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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: Katie Telford, Brian Clow, Patrick Travers

Senior officials of the Prime Minister's Office (“**PMO**”) were interviewed in a panel format by Commission Counsel on June 25, 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 hearings held *in camera* in July and August 2024. It discloses the evidence 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.

### Notes to Readers:

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

## 1. Interviewees

- [1] Katie Telford is the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Aside from two unpaid leaves during the 2019 and 2021 election campaigns, she has held that role since 2015.
- [2] Brian Clow is the Prime Minister's Deputy Chief of Staff, and has held that position since the 2021 general election. Before that, he served in the PMO as Executive Director of Issues Management, Parliamentary Affairs and Canada-US Relations from January 2019 until the 2021 general election, and as Director of Canada-US Relations from January 2017 to January 2019. Mr. Clow also took unpaid leaves from the PMO during the 2019 and 2021 election campaigns.
- [3] Patrick Travers has been Senior Global Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister since the fall of 2020. Before then he worked as a policy advisor on the PMO policy team. He served on the caretaker team during the 2019 and 2021 writ periods.

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## 2. Information Flow

### 2.1 Updates to Intelligence Flow from Stage 1

- [4] The interviewees were asked about any changes to intelligence flow procedures since the Commission's Stage 1 interview on February 21, 2024. Ms. Telford said no significant changes have been made in the past four months. However, the flow of intelligence to the PMO and Prime Minister has become increasingly rigorous and systematic since the 2022 and 2023 media leaks, both for *ad hoc* and scheduled briefings. Mr. Clow said that the Prime Minister receives intelligence information more frequently. Ms. Telford also noted that the Client Relations Officers ("**CROs**") [CSE employees typically in charge of delivering intelligence to ministers' offices] always make clear to her now whether the Prime Minister has read something, is scheduled to read it, and whether he has any notes or questions once he has read it.
- [5] Ms. Telford said PMO continues to have conversations with the Clerk of the Privy Council Office ("**PCO**") and the National Security and Intelligence Advisor ("**NSIA**") to the Prime Minister on how to improve. One post-leaks challenge is that intelligence is now more closely held, meaning that, even though Ms. Telford has secure storage at her office, CRO-delivered intelligence often cannot be left there. This can cause logistical challenges, for instance when she has time only to read half a document that she wants to finish later.
- [6] All interviewees viewed the Deputy NSIA position [a position created in 2023] as beneficial. It provides additional capacity and another point of contact when the NSIA is travelling. The interviewees work with both the NSIA and the Deputy NSIA.

### 2.2 Briefings to Parliamentarians

- [7] The interviewees were asked to comment on the National Security and Intelligence Committee Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions ("**NSICOP Report**"). The Report describes a December 2019 memorandum sent to the Prime Minister seeking authorization to implement briefings to

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Members of Parliament (“**MPs**”) about foreign interference (“**FI**”) risks. The NSICOP Report says that the PMO never replied formally to the recommendation.

- [8] Mr. Clow said that implementing the parliamentary briefings is something that should have happened. PMO received the memorandum in December 2019, and the general sentiment was that these briefings should be implemented. However, the proposal outlined in the December 2019 memorandum was interrupted when the COVID pandemic arrived in 2020. The same thing also happened to other notes which were at PMO around the same time. The focus was on responding to the pandemic, and the House of Commons ceased to sit. Mr. Clow noted that briefings to parliamentarians recently occurred in June 2024.
- [9] Mr. Clow said, to put this into context, that the Prime Minister receives about 1,000 notes like this memorandum each year. Ms. Telford said that, had there been any urgency, the Clerk of the PCO and the NSIA – both of whom have direct access to the Prime Minister – would have raised the issue.
- [10] Mr. Clow’s view is that the absence of the proposed briefings would not have had a significant impact on parliamentarians’ understanding of FI. The briefing proposed was very high level. He believed that page five of six of the memorandum was the type of content to be included in the proposed briefings. This type of information was available to MPs from other sources. These include security briefings upon their swearing-in and the letter on FI that Minister Blair tabled in 2020.<sup>1</sup> [This letter was sent to all MPs and discussed what Canada was doing to address FI-related threats.].
- [11] Mr. Clow further stated that no decision from the PM was actually necessary in order for the briefings to occur, as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) has the authority to brief MPs as it sees fit.
- [12] Commission Counsel referred the interviewees to a May 13, 2023, memorandum to the Prime Minister on steps taken to ensure the Prime Minister’s and PMO’s awareness of intelligence reports related to MPs.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Clow said that this memorandum followed

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<sup>1</sup> CAN003326.

