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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 fédérales

Interview Summary: Hon. Karina Gould

Background

The Honourable Karina Gould was interviewed by Commission counsel on March 15, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to classified information.

This preamble and the text contained in square brackets are explanatory notes provided by Commission Counsel for the assistance of the reader. This summary should be read in conjunction with the Institutional Reports prepared by the Government of Canada.

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- [1] Minister Gould held various Cabinet positions since 2017, including:
- Minister of Democratic Institutions from January 10, 2017 until November 20, 2019;
 - Leader of the Government in the House of Commons since July 26, 2023.
- [2] Minister Gould is currently the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons. She is on parental leave.

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Minister of Democratic Institutions and Foreign interference

- [3] Minister Gould's primary responsibility in her role as Minister of Democratic Institutions was to implement policy measures to safeguard and mitigate threats to the 2019 General Election. By mandate letter dated February 2017, the Prime Minister tasked Minister Gould to work in collaboration with the Ministers of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and National Defence to defend the Canadian electoral process from cyber threats.¹ To fulfill her mandate, Minister Gould was briefed on the threats to Canada's electoral process by agencies from the **Security and Intelligence Community ("S&I")**. She recalls that Russia, China and other foreign states (India, Pakistan, and Iran) were

¹ [References classified document].

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named as threat actors, with an emphasis being put on Russia's activities. Minister Gould was not given detailed information about the "likelihood" that these key threats actors would engage in certain types of foreign influence or interference activities.²

Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy

Overview

- [4] Minister Gould described the motivation for the creation of the **Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy (the "Plan")** in the context of a series of high profile attempts by Russia to interfere with democratic elections around the world, primarily through cyber-activities and disinformation campaigns, notably in the U.S. Presidential election (2016), in the United Kingdom's (U.K) Brexit vote (2016), in the French Presidential election (2017), and in the German parliamentary elections (2017).³ The plan was designed to address a situation like the Obama dilemma, i.e. where President Obama became aware of intelligence that Russia was interfering in the 2016 Presidential election, but felt unable to publicly intervene because doing so would itself be viewed as a partisan actor interfering in the electoral process. Minister Gould was also driven by the need to solidify the trust Canadians have in their electoral processes, because she believes that when Canadians start questioning the integrity of an election, they start questioning Canada's democracy at its core.
- [5] As mentioned above, Minister Gould worked to build the Plan in collaboration with the Ministers of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and National Defence. Her colleagues mainly shared with her information relevant to the development of the Plan. She also collaborated with the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, who led the implementation of the Digital Democracy Project ["designed to support democracy and social cohesion in Canada in a digital world by building citizen resilience against disinformation and building partnerships to support a healthy information ecosystem"].⁴ Minister Gould believes that the best protection in a democracy is an informed citizenry.

² [References classified document].

³ [References classified document].

⁴ [References classified document].

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[6] The work to build the Plan started well in advance of the 2019 federal General Election. First, the Plan needed to be published well enough in advance of the election to reassure Canadians that the federal government was equipped to best defend its democratic institutions against any potential threats. Second, Minister Gould wanted to consult all political parties for their input feedback in the process. Minister Gould wanted all of the parties to be on board with the Plan. By the time the Plan was publicly announced in January 2019, all political parties had been consulted. Minister Gould described the political parties as "information takers" [rather than "information providers"], as the Plan's rationale was new territory for everyone. The Plan was finally announced publicly on January 30, 2019.

[7] Minister Gould's vision of the Plan evolved as she learned more about the threats to Canada's democratic institutions. Although she was initially tasked by the Prime Minister to defend the Canadian electoral process from cyber threats, she designed a Plan intended to serve as architecture for Canada's effort to combat foreign electoral interference operations from both cyber and non-cyber threats.

Minister Gould also approached digital and social media platforms to discuss actions for them to implement ahead of the 2019 federal General Election. Minister Gould was concerned primarily with the fact that social media platforms, mainly through the purchase of political advertising by foreign entities, were being used as a vector for electoral foreign interference [i.e. during the U.S. Presidential election (2016), and in the U.K.'s Brexit vote (2016)]. She explained that Facebook, Microsoft and Twitter were cooperative and willing to introduce new policies and initiatives to address information manipulation and political advertising in advance of the 2019 federal General Election. Google, for its part, would not agree to Minister Gould's proposed actions and simply chose not to allow political advertising during the writ period.

The Cabinet Directive on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol

The Panel of Five

[8] The Plan included the development of a Cabinet Directive on the **Critical Election Incident Public Protocol ("CEIPP")** which was published on July 9, 2019. The CEIPP "was established as the mechanism for communicating with Canadians in a clear,

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transparent, and impartial manner if there had been an incident that threatened Canada's ability to have a free and fair election".⁵

- [9] Minister Gould provided context to the creation of the Panel [i.e. the Panel of Five]. The Panel was intended to address the "gridlock" identified above [i.e. the Obama Dilemma]. Minister Gould was inspired by France's experience. In 2017, when a massive 'hack and leak' operation occurred just before the vote in the French Presidential election, there was an impartial body [France's electoral authority, the **Commission nationale de contrôle de la campagne électorale en vue de l'élection présidentielle ("CNCCEP")**] that was able to preserve the integrity of the vote by publicly intervening to ask the media, and more broadly all citizens, not to publish or relay the content of the leaked documents [i.e. "Macron leaks"], a call that was generally heeded. France's electoral authority is comprised of legal advisors. Minister Gould described this entity as being well-respected in France, neutral and independent. In deciding the composition of the Panel, she considered forming a Panel comprised of judges or other eminent Canadians. Ultimately, however, she felt that the CEIPP would be better administered by a Panel comprised of senior public servants with deep knowledge and understanding of the workings of government and the national security domain. She ensured that the legal perspective was represented at the decision-making table by including on the Panel the Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General. Minister Gould deliberately chose not to include any elected officials, such as the Prime Minister or the Minister of Democratic Institutions, as a Panel member to ensure the creation of a fair, neutral, and independent Panel.

