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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 fédéraux

Interview Summary: Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (CSE Representative, Three CSIS SITE Representatives, Robin Wettlaufer, Greg O'Hayon)

Current and former representatives of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (“**SITE TF**” or “**SITE**”) were interviewed in a panel format by Commission Counsel on June 13, 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 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. Witnesses¹

- [1] CSIS SITE representative #1 is the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) representative and Chair of the SITE TF. They assumed this role in August 2023, succeeding CSIS SITE representative #2. Around the same time, they joined the CSIS Foreign Interference Tiger Team (“**C-FITT**”) to contribute to FI-related work at CSIS, including coordinating the *CSIS Act* consultations. They currently serve as Deputy Director General of CSIS’ Policy and Strategic Partnerships Branch.

¹ The identity of the CSIS and CSE representatives must remain secret for national and personal security reasons.

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- [2] CSIS SITE representative #2 was the CSIS representative and Chair of the SITE TF from November 2022 to August 2023. They were also responsible for various portfolios in CSIS' Intelligence Assessment Branch.
- [3] CSIS SITE representative #3 was the CSIS representative on the SITE TF until November 2022. They now serve as Deputy Director General of CSIS' Intelligence Assessment Branch.
- [4] The representative from the Communications Security Establishment ("**CSE**") participated on the SITE TF from May 2022 to May 2024. Their role during that time was Director within an operational branch.
- [5] Robin Wettlaufer is the Global Affairs Canada ("**GAC**") representative on the SITE TF. She assumed this role in September 2022. She also serves as Director of the Centre for International Digital Policy, which houses the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism Canada unit ("**RRM Canada**"), and as Chair of the G7 RRM.
- [6] Greg O'Hayon is the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("**RCMP**") representative on the SITE TF. He assumed this role in March 2023. He also serves as the RCMP's Director General, Federal Policing Security Intelligence (previously Federal Policing Strategic Intelligence), within Federal Policing Intelligence and International Policing.

2. Transition and Onboarding New Members

2.1 Agency-by-Agency Approach to Onboarding

- [7] The CSE representative explained that the SITE TF onboarding process differs from agency to agency. However, to ensure continuity of knowledge and practices, all SITE TF 2023 members met with past SITE members, and referred to the SITE TF 2021's After Action Report ("**AAR**") and other past reports as a guide.
- [8] At CSE, the CSE representative met with the former SITE TF Chair, Lyall King, to gather past knowledge and to facilitate a smooth transition. They also relied on other deputies at CSE who had previously assisted Mr. King. They noted that they continued to ask Mr. King questions when necessary.

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- [9] CSIS SITE representative #2 said they benefitted from CSIS SITE representative #3's guidance to assist in their transition, as CSIS SITE representative #3 had previously served on the SITE TF. They also read the SITE TF 2021's AAR and spent time with the SITE TF as a group to learn how it would function going forward.
- [10] CSIS SITE representative #1 explained that they had worked with the CSE representative before, due to the tight-knit nature of the security and intelligence community. When CSIS SITE representative #1 joined the SITE TF, they reached out to CSIS SITE representatives #2 and #3 to help facilitate their transition. CSIS SITE representative #1 noted there are numerous informal structures in place to help ensure smooth transitions for new CSIS representatives on the SITE TF.
- [11] Ms. Wettlaufer described her process as perfunctory, like all handovers at GAC, but reported that, nevertheless, there was continuity between the GAC representatives on the SITE TF. She received briefings from the former GAC representative on SITE, Ms. Gallit Dobner, and also leveraged the expertise of Deputy Directors and other senior officers at GAC who had experience supporting Ms. Dobner in her SITE duties. She noted that Ms. Tara Denham, who also served on SITE in the past, is her Director General.
- [12] Mr. O'Hayon said that he received a formal handover from his predecessor, Ms. Lisa Ducharme, who kept good notes of her tenure as the RCMP SITE representative during the 44th general election ("GE44"). He added that he also received ample informal help as he transitioned into his new role.

2.2 Follow-Up from 43rd General Election ("GE43") and GE44

- [13] CSIS SITE representative #1 reiterated that all SITE TF members read the 2021 AAR to learn about past foreign interference ("FI") incidents stemming from GE44.
- [14] All witnesses indicated they were aware of the incidents and issues that the SITE TF reported on in both GE43 and GE44. These incidents included: (i) an alleged mis- and disinformation campaign relating to the Conservative Party of Canada's policy platform, which was directed against Mr. Kenny Chiu and Mr. Erin O'Toole; (ii) another foreign interference matter; (iii) PRC FI in Don Valley North, relating to Member of Parliament

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(“MP”) Han Dong; (iv) a PRC FI network; and (v) Indian funding of Canadian politicians through a proxy during GE44.