<sup>2</sup> CAN021476.

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media reporting on alleged threats to Michael Chong and his family, and related to the Ministerial Directive later issued by then-Minister Mendicino. It was intended to advise the Prime Minister formally of the steps being taken, further to the anticipated Directive, to ensure that he and the PMO learned of similar intelligence regarding other MPs.

- [13] Page two of the May 13 memorandum refers to a “list of MPs” that PCO would provide under separate cover. Mr. Clow did not remember seeing an exhaustive list but he did recall that around this time the PMO received the names of Jenny Kwan, Kenny Chiu and some others. Ms. Telford said that she did not recall a “list”, but does recall officials providing advice to the PMO about certain MPs who had been publicly identified as potentially affected by foreign interference. This advice may have been verbal and delivered by the NSIA at the time.
- [14] Commission Counsel further referred the interviewees to a September 13, 2023, memorandum to the Prime Minister on upcoming threat reduction briefings to MPs.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Clow said that the note was intended to inform the Prime Minister of the work officials were doing to brief specific MPs. Since the memorandum was “for information,” PMO would have delivered it straight to the Prime Minister. By contrast, for notes labelled “for decision”, PMO prepares advice that accompanies them when they are sent to the Prime Minister.

### 2.3 The Targeting Paper

- [15] The interviewees were referred to the analysis of the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (“**NSIRA**”) about the distribution of a report (the “**Targeting Paper**”) produced by a CSIS analyst about the People’s Republic of China’s (“**PRC**”) targeting of Canadian political actors. [NSIRA concluded that the CSIS Director thought that the Targeting Paper should be provided to the Prime Minister, but that the NSIA did not bring it to his attention].
- [16] Mr. Clow and Ms. Telford confirmed they had not been provided with the Targeting Paper until after NSIRA delivered its report. Ms. Telford defers to the NSIA’s expertise

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<sup>3</sup> CAN028170.

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and knowledge of the broader context to determine whether the Prime Minister should see a document like the Targeting Paper. Mr. Clow said that the current system, in which the Clerk and the NSIA determine which information goes to the Prime Minister, has developed over decades. Given the vast amount of information produced by the public service, there must be senior decision makers with the judgment to select which information goes to the Prime Minister. In this case, it was appropriate for the NSIA to make the determination.

## 2.4 The PCO Special Report

- [17] Commission Counsel referred the interviewees to the NSIRA's analysis about the dissemination of a report (the "**PCO Special Report**") by the PCO Intelligence Assessment Secretariat ("**PCO IAS**") about the PRC's FI tactics. [NSIRA found that, despite PCO IAS's recommendation to provide the Report to selected Deputy Ministers ("**DMs**") and Cabinet Ministers, the Special Report remained in draft form and was not sent to these individuals or to the PMO.].
- [18] Mr. Clow has confidence in the NSIA's decisions about what documents to distribute to the PMO or the Prime Minister. Ms. Telford added that the NSIA knows what information has already been raised in briefings with the Prime Minister and is able to determine when information still needs to be briefed to him. Mr. Travers said that the NSIA has the expertise and years of experience to make these decisions.
- [19] The interviewees were asked about the distinction between FI and standard diplomatic activity. [NSIRA found that there was debate about whether all of the activities described in the Targeting Paper and the PCO Special Report constituted FI]. Mr. Travers said that there is a spectrum of activity between FI and standard diplomatic activity. Activities are often hard to define and sometimes sit in a grey zone. Different parts of government have different perspectives. For example, activity may look normal to officials in GAC, but the same activity may look to CSIS like abnormal activity. Ongoing debate about these perspectives is important. Ms. Telford agreed, noting that different areas of experience and knowledge across government lead to a healthy tension with respect to many issues, not just FI. These types of conversations happen

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across government. The Clerk and NSIA are responsible for convening the national security community to assess these different perspectives before briefing the Prime Minister.

