SITREPs. It was expected that each SITE TF agency member would provide the final wording, including any assessments or commentary, for input into the SITREPs. Mr. King explained that SITE TF did not have a direct role in assessing the credibility of the information forwarded to them by the agencies for SITREP use. The agency responsible for providing the information to SITE TF provided an assessment of reliability.

[22] Mr. King stated that SITE TF met weekly beginning in late August 2018. During the election period, however, SITE TF met remotely every day.[4] The CSIS Representative explained that each morning, SITE TF members spoke over secure means and produced a daily product for circulation by noon. To facilitate this daily report, some SITE TF member organizations created timelines for reporting. For example, CSIS had until 10PM the night before to populate information and report in a format consistent with the daily SITREP. Then, during the daily meeting the next morning, SITE TF members discussed the reporting. Following the morning meeting, the SITE secretariat put the received inputs into the Daily SITREP template and disseminated the report.

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[4] Daily meetings and SITREPs were on a daily basis during regular working days (excluding weekends and federal statutory holidays).

3.3 Priorities and Threshold for Information Relevant to SITE TF

[23] Mr. King said that SITE TF crafted a Response Matrix to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each SITE TF member in various threat scenarios. Mr. King explained that the matrix covers various types of FI activities that SITE TF anticipated might occur, mapped against the SITE member who would have responsibility to monitor and respond. Mr. King and the CSIS Representative clarified that the Response Matrix was not meant to be an exhaustive or tactical decision-making tool, but was meant as a way for SITE TF to understand the different types of threats and potential responses across the different SITE TF member organizations.

[24] When asked whether overt influence fell within SITE TF's mandate, Mr. King explained there was no clear line between overt and covert activities, as one type of activity can bleed from one category to another. Generally speaking, fully overt activities would fall outside of SITE TF's mandate. Mr. King added that SITE TF had to look broadly at foreign activities to understand what qualifies as FI and what does not. From this broad perspective, what appears to be an overt activity could still be relevant to SITE TF's mandate. Ms. Dobner noted that overt activities in online spaces of the form identified by RRM can sometimes be considered FI activities, when the ultimate source of influence is deliberately hidden.

[25] The CSIS Representative noted that transparent and overt activities might have diplomatic consequences, but would not usually be characterized as FI. However, they explained that overt activities can set off covert activities. For this reason, this type of information would be relevant to SITE TF, and would be reported to the Panel of Five.

[26] Mr. Gordon highlighted that the SITE TF Response Matrix does not define any timelines. He noted that for the RCMP, the timeline for a response might be long and extend well beyond the election period. If the RCMP identified a criminal element in any reporting, it would launch a criminal investigation. These investigations may span weeks, months or years, depending on the complexity of the criminal element identified.

3.4 Priorities and Threshold for Information Relevant to SITE TF

[27] The CSIS Representative underscored that it is not SITE TF's role to make instances of FI public. Doing so without regard to diplomatic and intelligence context could have catastrophic consequences. Instead, CSIS may, for example, conduct **threat reduction measures ("TRM")** as necessary. These TRMs could consist of speaking with affected individuals to discuss the FI activities of a specific threat actor as a means to modify the behaviours of all concerned. This exposes the threat in a controlled manner to selected individuals, and not in a public forum. Mr. King echoed that GAC coordinates a formalized process in the cyber realm to attribute potential FI.

[28] The interview panel noted that attribution is difficult in the cyber realm and even more so when dealing with disinformation.

3.5 Response Summary

[29] Mr. King explained that SITE TF's Threat Coverage Review contains a summary of CSE and CSIS efforts to respond to FI and represents the ongoing efforts of each agency. The CSIS Representative noted that the specific threat coverage review was not exhaustive.

3.6. Threat Actors and Shifting Priorities

[30] The CSIS Representative explained that the PRC is viewed as the biggest threat to the Canadian electoral space, though this assessment may vary over time and as circumstances change. Russia has the capability to interfere in Canadian democratic structures, but it appears that Russia has little interest in doing so.

[31] The CSIS Representative explained that it was difficult to determine whether foreign efforts to interfere in the 2019 federal election were effective. While it is possible to confirm attempts to interfere, attributing the result of an election to a single interference attempt is a challenging exercise, given the countless variables that may lead to an election result.

[32] Mr. King explained that the collection efforts of SITE TF members must respond to the Canadian government's intelligence priorities, as set out by Cabinet. FI had grown as an intelligence priority by 2019.