- [15] CSIS SITE representative #1 explained that SITE remains active by engaging with key partners in the Security and Intelligence (“S&I”) community, such as CSIS operational branches, and it keeps track of all incidents stemming from GE44. They added that SITE TF members continue to work within their respective mandates to detect and counter possible foreign threats to Canada and its democratic institutions.
- [16] CSIS SITE representative #1 underscored that the SITE TF includes threat updates from all SITE members in its reporting. For example, SITE included intelligence from SITE members in its AAR issued after the June 19, 2023 federal by-elections in the ridings of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce-Westmount—Québec; Oxford—Ontario; Portage-Lisgar—Manitoba; and Winnipeg South Centre—Manitoba.

2.3 Threat Updates and AARs

- [17] Commission Counsel referred the witnesses to the SITE TF Threat Assessments from June 2023 (CAN040229) and February 2024 (CAN037690), as well as the SITE TF June 2023 by-elections AAR (CAN021929).
- [18] CSIS SITE representative #1 explained that all SITE members contributed to the Threat Assessments. They added that even though the June 2023 by-elections AAR related to specific ridings, each SITE member department/agency continued to collect intelligence and information on FI more broadly.
- [19] CSIS SITE representative #2 said that the SITE TF developed and issued the June 2023 threat assessment because SITE members felt they should assess the threat environment outside of election periods. They added that this reporting serves as a useful baseline or comparator when assessing FI during elections. It also served to increase Government of Canada awareness on FI in between elections. Ms. Wettlaufer qualified that RRM Canada does not have a mandate to monitor the domestic online environment in between elections or by-elections.

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2.4 Evolution of Threat Landscape

2.4.1 Methodologies/Tools

- [20] CSIS SITE representative #1 stated that the February 2024 Threat Assessment largely remains accurate. It identifies the PRC, India, Russia, and Pakistan as the four main threat actors perpetrating FI against Canada.
- [21] CSIS SITE representative #1 noted that these threat actors continue to use traditional FI techniques, including financing candidates in elections, exploiting vulnerabilities in political party nomination contests, and leveraging community organizations as vectors for facilitating FI activities. CSIS SITE representative #1 and the CSE representative also noted the increased use of generative AI and cyber.
- [22] CSIS SITE representative #1 stated that the PRC, in particular, has been known to exploit vulnerabilities in nomination contests. They added that SITE continues to observe foreign interference at the subnational level. SITE's mandate is to monitor FI in federal elections. Nevertheless, SITE's threat assessments include reporting on FI in provinces, territories, and other sub-national governments and democratic processes because they serve as indicators of what could happen at the federal level and assist in understanding the general threat environment.
- [23] CSIS SITE representative #1 provided an overview of the various methodologies used by various foreign states to engage in foreign interference. They explained that some threat actors, like the PRC, India, and Pakistan, are more likely to engage with local community organizations to facilitate covert influence in Canada. Russia does not engage in this behavior but has greater capabilities in artificial intelligence (“AI”) and other cyber threats.
- [24] CSIS SITE representative #1 also noted an increase in mis- and disinformation campaigns. They referenced SPAMOUFLAGE, a PRC-led mis- and disinformation campaign directed against Members of Parliament (“MPs”).

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2.4.1 SITE Briefings to Panel in 2024

- [25] CSIS SITE representative #1 explained that briefings to the Panel of Five took place in 2024, even though it was not an election period. The briefing included an update on specific intelligence. They said that regular briefings to the Panel, outside of election periods, are necessary to capture and share relevant intelligence on elections. To ensure that the Panel was ready to assume their duties during a general election, SITE has provided them with briefings approximately every six weeks since the briefings started on January 19, 2024.
- [26] CSIS SITE representative #2 acknowledged that SITE included information about potential FI in nomination contests, as well as municipal or provincial elections, in their briefings, and threat assessments, even though SITE's Terms of Reference do not explicitly cover these nomination or leadership contests or sub-national elections. CSIS SITE representative #2 also acknowledged that potential FI in nomination contests was included in the SITREPs. They explained that this information is included because it allows SITE to assess and understand possible upcoming threats to federal elections.

