



## Interview Summary: Green Party of Canada (Jon Irwin and Robin Marty)

Jon Irwin and Robin Marty were interviewed by Commission counsel on August 23, 2024.

### Notes to Readers:

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

## 1. Background

- [1] Jon Irwin is the Interim Executive Director of the Green Party of Canada (“**GPC**”). He has held this position since August 2024. Prior to this he served as the Director of Finance and Administration since November 2023. He has been a professional accountant since 2004.
- [2] Robin Marty is the National Campaign Director for the GPC. He has been in this role since 2021. He has been employed by the Green Party since 2015.

## 2. Foreign Interference Threats and Political Parties

### 2.1 Foreign Interference as a Threat to Political Parties

- [3] Both Mr. Marty and Mr. Irwin indicated that their awareness of foreign interference threats have been informed by meetings of the Advisory Committee of Political Parties (“**ACPP**”), an advisory body that exists under the auspices of Elections Canada.
- [4] Mr. Marty referenced meetings of the ACPP that occurred in 2023 where representatives from CSIS attended to discuss foreign interference. The discussion included cyber security topics, as well as the possibility of foreign actors attempting to exploit weak party rules in order to get preferred candidates nominated.

- [5] Mr. Irwin indicated he first began thinking about foreign interference during an ACP meeting in June 2024. The purpose of this meeting was for political parties to come together and share information about measures that parties were or could be taking to deal with foreign interference threats.
- [6] Mr. Irwin indicated that the GPC views political parties as being a potential target for foreign interference. He noted that all parties want to welcome new members and grow, and that foreign actors can try to take advantage of that in order to infiltrate a party. He stated that smaller parties like the GPC are likely less vulnerable, as foreign actors would likely focus their attention on parties with more political power. He also indicated that as a smaller party, it was easier to scrutinize individuals seeking party membership. He indicated that as the GPC elects more Members of Parliament (“**MPs**”), it may become more of a target.
- [7] Mr. Marty noted that, as a smaller party, it may be easier to obtain a GPC nomination to be a candidate than in a larger party. He emphasized the GPC’s robust candidate vetting process as a check against this.
- [8] He noted that it would also be easier for a foreign power to infiltrate a small party’s Electoral District Associations (“**EDAs**”) but agreed that these are less attractive targets than the EDAs of larger parties with more political power.

## 2.2 Measures Taken to Protect Against Foreign Interference

- [9] Mr. Marty indicated that, compared to 2019, the GPC had a much more robust candidate vetting process in place. While these measures were not because of foreign interference, they do have this effect. By relying on comprehensive research and the assistance of an external vetting company, the GPC could identify indicia of support for or connections to hostile foreign states. While the GPC cannot eliminate the risk of foreign interference, it can reduce it.
- [10] Mr. Irwin discussed measures to protect GPC party members from being targeted for foreign interference. He noted that the GPC introduced the Conduct Committee into its party structure in 2022. The purpose of this committee is to address concerns from party staff or members related to its code of conduct or the propriety of other members’

conduct. This could include concerns arising from foreign interference. This committee is not yet operational.

- [11] Mr. Irwin indicated that a small party like the GPC has limited resources, which can impact its ability to implement measures to protect against foreign interference.
- [12] Mr. Irwin said that he would look to Elections Canada as a source of information or guidance for taking measures to protect against foreign interference.

### 3. Relationships with the Government of Canada

- [13] The GPC leader, Elizabeth May, holds a top-secret security clearance. The GPC does not have other designated representatives who are security cleared to receive classified information from the Government of Canada.
- [14] The witnesses were not aware of the GPC being given unclassified briefings by the government of Canada in relation to foreign interference issues or receiving unclassified materials from the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Taskforce (“**SITE**”) related to federal by-elections.
- [15] Mr. Irwin does believe that Ms. May had a discussion with CSIS related to cyber security issues.
- [16] The GPC does not have established connections with the security and intelligence community or related agencies, such as CSIS, CSE, or PCO. It has had limited contact with these agencies through APCC meetings. It does not have established relationships with the RCMP or local police of jurisdiction in relation to foreign interference matters. It does have a relationship with the RCMP for matters related to the security of party leaders.
- [17] The GPC’s head of information technology may have had some contact with the Canadian Centre for Cybersecurity (“**CCCS**”).
- [18] The witnesses recalled hearing something about the creation of a dedicated support hotline for political parties related to foreign interference but believe that it has not yet been implemented. The witnesses were not aware of a dedicated point of contact within

CCCS for cyber security matters. Mr. Marty indicated that he believed that such a contact point existed during general elections.