- [20] Mr. Clow said that the context in which this issue generally comes up for PMO is when vetting caucus members. CSIS may present concerns about an assessment of someone the Prime Minister is considering for a Cabinet or Parliamentary Secretary position. That information can lead to a conversation about whether certain actions, such as speaking to a diplomat, constitute concerning behaviour that should bar someone from such a position. For instance, an MP talking to a High Commissioner or Consul General of a state that engages in FI, such as India, may set off more alarms for CSIS than it does for other officials or the PMO.

### 3. Policy Reform

#### 3.1 Role of the PMO

- [21] The interviewees were asked to describe the PMO's role in the development of policy. Mr. Travers said that Ministers play a lead role and bring measures to Cabinet. The PMO's role is to advise the Prime Minister and to coordinate with PCO, which also advises the Prime Minister. The PMO also engages and coordinates with Ministers' offices and PCO as policies make their way through government, as multiple Ministers and departments are often engaged with one file. Mr. Clow said that the PMO assists with the prioritization of policies because, like PCO, they see the full picture of ongoing policy reform.
- [22] The interviewees were referred to a May 25, 2023, email from Sarah Hussaini (Director of Policy in the PMO) about an FI policy note and a proposal for next steps on legislation and consultations. The email describes a proposed "CSIS Act amendment to allow CSIS to share information outside the federal family," as Sam Khalil's (Chief of Staff for Minister Mendicino) idea. Mr. Clow clarified that the policy was not Ms. Khalil's idea but that she might have suggested trying to fast-track that part of the legislation.

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### 3.2 The LeBlanc-Charette Report

- [23] The interviewees were asked to explain the genesis of the Prime Minister's request for Minister LeBlanc and the Clerk to prepare the report called, "Countering an Evolving Threat: Update on Recommendations to Counter Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Institutions."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Clow said that after the 2022 media leaks the Prime Minister asked Minister LeBlanc and the Clerk to summarize what had been done to address FI and what should be done in future. Minister LeBlanc was selected because this fit within his responsibilities as Minister for Democratic Institutions.
- [24] Commission Counsel also referred the interviewees to a briefing note from a PMO policy advisor to the Prime Minister on Minister LeBlanc and the Clerk's plan to address outstanding recommendations to counter FI. The note mentions that actions taken to combat FI included "formalizing" the role of the NSIA. Mr. Clow believed that this referred to the creation of the NSIA position, not to proposals to legislate or regulate the role. Mr. Travers said that this could also refer to the fact that the mandate of the NSIA, unlike that of DMs, is not established by statute. Ms. Telford added that there have been conversations over the past several months on how to empower the NSIA within the current framework, including discussion as to whether the NSIA should receive a mandate letter.
- [25] The end of the briefing note states that, "[g]iven that many of these initiatives are led by different Departments, sometimes in siloed approaches, we will take steps to establish stronger coordination to drive continued implementation." Mr. Clow said that this statement is standard boilerplate language in such a note. Mr. Travers said that, in practice, the PMO does convene the relevant actors on a file, across government, to move the file forward.

### 3.3 The Foreign Agent Registry

- [26] Mr. Clow said that the decision to implement a foreign agent registry was the result of a rigorous process over several years. This policy initiative included multiple public and

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<sup>4</sup> CAN024135.

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non-public consultations and many Cabinet discussions. It was seen as particularly sensitive since the decisions could have unintended consequences for various communities. Even before the public spotlight focused on FI, the PMO recognized that tabling legislation that takes into account the varied concerns of all stakeholders would require extensive and careful preparatory work. Mr. Clow considered that the widespread and quick support for the introduction of the registry in Parliament shows that the consultations achieved this objective. Even so, he noted that the government was criticized in some quarters for moving too quickly when it introduced the legislation, after having first been criticized for moving too slowly.