2.5 Cyber Threats

- [27] While there was little observed cyber activity during GE43 and GE44, cyber threats are now increasing. SITE TF observed a trend towards traditional, human-based forms of FI in 2019 and 2021 and is now seeing a shift back to cyber-based activities. The CSE representative said the PRC has extensive cyber capabilities. They noted that CSE has picked up on new cyber threats directed at democratic institutions internationally, and produces a public-facing assessment on these threats every two years. The CSE representative explained that technological advancements have lowered the bar to entry for cyber interference activities.
- [28] In preparing for Canada's next federal general elections, CSIS SITE representative #1 said SITE has continued to consider instances of foreign interference in international elections, including elections in Moldova and Slovakia. Ms. Wettlaufer said GAC issued a joint press release together with the US and the UK on Russian interference in the upcoming Moldova election the day of the Commission interview.

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[29] In the international context, Ms. Wettlaufer said that the RRM sees significant risk arising from the use of generative AI, the proliferation of social media platforms, and other new technologies. RRM Canada has observed increasing numbers of threat actors. CSIS SITE representative added that cyber-attacks and incidents can involve “pre-positioning,” meaning gaining access to systems or information, not for immediate use, but potentially to be used for future FI activities.

3. Operations Before and During the By-Elections

3.1 SITE Operations outside Election Periods

[30] [On May 16, 2023, the Honourable Dominic LeBlanc announced that the SITE TF would provide enhanced monitoring and assessment of FI threats with respect to the June 19, 2023 federal by-elections].

[31] CSIS SITE representative #2 explained that before the announcement that SITE would be stood up to monitor the by-elections, SITE met monthly. Outside of election and by-election periods, SITE meetings focused on the development of table-top exercises, relationship-building, considering the recommendations of the 2021 AAR, and liaising with Elections Canada and the Office of the Commissioner of Canada Elections.

3.2 SITE TF Tech Table

[32] CSIS SITE representative #1 explained that the SITE TF Tech Table, now re-named the Incident Response Group (“IRG”), comprised a group of subject-matter experts who had the skills to unpack threats online and in the election space. Members included RRM Canada specialists, CSIS analysts, subject-matter experts from CSE, and members of the RCMP’s Cyber and Technical Operations Unit. Although active during GEs 43 and 44, since GE44, the IRG has not yet formally met.

3.3 The June 2023 By-Elections

[33] CSIS SITE representative #2 explained that none of the SITE members anticipated being called to action for the June 2023 by-elections. The expectation for by-elections

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was that SITE would provide daily SITREPs, meet weekly, and brief the Deputy Ministers' Committee on Intelligence Response ("**DMCIR**"), as well as the Director Generals' Election Security Coordinating Committee ("**DG ESCC**") and Assistant Deputy Ministers' Election Security Coordinating Committee ("**ADM ESCC**"). CSIS SITE representative #1 described DMCIR as the body responsible for receiving SITE briefings during the by-elections, as the Panel would only be in place during a general election. As a result, and in response, CSIS SITE representative #2 explained that SITE assembled and set a regular meeting schedule, which included daily touchpoints outside of the weekly meeting, to ensure daily reporting went out. If there was no new intelligence to report, SITE would generate a 'nil' report. The generation of daily SITREPs, including 'nil' reports, required extensive efforts.

- [34] CSIS SITE representative #2 added that the SITE TF was able to meet on an *ad hoc* basis outside of regular meeting times, if necessary. As the SITE Chair, CSIS SITE representative #2 attended the DMCIR meetings and provided the briefings.

3.4 Identifying "At Risk" Ridings

- [35] CSIS SITE representative #2 was asked whether SITE pre-identified any riding in the by-elections as "at risk". SITE TF prepared a baseline threat assessment for the by-elections. CSIS SITE representative #1 noted that one should not draw broad conclusions on 338 ridings across the country from observations made during four by-elections.

3.5 Dissemination of SITE TF Situation Reports ("SITREPs")

- [36] Commission Counsel then referred the witnesses to a document dated May 30, 2023, and a document dated June 6, 2023, which indicate the SITREPs should no longer be distributed to Ministers' Offices. CSIS SITE representative #2 said that PCO developed the dissemination list for SITREPs after a DMCIR meeting, and later communicated the list to SITE TF. At a following DMCIR meeting, DMs made the decision to remove Ministers' Offices from the list. PCO communicated this change to Ministers' Offices.