4. Information Flow

4.1.1 Information Flow into SITE TF and onward to Panel of Five

[33] The CSIS Representative explained that CSIS has issue-specific dissemination lists for the various reports and assessments that it produces. Once the Panel of Five was established, CSIS began disseminating reports relevant to FI or democratic institutions directly to the Panel of Five members, notwithstanding that some of the members were not regular recipients of intelligence. They noted that it was generally less common for CSIS products to be disseminated directly to Deputy Ministers, except in cases of highly sensitive or urgent matters. All CSIS products relevant to FI or democratic institutions were disseminated directly to SITE TF members.

[34] Mr. King explained that CSE-produced intelligence is uploaded onto a central database. Clients can then go onto the database and search for information pertinent to their intelligence priorities based on their clearance levels. CSE decides who can access specific information through access controls. The database ensures that all of CSE's clients can access information and intelligence relevant to their priorities. He noted that CSE has a few named distribution lists for sensitive reporting, but this is atypical.

[35] To help forward information to SITE TF, Mr. King explained that he recruited a few individuals at CSE to help comb through SIGINT reporting and pull reports that should go to SITE TF. His analysts applied a low bar for relevancy, and forwarded all reports that related to the capabilities of states of interest and could be applied in a Canadian context. Mr. King explained that information was forwarded to the Panel of Five if it was judged to be sufficiently important.

[36] The CSIS Representative explained that CSIS had an FI working group. The working group would meet, assess all intelligence relevant to FI, and bring that intelligence to SITE TF. The intelligence would also be distributed to Panel of Five members.

[37] Ms. Dobner explained that RRM did not produce Canadian election-related products in the same way as CSE or CSIS, but brought real-time reporting to SITE TF as it became relevant.

[38] Mr. Gordon noted that in 2019, the RCMP did not have very much information to share. Most relevant information the RCMP shared with SITE TF came from its protective policing stream. He noted that the information he received as a SITE TF member would not be shared widely within the RCMP without first discussing with the originator, to preserve the integrity of the RCMP's criminal investigations and to respect the "need-to-know" principle.

[39] Ms. Dobner noted that PCO Democratic Institutions indicated that the Panel of Five had sources of information other than SITE TF. These sources may have included PCO. The witnesses also noted that SITE TF did not triage information to send to the Panel, as all of SITE TF's reporting was transmitted directly to the Panel.

[40] The CSIS Representative explained that some information was considered too sensitive to share in a SITE TF SITREP. In that case, the SITREP would simply reference the relevant CSIS report that contained the information. Then, SITE TF would have a **Client Relations Officer ("CRO")** deliver the report directly to named recipients.

4.1.2 SITE TF and Other Bodies

[41] The CSIS Representative explained that officials from the **Elections Security Coordination Committee ("ESCC")** and the **Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections ("OCCE")** would come in to read intelligence products. CSIS kept a record of all intelligence products shared with these organizations.

[42] Mr. King explained that SITE TF briefed other bodies, including the **Deputy Minister National Security Committee ("DMNS")** as well as representatives of political parties.

[43] All members of SITE TF participated in briefings with political parties, with a few noted exceptions. There were a few instances where a political party was met by CSIS and PCO on specific issues without the other SITE TF members. For example, the CSIS Representative noted that they had briefed the Liberal Party of Canada on potential interference in Don Valley North. Two secret-cleared individuals from the Party attended this briefing. Alia Tayyeb, who was assigned to PCO at that time, also attended. Following the briefing, the CSIS Representative noted that notes were provided to the Director of CSIS, who was to brief the Panel of Five on this topic the following day.

[44] The CSIS Representative stated that during the election, PCO approached CSIS to bring them into a conversation with a political party that felt they had been targeted by foreign actors, as a candidate had been the subject of negative social medial posts. The CSIS Representative explained that upon investigation, CSIS could not definitively say that the activity identified in the allegations revealed FI. The activity was, however, in some ways consistent with behaviours CSIS had previously seen from foreign states.

[45] The CSIS Representative noted that in both of the above examples, SITE TF was briefed on the interactions between CSIS and the political parties.

4.1.3 Briefings to Ministers

[46] Mr. King briefed Minister Gould in late 2018, and also briefed the Minister of Defence on one occasion. These briefings included an overview of SITE TF and information about specific threats. The CSIS Representative explained that CSIS would have routinely briefed the Minister of Public Safety, led by the CSIS Director/Deputy Director and supported by subject-matter experts. Mr. King clarified that SITE TF itself would have only briefed Minister Gould.