- [27] Mr. Travers agreed that particular care was needed when making reforms in the national security space. The rigorous approach taken to develop the foreign agent registry was informed by amendments to national security legislation during Prime Minister Trudeau's first term. The earlier amendments had made it clear that tabling national security legislation requires extensive consultation to understand concerns of those who may be affected.
- [28] Ms. Telford recalled that the government had a commitment to introduce a registry, so the question was not whether to do it, but rather how to do it. She noted that the PMO wanted to ensure that they were not blindsiding stakeholders. There is an important educational value for those who take part in the consultations. The department that leads the consultations can also have an impact on the responsiveness of the entities that the Government wants to consult. Much work had been done to understand the distinctions among registries established in other jurisdictions, since these distinctions can impact their effectiveness.

## 4. Particular Suggested Vulnerabilities

### 4.1 Political Party Processes

- [29] Ms. Telford said that the Government's introduction of the Panel of Five and the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force ("**SITE TF**") shows that it is alive to the risks that FI could pose to political party processes. The Panel and SITE TF



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have been reviewed twice and have evolved since their creation. Ms. Telford noted that parties themselves have also established safeguards. She referred to Jeremy Broadhurst's testimony in Stage 1 of the Commission's work on the robustness of the Liberal Party of Canada's candidate nomination process.

- [30] Ms. Telford explained that party operations was a complex space, and further regulating political party processes to reduce the FI risk would be challenging. For one thing, different parties do things differently. She gave the example of the different age limits for voting in a general election and voting in a party nomination. She noted that education is also important to counter FI in political party processes.
- [31] Mr. Clow said that Bill C-70<sup>5</sup> should help to counter FI in party processes. He believes that, to date, security agencies have sometimes been overly reluctant to share information on FI with political parties. That said, he noted that the actions that a political party can take when it receives intelligence are often very limited.
- [32] Mr. Clow said that sharing information with political parties becomes more difficult between elections when there is no cleared party representative to receive classified briefings. He gave the example of sharing intelligence about FI in the leadership race of the Conservative Party of Canada ("**CPC**") when the party does not have a security-cleared representative.
- [33] Ms. Telford said that this is further complicated because security agencies often tell a recipient of a briefing that they cannot use the information in any manner. Even where that is not the case, briefing political parties on sensitive intelligence regarding an MP could put the leader or representative of a political party in a tough position, because any decision affecting the MP might have to be made without giving them due process. In the current climate, now that FI is in the spotlight, significant suspicion would also arise from the unexplained removal of a candidate from a ballot or caucus.

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<sup>5</sup> Bill C-70 was enacted as *An Act Respecting Countering Foreign Interference* and received Royal Assent on June 20, 2024. Among other measures, it modifies the *CSIS Act*, including provisions that enhance the ability of CSIS to share of intelligence outside the federal government.

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## 4.2 Political Staff

- [34] Ms. Telford said that all PMO staff must hold a security clearance. Most are cleared to the Secret level and some are cleared to Top Secret. She believed the same applies to staff in Ministers' offices. PMO staff also receive briefings on security concerns.
- [35] Mr. Clow said that staff in MPs' offices, unlike Ministers' offices, do not have security clearances. Ms. Telford said that constituency staff may interact more directly with local officials who could have links to threat actors. This may be a vulnerability, although MP staff do not have access to the classified or confidential information seen by ministerial staff.

## 5. External Engagement

### 5.1 Engagement with Provincial and Territorial Governments

- [36] Ms. Telford and Mr. Clow said that it is not the PMO's role to share intelligence with provincial and territorial governments; that is the role of the security agencies. Mr. Travers said that security agencies decide what intelligence can be shared. PMO staff would not be well suited to make these decisions.
- [37] The interviewees were referred to a memorandum to the Prime Minister relating to the Yukon Premier's concern about the inability of security agencies to share classified information with provincial and territorial officials. Mr. Travers said that Bill C-70 is intended to address this concern. The Bill reflects a significant step forward in the security agencies' capacity to share information.
- [38] Ms. Telford said that the Prime Minister has for a long time encouraged information sharing with the provinces and territories. She understands that CSIS has spoken with premiers but that it has not been able to share sufficient information to allow the premiers to know how to act on that information. Some private companies want similar assistance to counter FI threats, and there are ongoing discussions on these types of engagements.