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[37] CSIS SITE representative #2 noted that, in the period following the media leaks in 2023, there were concerns about the dissemination of sensitive information. As a result, PCO requested that SITE track the readership of the SITREPs. Active measures are now in place to address those concerns.

3.6 Use of Client Relations Officers (“CROs”)

[38] Commission Counsel referenced an email requesting that CSE CROs [CSE employees who are housed within other departments or agencies and assist with the dissemination of classified reporting to clients] assist the SITE TF in its distribution of SITREPs to a series of clients. The email acknowledges that doing so will be “taxing” on the CROs’ capacity, and that CSE’s CRO system was not designed for this approach.

[39] The CSE representative agreed that this added responsibility, especially during the period where SITE was releasing daily SITREPs, was taxing on CSE’s CRO system but that CSE wanted to be helpful. At present, there are a number of CROs at PCO, as well as a number serving CSIS and other government client departments. CSIS SITE representative #3 added that there are also SIGINT Dissemination Officers (“SDOs”). SDOs are staff from other departments accredited by CSE to disseminate SIGINT reports.

3.7 SITE Resource Implications

[40] Commission Counsel referred to a document that outlines the opportunity-cost to RRM Canada arising from the need to support SITE work in the June 2023 by-elections.

[41] RRM Canada is a small team comprising eight data analysts and a small policy team charged with covering the worldwide online space. Ms. Wettlaufer emphasized that, although the RRM Canada team believe in their work and often work overtime, everything is a trade-off when you are working with limited resources. RRM Canada had to lower or postpone their efforts on some of the other things they were following in order to cover the June 2023 by-elections. For example, RRM had to pause its monitoring on, amongst other things, the PRC’s Overseas Liaison Stations. Ms.

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Wettlaufer underscored that RRM Canada is generally charged with monitoring the international online space, not domestic online activity.

- [42] The CSE representative said that, in terms of operational resources, covering the by-elections was not as difficult for CSE because the collection of foreign intelligence is a regular part of its mandate. They also commented that being asked to cover the by-elections caused the SITE TF to rally themselves and that the administrative burden to create and disseminate SITREPs takes resources. The CSE representative also noted that adopting an enhanced monitoring role for the by-elections resulted in opportunity costs for SITE itself, as it had to pause its work on producing table top exercises and reviewing recommendations from previous SITE reports.
- [43] CSIS SITE representative #1 echoed the CSE representative's statement and noted that the creation of CSIS assessments takes significant internal resources, as does SITE's work, requiring consultation with operational areas who convey how they see the threat.
- [44] Mr. O'Hayon observed that standing up for the by-elections impacted the RCMP's Ideologically Motivated Criminal Intelligence Team by redirecting its bandwidth away from day-to-day activities, but that doing so assisted in building muscle memory for the RCMP. It also resulted in internal conversations about how it would best organize and respond for the next general election.

3.8 Classified AAR and Information Flow

- [45] SITE TF produced a classified (CAN021929) and a public AAR following the June 19, 2023 by-elections.
- [46] CSIS SITE representative #1 observed that the public AAR was the first public communication from the SITE TF. They said it was difficult to produce unclassified products, and is looking into the best practices of other countries when it comes to producing public facing communications.
- [47] CSIS SITE representative #2 explained that the SITE TF was specific and deliberate in its language in the AAR about what it did and did not observe during the by-elections. They emphasized that it was not SITE's role to make an assessment as to the impact of

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intelligence or potential FI, but rather, to act as a central hub for intelligence collection and dissemination related to elections. They noted that the by-elections were different than GE43 and GE44, as the Panel of Five was not in place. Instead, information was sent to DMCIR, the ADM ESCC, and DG ESCC. They noted that it would be up to these bodies to action the information provided to them if that had been necessary.

[48] CSIS SITE representative #1 agreed that SITE's job is to detect, then inform. CSIS SITE representative #2 noted that each member agency also disseminated the information contained in SITREPs through their own regular reporting processes.

3.9 Engagement with Political Parties

[49] The SITE TF provided unclassified briefings to political party representatives before the June by-elections in 2023 and the March by-election in 2024.²

[50] CSIS SITE representative #2 explained that PCO provided feedback on the briefing to political parties in May 2023. As set out in a May 30, 2023 email (CAN044589), CSIS SITE representative #2 felt the briefing went well. PCO noted that they felt that the examples used by SITE representatives were not concrete enough in relation to actual FI observed by SITE and that the briefing "did not hit the mark." CSIS SITE representative #2 directed Commission Counsel to PCO representatives for any follow up on their views. They explained that the unclassified level of the briefings made it difficult to share more concrete examples of FI derived from classified intelligence.