[47] The CSIS Representative noted that SITE TF SITREPS would have been forwarded to Public Safety as the Deputy Minister was a member of the Panel of Five. In addition, CSIS intelligence goes to the Public Safety Minister's office. Mr. King added that CSE's Chief, Shelly Bruce, would have held weekly briefings with the Minister of National Defence (i.e. regular bilats), where relevant CSE intelligence would have been discussed.

5. Specific SITE TF SITREP Incidents

[48] The witnesses were presented with a collection of SITE TF SITREPS.[5] They offered the following comments:

    a) **SITREP #1** | This SITREP referenced a Twitter account spreading what was thought to be disinformation. The CSIS Representative did not recall enough about this incident to speak about it. Ms. Dobner noted her team did not see any information that suggested a foreign-sponsored disinformation campaign. This SITREP also referenced another foreign interference matter. The CSIS

Representative confirmed that this information would have gone to the Panel of Five.

b) **SITREP #2** | This SITREP referenced a TRM related to an individual believed to be conducting FI. The CSIS Representative explained that CSIS followed through on the TRM to mitigate the threat. They noted that this incident does not appear again in SITE TF reporting, which suggests the threat behaviour did not continue.

c) **SITREP #3** | This SITREP referenced allegations of PRC interference in the Liberal nomination contest in Don Valley North. The CSIS Representative explained that they briefed the Liberal Party in late September 2019. The CSIS representative also prepared briefing notes for the Director of CSIS, and the Director briefed the Panel of Five shortly afterward. Ms. Dobner noted that SITE TF did not receive any feedback from the Panel of Five. Mr. King explained that the Panel of Five would have received a baseline threat assessment, covering broadly, interference from the state at issue and influence activities/tactics, against which to compare the reporting on this issue.

d) **SITREP #4** | This SITREP references a group that primarily targets the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party and the People's Party of Canada. Mr. King explained this information was likely an update based on a series of reports.

e) **SITREP #5** | This SITREP references disinformation that appeared on an American-based website, the Buffalo Chronicle. Ms. Dobner noted that RRM flagged this incident based on a number of factors, including the fact that the owner of the paper had reportedly stated publicly he would accept money to publish false news stories about individuals. Mr. Gordon expressed that this was likely not criminal activity, and was uncertain about whether there was a *Canada Elections Act* violation.

6. SITE After-Action Report and Correspondence

6.1 After-Action Report

[49] Mr. King noted that there is nothing in SITE TF's After-Action Report for the 2019 election that assesses the Panel of Five, as it is not within SITE TF's mandate to do so. However, the Judd report provided an assessment of the Panel of Five.

6.2 Information Flow Issue

[50] Mr. King discussed the process by which SITE TF received a specific CSIS intelligence product called a CSIS National Security Brief ("CNSB"). The CSIS Representative explained that CNSBs pull different pieces of intelligence together to create a fuller picture on a given issue. This CNSB was disseminated post-election to all Panel of Five

members. Mr. King expressed that SITE TF was not aware of the CNSB before it was disseminated. The CSIS Representative noted that the building block pieces of intelligence that the CNSB was based on had been shared with SITE TF as each piece was developed. In the initial version of the report, it assessed that a threat actor had an impact on the 2019 election, which contradicted SITE TF's After-Action Report. On December 3, 2019, the CNSB was modified to remove this language.[6] The CSIS Representative was unaware of the process that occurred between October 29, 2019 and December 3, 2019 that resulted in the modified CNSB. This situation was discussed at the Director General level.

[51] The CSIS Representative elaborated that the Panel of Five would have received elements of this reporting as it came through CSIS. They underscored that nothing in the CNSB was new information that had come in during the writ period. Rather, the intelligence on which the CNSB was based was gathered before the election.

[52] Mr. King cited the timing of the CNSB as an example of a challenge SITE TF faced when it came to coordinating information handling across four different intelligence bodies (CSE, CSIS, RCMP, GAC). These challenges are discussed in detail in the After-Action report.[7]

[53] Mr. King noted that there are different processes and protocols for information sharing across agencies. He explained this was likely not the first time there was not alignment between agencies in their processes, but could not recall any other specific examples. Mr. King elaborated that he appreciates, and it is important to keep in mind, that it may take some time for an agency to make sense of what they are collecting when dealing with intelligence. That reality can lead to a perceived delay in its dissemination.

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[6] For clarity, while the 2019 SITE TF AAR came out after the corrected CNSB, SITE TF had relayed their draft/key observations before the corrected CNSB's release.

[7] Mr. King advises that SITE TF revised their Terms of Reference prior to GE44 to include 'principles' in order to overcome some of these issues. This is discussed in the 2021 SITE TF Interview Summary.