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## 5.2 International Engagement

- [39] The panel was asked how international engagements come about. Mr. Travers said that there is a continuing strategy discussion with the Prime Minister, PCO, and PMO on how to advance an issue. The public service provides advice and there is a discussion. Any particular engagement will be part of a broader strategy.
- [40] The panel was asked whether the focus on FI is unique to Canada. Mr. Travers explained that FI is a global problem. Although it manifests differently in each country, Canada is not uniquely targeted. Conversations in the international space tend to focus on issues of common concern, such as transnational repression, and collective responses, such as the Rapid Response Mechanism (“**RRM**”). He emphasized that it was important not to focus only on leader-to-leader interactions; there was a whole range of other interactions that occur between countries (e.g. between Ministers or between officials), and that Canada uses all the available tools in a coordinated manner to advance its interests. Ms. Telford noted that the intensity of the FI conversation at the international level increased in 2018 at the G7 in Charlevoix. Discussions at that G7 led to the creation of the RRM. Governments can also share real-time experiences of FI depending on where they are in an election cycle.
- [41] Ms. Telford described a newer development at summits, which she called the “NSIA track.” National security advisors now get their own badges and rooms to meet at international summits. This arose out of the invasion of Ukraine, which galvanized a meeting of the allied NSIAs.
- [42] Ms. Telford said that there are incidents of FI in other countries but it is not necessarily a focus of public conversation there, unlike in Canada.

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## 6. Specific Incidents and Responses to FI

### 6.1 Declaring Zhao Wei *Persona Non Grata*

- [43] The interviewees were referred to a series of Mr. Clow's notes about the decision to expel Mr. Zhao from Canada [Mr. Zhao was declared *persona non grata*, *i.e.*, expelled from Canada, on May 8, 2023]:
- a) **CAN019500** [These notes are from a May 2, 2023 briefing, but are erroneously dated May 7; they were taken during two briefings on May 2, 2023, to the Prime Minister and PMO]. Mr. Clow said that on May 1, 2023, the *Globe & Mail* reported that Mr. Zhao had participated in the PRC's efforts to target MP Michael Chong.<sup>6</sup> On May 2, CSIS briefed Mr. Chong. In response to questions about the reference to a "2019 ministerial directive" in the notes, Mr. Clow suggested that Mr. Chong may have said there was a ministerial directive already, but did not recall exactly what this note reflected. Ms. Telford suggested that there could be reasons why not all intelligence about a foreign state's interest in an MP might need to go to the Prime Minister.
  - b) **CAN018000** [These notes were taken during a briefing to the PMO on May 6, 2023]. Mr. Clow said that this briefing was to provide an update about the status of the potential expulsion of Mr. Zhao.
  - c) **CAN018001** [These notes were taken during a briefing to the Prime Minister and PMO on May 7, 2023]. Mr. Clow said that this briefing was to provide an update on the status of Mr. Zhao's expulsion.
- [44] Mr. Clow said that the idea of declaring Mr. Zhao *persona non grata* was first raised in these early May 2023 meetings. The PMO had not heard Mr. Zhao's name before the leaks and was not aware that Mr. Zhao had been named as a problematic actor.
- [45] The interviewees were asked if they had discussed expelling other PRC diplomats. Mr. Travers said that the discussion would have focused on Mr. Zhao. He pointed out that

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<sup>6</sup> The interviewees indicated that this was the first time that they became aware of the alleged targeting of Mr. Chong.

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expelling a diplomat is very significant. For this reason the decision is usually tied to a specific individual alleged to have engaged in wrongdoing.