[51] Mr. O'Hayon recalled being struck by the lack of follow-up questions from any of the parties being briefed in the English language briefing prior to the June 2023 by-elections. As a result, Mr. O'Hayon recalled that, in the subsequent French language briefing, they injected potential examples "on the fly". Going forward, Mr. O'Hayon noted that the SITE representatives have tried to populate their briefings with more unclassified examples. CSIS SITE representative #1 noted that, during the Durham by-election in 2024, SITE TF's briefing to political parties included reference to three specific FI cases [see SITE's presentation to the political parties in February 2024

² See CAN044590 and CAN044568.

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(CAN044568)]. CSIS SITE representative #1 noted that the New Democratic Party (“NDP”) was the only party that accepted SITE’s invitation to receive a briefing in 2024. Mr. O’Hayon acknowledged unclassified briefings were challenging, as it was difficult to know what knowledge base of FI the political party representatives already had.

[52] CSIS SITE representative #3 added that these briefings came in 2023, after the media leaks. They noted that their purpose was to demystify what was being said in the media and what SITE was. CSIS SITE representative #2 noted that, as part of the briefings, SITE also provided information about the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security’s Political Parties Hotline [the Hotline is a resource for registered political parties to call and report unusual cyber activity].

4. Specific FI Incidents

[53] Commission Counsel referred to a number of classified documents concerning specific FI incidents. The CSIS SITE representatives and Mr. O’Hayon provided information about the incidents.

4.1 Oxford Riding Nomination

[54] Commission Counsel referred to the SITREP for May 24, 2023 which contains an entry regarding media reporting of alleged irregularities in the nomination race for Oxford, Ontario.

[55] CSIS representative #3 noted that because nomination contests have been identified as a potential vector for FI, SITE member agencies will collect intelligence on nominations contests and report it.

[56] The SITE TF did not observe, at that time, any indication of FI directed at the by-election.

5. Concluding Remarks

[57] Asked for their views on SITE moving forward and how it might operate more effectively, the CSE representative said that the SITE AARs had great suggestions.

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They also stated that much credit had to be given to the first group of SITE TF representatives for setting up a high functioning group. Although SITE is resource-intensive, it does important work, and creates greater cohesion between the member agencies. In their view, this is a positive element. They commented that the ongoing operation of SITE is necessary as it is clear that FI is not just an election cycle issue.

[58] CSIS SITE representative #2 echoed the CSE representative's comments and described the FI threat as pervasive and ongoing. They affirmed that SITE TF members have a good working culture and relationship.

[59] CSIS SITE representative #1 stated that FI is here to stay. Active efforts are needed to successfully combat FI. They commented that it would be naïve to think that SITE could adequately monitor the FI threat if it was meeting only part of the time. They described a need to "take the pulse of FI throughout the year" and for more resources for those monitoring online activities. They added that going forward, policy and law-makers should begin to think about how to combat FI at the sub-national level (i.e., provincially, territorially, and at the municipal level).

[60] Ms. Wettlaufer commented on the complexity of the global information space. This space is growing and becoming more dangerous at a rapid pace. This is affecting not just Canada but all our allies. She also noted that SITE is one of the most functional inter-departmental bodies she has worked on, and explained that in spite of the resource drain on RRM Canada, it has been hugely beneficial for RRM Canada to have regular access to the intelligence expertise of the other members. However, for her small unit, there is a high opportunity cost. Finally, she noted that RRM Canada does not monitor the online domestic space on an ongoing basis. Without a baseline knowledge and assessment of the online space, it is difficult to detect unusual or abnormal activity. Other panelists also highlighted the lack of resources to monitor malign cyber activities domestically. Without ongoing monitoring in Canada, "we don't know what normal is."

[61] CSIS SITE representative #3 referred to the 2021 AAR which recommended, among other things, maintaining longer lasting engagement with political party representatives outside of an election cycle. They also noted there was a need for greater

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communication to the public on Security and Intelligence matters, in order to build resiliency against FI. To that end, they noted that the unclassified AAR was a really good start.

- [62] Mr. O'Hayon commented that new technologies have made it easier than ever to spread mis- and dis- information and lowered the barriers of entry for cyber criminals. He noted that we now live in a system where cyber criminals and foreign state actors are learning from one another.