



Stage 1 Interview Summary: Azam Ishmael

Azam Ishmael, the National Director of the Liberal Party, was interviewed by Commission counsel on March 5, 2024.

Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission's mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Information provided during the interviews that relates to other aspects of the Commission's Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.

1. Background

[1] Azam Ishmael has served as the National Director of the Liberal Party since 2017. In 2021, he also served as the Party's National Campaign Director.

2. The 2019 Federal Election

2.1 Precautions taken against foreign interference in advance of the 2019 federal election

[2] In response to reporting about Russian attempts to interfere with the 2016 American election and related cybersecurity concerns, the Liberal party consulted with cybersecurity experts and the Party's IT Director oversaw the updating of the Party's

approach to cybersecurity. While this work was largely internal to the Party's practices, processes, and infrastructure, it also included ensuring that the Party's candidates were aware of cybersecurity risks they may be exposed to.

- [3] The Canadian Center for Cybersecurity published a candidate manual relating to cybersecurity that the Party shared with its candidates, but people found the manual to be daunting, dense, and inaccessible, so the Party stopped distributing the manual. Instead, the Party included a one-page document focused on cybersecurity in its own Party booklet for candidates and campaign staff.

2.2 Candidate vetting process

- [4] Liberal Party candidates were vetted by a team of approximately 100 volunteer researchers. The Party directed the researchers to bring forward any information found that could cause reputational damage to the candidate or to the Party. The Party impressed on the researchers that vetting must not be taken lightly.

2.3 Flow of information

- [5] Mr. Ishmael was one of three Liberal Party representatives who attended Security and Intelligence Threats to Election Task Force (SITE) briefings in respect of the 2019 federal election. The other two Party representatives were Braeden Caley and Mathieu Lafrance. All three were required to obtain secret clearance to attend the SITE briefings.
- [6] The three men all attended the SITE briefings when they could and the Party generally had two or three representatives at each SITE briefing.
- [7] The information presented at the SITE meetings was general. Attendees were not allowed to take notes. The Liberal Party knew that it could make reports about suspected issues to SITE, but was unclear about what the threshold was for issues that should be reported to SITE. Guidance shared at the SITE briefings tended to be general in nature.

[8] Mr. Ishmael also met once with the head of the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, who was contacting the political parties to alert them to the new candidate manual and advising that the Parties needed to be aware of potential foreign interference.

2.4 Social media account breach and response

[9] In the lead up to the 2021 federal election, a senior director of the Liberal Party noticed that their login information on their personal social media account had been changed and that the last IP address used was not theirs. . There was no apparent activity generated on or from the account while it was out of this person's control. The Party reported the incident to SITE and to the social media platform, and the individual changed the password for the account. No further steps were taken.

2.5 The Liberal Party does not believe that foreign interference affected results of election

[10] As National Director of the Liberal Party, Mr. Ishmael did not receive any complaints about potential foreign interference from Liberal Party candidates or staff. With the benefit of hindsight and subsequent media reporting on foreign interference, the Liberal Party does not believe that foreign interference affected the results of the 2019 federal election either nationally or in any particular riding.

3. The 2021 Federal Election

3.1 Precautions taken against foreign interference in advance of the 2021 federal election

[11] The Liberal Party put cybersecurity at the forefront of its election preparation efforts.

3.2 Candidate vetting process

[12] With respect to recognizing or responding to potential foreign interference, the Liberal Party did not make any changes to its candidate vetting process as compared to 2019.

3.3 Flow of information

[13] As in 2019, Mr. Ishmael was one of the Liberal Party's representatives at SITE briefings for the political parties. Mr. Caley served as the Party's other representative at these briefings. There was no material change to the information shared at these briefings as compared to those in 2019.

3.4 Media reports about bussing international students in the Don Valley North nomination race

[14] The media reported on individuals signing international students up with the Liberal Party and bussing them to voting sites in the nomination race in Don Valley North in 2019. Mr. Ishmael indicated that this activity was compliant with the Liberal Party's rules – people may vote in nomination contests if they are over the age of 14 and ordinarily reside in Canada – so no action was taken in response to those reports. Mr. Ishmael explained that the “ordinarily reside in Canada” requirement is generally satisfied where the voter has proof of a Canadian address. He also stated that any candidate paying for the cost of bussing voters would have to declare that cost to Elections Canada as part of their filings post-nomination. Any such expenditures would be reviewed by Elections Canada.

[15] Mr. Ishmael noted that no one accessed the permanent appeal process, the Party's internal dispute resolution mechanism, about the Don Valley North nomination.

[16] From the Party's perspective, there were no issues or irregularities in the Don Valley North nomination process. It was a hotly contested but very organized nomination that complied with Party rules.

3.5 The Liberal Party does not believe that foreign interference affected the results of the election

[17] As National Campaign Director for the 2021 campaign, Mr. Ishmael did not receive any complaints about potential foreign interference from Liberal Party candidates or staff. With the benefit of hindsight and subsequent media reporting on foreign

interference, the Liberal Party does not believe that foreign interference affected the results of the 2021 election either nationally or in any particular riding.

4. Recommendations

- [18] Mr. Ishmael provided the following recommendations:
- [19] Caution should be taken when discussing potential foreign interference in Canada's elections and democratic processes because sowing misinformation and/or distrust is easy and can effectively undermine an otherwise robust system;
- [20] Party leaders, who generally hold security clearances higher than "secret", should be briefed by SITE so they can contextualize the information their parties receive;
- [21] SITE meetings should be held regularly in between elections in order to increase the likelihood that reports of suspected or potential issues are made to SITE; and
- [22] The federal government should provide political parties with a list of vendors or providers of social media applications and communications technology approved or recommended for use during elections.