## 4. Green Party of Canada Internal Rules and Operations

### 4.1 Membership

- [19] Attempting to infiltrate the GPC membership could be a strategy employed by a foreign actor to interfere with Canada's democracy. The GPC is a grassroots party whose policy platform is developed by the membership. Members therefore have a greater influence over the GPC than may be the case for larger parties.
- [20] The GPC requires an individual to be either a Canadian citizen or Permanent Resident to become a member. Individuals applying for membership must certify that they are a citizen or Permanent Resident but are not required to provide proof.
- [21] The witnesses did not believe that permanent residents might be more vulnerable to foreign interference than Canadian citizens. Mr. Marty noted that a Citizen may also have connections to foreign states which can be exploited by others. Mr. Irwin referenced the multicultural make up of Canada and noted that there will always be Canadians who could be targeted by foreign states.
- [22] An individual must be 14 years of age or more to become a member of the GPC. Applicants below the age of 29 are not required to pay to join the party.
- [23] Mr. Marty agreed that young people may be more vulnerable to foreign interference than adults. He referred to a push by some young members of the GPC to permit memberships to be obtained without providing proof of identity. The GPC did not agree to permit this, as it believed that this could increase the party's vulnerability to foreign interference.
- [24] Mr. Irwin indicated that almost all membership fees, as well as other contributions, are made using credit card. While an individual may give cash to the party, this is extremely rare. Even if a person signed up for a membership with an EDA and pays in cash, they are still required to provide their name, address and contact information.

[25] The GPC does not permit the bulk purchase of party memberships.

## 4.2 Nomination Contests

[26] The nomination process for candidates begins on a Canada-wide basis. The GPC Federal Council opens nominations across the country on a single date. Nomination periods are closed on a riding-by-riding basis, generally at the request of the local EDA (when an EDA exists in the riding).

[27] The GPC Executive Council is the ultimate decision-making body to approve whether an individual may become a nomination contestant. EDAs are empowered to recruit contestants, but the Executive Council must approve potential contestants. Mr. Marty indicated that he receives vetting reports for all potential contestants and makes recommendations to the Executive Council.

[28] Mr. Marty explained that nomination contests may or may not occur, depending on the circumstances of each electoral district. When a single contestant is recruited, the local EDA may ask the Executive Committee to close nominations. This may occur when the recruited contestant is viewed as strong, or when the Party is unable to recruit additional competitive contestants. When nominations are closed with only one contestant nominated the contestant is acclaimed as the candidate.

[29] Where more than one contestant has been approved before nominations close, the EDA is responsible for running the nomination contest. Nomination meetings may occur in person or online using the “Simply Voting” platform. In ridings where there is no active EDA, voting is always conducted online by the Party. GPC rules also permit proxy voting by telephone.

[30] When voting occurs in person, individuals are required to provide proof of identity and place of residence in order to obtain a ballot.

[31] When voting occurs online, only those individuals who have already provided proper proof of identity when joining the GPC will be emailed an electronic ballot.

[32] When voting occurs by telephone, the individual seeking to vote is required to provide their name, phone number, email address and physical address, along with their vote.

The GPC then checks the information provided against its records, and only allows the vote to count if the caller's information matches party records. Telephone votes normally come in days before the nomination meeting, and so there is sufficient time to confirm the information. Very few people vote by phone.

- [33] The outcome of the nomination vote is generally determinative. However, the Executive Council does have the authority to revoke a contestant's approval even after a nomination vote occurs. If this occurs, the EDA will either run a new contest, or the runner up will be declared the candidate.
- [34] Decisions of the Executive Council regarding approval for contestants may be challenged before the GPC Appeal Committee. This is a committee made up members of the Federal Council who are not members of the Executive Council. This body was implemented after 2021 due to concerns that some contestants were not being approved by the Executive Council due to inappropriate political considerations.
- [35] The members of the Appeals Committee have access to the same vetting information as the Executive Council. Mr. Marty expressed his view that the Appeals Committee will normally uphold decisions by the Executive Council as long as they do not appear to be based on improper political considerations.
- [36] Both witnesses agreed that nomination contests were vulnerable to foreign interference and indicated that their awareness of this has grown significantly in recent months.
- [37] The witnesses were not aware of any specific allegations of foreign interference in any GPC nomination contest.
- [38] Commission counsel asked what measures the GPC could take to better secure their nomination contests. Mr. Irwin indicated that, while there is always room for improvement, as a small party the GPC does not have significant resources to devote to implementing additional security measures. Potential measures like better ID verification can be costly to implement.
- [39] Mr. Marty indicated that entities like CSIS or Elections Canada should be able to review potential nomination contestants and identify any who represented security risks. This

information could be conveyed to parties to ensure that they do not permit compromised individuals to seek party nominations.

