



Interview Summary: Erin O'Toole (Stage 1 Addendum)

Erin O'Toole, former Member of Parliament for Durham and Leader of the Official Opposition (Conservative Party of Canada (“CPC”)) was interviewed by Commission Counsel on February 23, 2024 and March 1, 2024.

Notes to Readers:

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- Some of the facts mentioned by Mr. O'Toole during his Stage 1 Interview pertained to aspects of the Commission's mandate under clause (a)(i)(C) of its Terms of Reference, which were outside of the scope of the first phase of the Commission's work. As such, these elements have been incorporated in the present Stage 1 Interview Summary Addendum.

1. Incidents of Concern

- [1] Mr. O'Toole described behaviour by parliamentarians, including a member of his own caucus, that he considered to be consistent with engagement in foreign interference. That behaviour included taking trips sponsored by a foreign state and lobbying on behalf of foreign interests. He described feeling uncomfortable discussing certain policy issues in front of that individual, but it was not clear to him that he needed to expel the individual from caucus immediately or that it was necessary to report such behaviour to government agencies.
- [2] Mr. O'Toole did not view extreme steps such as expulsion from caucus to be appropriate at the time and was concerned that the Liberal Party and media would describe any moves against this individual as racist. Mr. O'Toole did ensure that the individual, who in his view was engaging in questionable behaviour, was counselled on the propriety of his actions.



- [3] Mr. O'Toole did not go public with his concerns because he did not want to unjustly target a member of his own caucus and a fellow parliamentarian. In his discussions with the Commission, he stressed his view that the Commission, with its extensive investigative powers, could more effectively examine suspected cases of foreign interference. He also explained that foreign interference should not be perceived as an issue only concerning the current government or the Liberal Party of Canada ("**LPC**"). In Mr. O'Toole's opinion, foreign interference is an all-party problem that impacts the national interest.
- [4] Mr. O'Toole recalled two incidents that he believes may have constituted foreign interference. First, he recounted being approached on several occasions by a young, ethnic Chinese woman at an event in 2018 or 2019. He noted that he may have seen her previously at other events. Mr. O'Toole described the young woman as very flirtatious and as unprofessional and relentless in her attempts to obtain his phone number, to the point that he felt bothered and uncomfortable. Around the time he became CPC leader, he reflected upon this incident and believed it may well have been an overt attempt at gaining his influence.
- [5] Second, Mr. O'Toole recalled that during his first CPC leadership race, in 2017, two young foreign Chinese students approached his campaign office in Ottawa. They offered to accomplish a variety of tasks in Mandarin and in Cantonese, such as calling voters and doing data entry. Although Mr. O'Toole described them as "lovely", he wonders why these foreign students offered to volunteer out of the blue and whether they were prompted to do so by foreign actors. He thought it strange for international students to follow domestic politics so closely and even stranger that they would volunteer in the context of an internal party leadership race. He raised the possibility that this was a genuine offer of assistance, but also noted that their status as volunteers would have given them a line of sight into his campaign. While he stated that he regretted even suggesting that they may have had ill intentions, he stated that there is little to no ability for a political party to properly screen or vet volunteers to ensure that they are not engaging in foreign interference.



- [6] Mr. O'Toole submitted that both situations demonstrate the difficulty of detecting foreign interference: in the two instances, were the individuals in question engaging in harmless behaviour or were they subtly engaging in foreign interference? In the context of a busy political campaign, harried front-line staff do not have the time, resources, or training to scrutinize ambiguous behaviour such as that described in the two incidents.