## 6.2 WeChat Disinformation Campaign about Michael Chong

[46] Commission Counsel referred the interviewees to a July 26, 2023, memorandum to the Prime Minister about an RRM report regarding WeChat disinformation campaign against MP Michael Chong. Counsel also referred to notes from a briefing to the Prime Minister and PMO on August 3, 2023, about the same disinformation campaign.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Clow said that the August 3 briefing was meant to update the Prime Minister on the campaign and to discuss how to handle the situation. Meeting attendees also discussed making the RRM findings public, which ultimately occurred.

## 6.3 Spamouflage

[47] Commission Counsel referred the interviewees to an email from Cindy Termorshuizen [Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs at Global Affairs Canada] providing information on how the Prime Minister was targeted by the Spamouflage campaign [in September 2023, RRM Canada received notice from counterparts that a bot network connected to the PRC was targeting dozens of Canadian parliamentarians on various social media platforms. "Spamouflage" is a network of new or hijacked social media accounts that posts and amplifies propaganda messages across multiple social media platforms]. Mr. Clow noted that the identification of the Spamouflage campaign was an example of RRM Canada achieving its objectives.

[48] The campaign made multiple salacious allegations against the Prime Minister, citing the *Buffalo Chronicle* article discussed during Stage 1 of the Commission's inquiry. Mr. Clow said that this shows the ongoing damage of online disinformation. Ms. Telford said that this incident was an example of a developing trend: methods that use existing disinformation, rather than creating their own.

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<sup>7</sup> CAN017997.

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## 6.4 Han Dong

- [49] Ms. Telford reiterated that cleared Liberal Party representatives were briefed about Mr. Dong during the 2019 writ period. After the election, the Clerk briefed the Prime Minister, Ms. Telford, and Mr. Broadhurst about the intelligence. However, there was very little information available. The PMO expected that officials would keep them informed of any updates. At that point the level of Mr. Dong's engagement with the PRC was unclear.
- [50] Mr. Clow stated that, around December 2019, the Whip's Office put Mr. Dong's name forward for membership on the China-Canada Committee. Because of the concerns that officials had raised, PMO intervened and Mr. Dong was not appointed.
- [51] Commission Counsel referred the interviewees to undated notes [during the interview, the Attorney General for Canada undertook to make best efforts to identify the author and date of these notes] that refer to a February 9, 2021, meeting with the notation "David to talk to Han Dong." [A briefing by the CSIS Director on foreign interference did occur, by secure telephone, on February 9, 2021]. Mr. Travers attended the February 9, 2021 by phone; he remembered the Don Valley North nomination contest in 2019 being mentioned as an example, but did not know what this notation meant.

## 6.5 Incident of PRC Foreign Interference

- [52] The interviewees were asked about an issue related to foreign interference that resulted in a briefing to the secret-cleared representatives of the Liberal Party of Canada shortly before the 2021 election and to the Prime Minister shortly after.

## 6.6 Intelligence Regarding Other Liberal MPs

- [53] Mr. Clow spoke of concerns that have been raised in the past regarding a very small number of Liberal MPs.
- [54] Ms. Telford said the Prime Minister had never ignored what intelligence services told him if there were ongoing concerns about a member of the Liberal caucus. The Prime Minister may probe the intelligence and ask security agencies to look further or provide

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more information, but ultimately he always defers to the security agencies' advice on these matters.

- [55] Mr. Clow said that there can be an impact on the consideration of MPs for roles because of behaviour that they may not have known would be considered by CSIS as "crossing a line", and may not even have crossed that line. He is frustrated that MPs do not have an opportunity to defend themselves. This has happened multiple times, mostly in relation to racialized MPs.

### 6.7 Intelligence Regarding MPs from Other Parties

- [56] Mr. Clow said that the Prime Minister and PMO staff were briefed on intelligence regarding potential foreign interference involving an MP from another party.
- [57] Mr. Clow said that, if it received intelligence about another political party, the PMO would not take action itself; that would be for officials. He noted that even without the relevant provisions of Bill C-70 in force, CSIS could share the information with the leader of the other party if that leader had a Top Secret clearance.