The threshold for a public announcement

- [10] Minister Gould stated that the threshold for informing the public of a threat to an election should be (and was designed to be) high. The moment a public announcement is made, not only could the election be put in question, but Canada's democracy as a whole could also be put in question. Determining whether the threshold has been met is context-dependent and requires considerable judgement. Asked whether there was a specific incident in respect of which the threshold was developed, Minister Gould said no, as threat

⁵ [References classified document].

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actors do not act the same way twice. Minister Gould tasked the Panel with assessing whether a given incident(s) meets the threshold.

- [11] In Minister Gould's view, issues arising in the nomination process of a candidate fall outside of the Panel's mandate, and are instead within the remits of the affected political party, **Elections Canada ("EC")** and/or the **Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("RCMP")**. Minister Gould stated that alleged interference in a nomination process would not be significant enough to question the integrity of an election in its entirety.

Minister of Democratic Institutions and Intelligence

Flow of information

- [12] As Minister of Democratic Institutions, Minister Gould did not receive daily packages of intelligence products. Rather, she was invited into the **Privy Council Office ("PCO ")** when PCO officials felt she should be made aware of general intelligence relevant to the policy she was mandated to develop. Minister Gould did not recall who was "pushing" and "selecting" the intelligence with which she was presented. If she felt the need to or had specific questions on an intelligence product, she could always ask to be briefed in more detail, which she did on several occasions.
- [13] Further, in the lead up to the 2019 federal General Election, Minister Gould received security briefings by heads of agencies within the S&I Community on the cyber and non-cyber threat landscape. Minister Gould attended a SCIF on the **Communications Security Establishment ("CSE")** premises to receive this information. She recalls meeting with representatives from the **Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force ("SITE TF")**, the **Department of National Defense ("DND")**, **CSIS**, **GAC (RRM)** and **PCO**. Each representative would walk her through relevant updates on the threat landscape. Minister Gould described the intelligence and other related information she received in these briefings as "high level" and without granularity (for instance, naming a specific candidate or political party). Minister Gould's focus was on potential cyber threats. She was also interested in how other countries responded after being targeted by foreign interference. This intelligence/information was relevant to Minister Gould's development of the Plan.

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- [14] Minister Gould's briefings were held on a regular basis (monthly/bi-monthly/quarterly) at her initiative. Minister Gould actively sought out briefings with various agencies because she wanted 1) to make sure she was up to date in terms of the evolution of the threat landscape, given her mandate and 2) to reinforce the fact the Plan was a priority for the Government of Canada and that it be delivered in time to prepare for the 2019 federal General Election. Minister Gould did not recall being briefed specifically on things to personally be on guard for when it came to foreign interference.
- [15] Minister Gould did not recall passing on specific intelligence to the Ministers of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and National Defence. She was not responsible to, and could not action, the information she received; her role was not to respond to intelligence. Rather, her mandate was to understand the threat landscape and develop a policy that would mitigate cyber and non-cyber threats. However, that said, if Minister Gould felt something needed to be shared with the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness or Minister of National Defence that they did not otherwise have, she would have requested a meeting to do so.

Specific Briefing – April 4, 2019

- [16] Minister Gould was asked about a briefing that took place on April 4, 2019 by the CSIS Director on "FI General, Elections Funding". Minister Gould was shown a twenty-page briefing note called "Briefing to Minister Gould: Safeguarding the 2019 Election and Protecting Democratic Institutions" dated April 4, 2019. Minister Gould was asked if she had been briefed on the paragraph contained at p.14 that stated: "you may wish to note that CSIS also met with the Director of Investigations on March 26, 2019, with regard to the following reporting item..." Minister Gould had no recollection of ever seeing the documents referenced in that briefing note or being briefed on the specifics of this issue. She noted that she would not have received intelligence that specific. She recalls hearing information about a transfer of funds via the media leaks in 2023 and was surprised. However, at the time she was the Minister of Democratic Institutions, she would not have expected to receive such specific intelligence since her mandate was focused on developing an overarching policy. She also added that financial issues arising during an election at the provincial level are outside the scope of her mandate.

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[17] Minister Gould remembered being briefed with high level information on the fact that foreign countries were seen to be indirectly funding electoral candidates.

Specific Briefing – Post-election

[18] Minister Gould was not briefed on the Don Valley North issue, during or after the election. Neither was she made aware that secret cleared Liberal party representatives were briefed in late September 2019 about the allegations of foreign interference by China in the Don Valley North nomination contest. She did not view that as unusual. The political parties had a direct relationship with the security agencies and not with Minister Gould. Minister Gould was informed, after the election, that CSIS had observed low level foreign interference activities by China, similar to what had been seen in the past. That foreign interference did not affect Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election.