### 4.3 Leadership Contests

- [40] The witnesses agreed that leadership contests are vulnerable to foreign interference. Mr. Marty indicated that they would be attractive to foreign actors as influence over a party leader could produce a significant benefit to the foreign state. He believes that foreign states likely target nomination contests because they are easier to manipulate, though they are also less valuable.
- [41] Mr. Marty indicated that there were allegations of foreign interference during the GPC 2020 leadership contest, but that no evidence was ever presented of this. He indicated that all kinds of allegations are made during leadership contests, and the fact that an allegation is made – without proof – is not an indication that there is a real issue.
- [42] He noted, however, that political parties are not well equipped to investigate allegations of foreign interference, and that greater support for bodies like CSIS could help. If they could provide political parties with information about leadership contestants, that could assist parties protect against foreign interference.
- [43] The GPC has adopted new procedures since the 2019 General Election to make the process more secure. In particular, in 2022 it adopted a more rigorous vetting process for proposed leadership contestants. The purpose of the vetting process is not to identify foreign interference threats, but it may have the effect of doing so. It is unlikely to identify individuals who are secretly working for a foreign state but may identify individuals with sympathies to authoritarian regimes.
- [44] Commission counsel contrasted the GPC rules for disqualifying nomination contestants, which appeared to be flexible and discretionary, with its rules for disqualifying a leadership contestant, which are more prescriptive. Mr. Marty explained that disqualifying a potential leadership contestant would inevitably attract significant public attention. Having more defined rules makes it easier for the Party to explain why an individual may have been disqualified.

[45] Voting for the GPC's most recent leadership contest took place entirely online. Access to an electronic ballot is based on a member's record in the GPC membership management computer system. Only those who have active, valid memberships recorded in the GPC database get access to the voting platform. Identity verification therefore occurs on the "front end" when a person obtains their party membership.

## 5. Political Finance Rules

[46] Mr. Irwin indicated that he believed that there were weaknesses in Canada's election finance rules. He indicated that Elections Canada publishes too much information related to political donations. Publication of donations over \$200 violates donors' privacy rights without generating any real benefit for the electoral system. It puts pressure on donors to either donate below the reporting threshold or not donate at all. Published information also provides foreign actors with a potential source of information that it can use to engage in foreign interference.

[47] Commission counsel noted that unlike other regulated entities, political parties are not required to provide Elections Canada with supporting documentation, such as receipts, when filing expense reports. Mr. Irwin agreed that it is fair for Elections Canada to ask for evidence backing up the reports it receives. However, he also noted that political parties are required to provide reports from an external auditor to Elections Canada. Mr. Marty added that it may be appropriate to impose more reporting obligations on larger political parties, such as those with official party status.

[48] Mr. Marty indicated that the political finance regime could be improved through significant reforms. He advocated for lowering individual contribution limits to \$200, while at the same time reinstating per-vote public subsidies.

## 6. Proposed Reforms to Nomination Contest and Leadership Contest Rules

[49] The witnesses were asked about Elections Canada's ongoing consultations regarding nomination contest and leadership contest rules.



- [50] The focus of Elections Canada's meeting was on nomination contests. Leadership contests were mentioned but were not the focus.
- [51] Mr. Irwin described disagreement from the political parties to the proposals that Elections Canada discussed. It felt to him like Elections Canada was trying to offload responsibility onto political parties to protect against foreign interference. He was concerned that proposals were being made so that it would appear that action was being taken, rather than based on actual need.
- [52] Some of the proposals appeared to be counterproductive. Mr. Marty provided the example of requiring parties to post the vote totals following nomination contests. He indicated that this information could actually assist foreign actors identify contests to target by showing which electoral districts tend to have close contests.
- [53] Mr. Marty indicated that some reform proposals were not well adapted to smaller parties like the GPC, and so would have an unfair impact on them. This included obligations to file additional information or documentation with Elections Canada. He indicated that countering foreign interference required a much more significant set of democratic reforms and not the type of rules changes Elections Canada was considering.
- [54] The witnesses did not believe that it would be realistic for an external body, like Elections Canada, to administer nomination or leadership contests as the resources required to do this would exceed Elections Canada's capacity.
- [55] They also did not believe that rules violations could effectively be investigated by an external body like the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections. The types of complaints that get raised during nomination contests can be highly personal, politically driven, and could overwhelm an external body.
- [56] The witnesses supported the idea of expanding offences under the *Canada Evidence Act*, such as intimidation and bribery, to apply to nomination and leadership contests as well as elections. They raised concerns about implementation and enforcement.
- [57] The witnesses expressed uncertainty about how section 20.4 of the *Foreign Interference and Security of Information Act* [inserted by Bill C-70] would apply in practice and noted that the GPC has not studied this provision in detail. Mr. Marty noted

that in Canada, many individuals have connections to different countries and may be involved in political or social movements in different countries. He indicated that how one defined foreign interference is important.