



Summary Report

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Panel Theme: Building Democratic Resilience Amid Value Conflict

Submission to the Foreign Interference Commission

I would like to make two recommendations as part of my participation in the panel discussion Building Democratic Resilience Amid Value Conflict: the first around the rules for participation in nomination and leadership contests, and the second regarding proactive disclosure of financial information about elections.

As a journalist I have been following the foreign interference story and writing commentary on it, which is informed by confidential sources in the political system and intelligence community.

This year I published a book, *The Prince: The Turbulent Reign of Justin Trudeau*. To research it, I spoke at length with senior officials and other sources, seeking to understand the interplay between foreign interference, international relations and diaspora politics.

While I was doing this research I came to believe that diaspora politics is preventing Canada from pursuing its national interest in its relationships with China and India. I don't think a change of government alone will end this problem, because the forces that acted on this government will act on future governments.

Foreign interference is an important problem for Canada, not existential, but serious, that it is distorting our policy-making processes and there are things we ought to do to reduce it, to make our democracy more resilient and safeguard our independence.

To deal with this, we have to talk about diaspora politics.

New Canadians are enthusiastic participants in nomination and leadership contests, which is something in which Canadians can take pride. One of the reasons people want to come here is because of our open political system, freedoms guaranteed by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Nomination and leadership contests, however, as the commissioner has noted, are a "gateway" to foreign interference.

I talked to a longtime organizer last week who told me that there are likely more non-citizens than citizens participating in these contests in the LPC.



It is normal that immigrants are often motivated by concern for events in their home countries. Novelist Yann Martel described Canada as “the greatest hotel on earth.” It should not surprise us that guests in this hotel are often preoccupied by events in their home countries.

Diaspora politics exercises a powerful influence over policy for Canadian governments, since all the parties must seek support from diaspora communities. The percentage of foreign born citizens is higher here than in most countries, and the percentage of foreign born citizens *and non-citizens* who are active in nomination races and leadership contests is much higher still. This gives them out-sized influence over our politics, and opens the door to foreign interference.

There is a flashing neon Open sign over those processes

To understand nomination contests, you need to think about the tremendous drive motivating the participants. Some years ago it was credibly alleged that one would-be candidate for a provincial party paid a bribe of more than \$10,000 for the opportunity to win the nomination in an unwinnable riding. You are not always dealing time with homo economicus, rational actors pursuing advantage.

Imagine you are a car dealer in a suburb of a big city who wants to be an MP. You have spent many years making money and doing good works and are active in the political party that holds the seat. The MP retires, opening up a nomination contest. The outcome is all but assured. If you win the nomination, you will be a member of parliament.

You get approved, vetted by the party, and you have a good chance of winning, depending on who gets more people to turn up at the nomination meeting. This represents a huge opportunity, a fork in the path of your life, between your humdrum existence in auto sales and a bright future at the right hand of the prime minister.

Now imagine that a proxy for a foreign power offers to line up a few hundred votes of non-citizens for you. They may be foreign students, members of a religious group. What are you going to do?

There is often money, sometimes cash, sometimes a second bank account, used to pay for off-the-book expenses for organizers, who sometimes pay for memberships. Sometimes organizers are put on the payroll of a company that supports a candidate.

Organizers are highly motivated to win because there is no second prize in politics. They are often ruthless, and they do not have to account for themselves publicly.

Nobody knows how much cheating there is. When the cheating is done by those acting for foreign powers, or the money is coming from foreign powers, that's dangerous, in part because nomination and leadership contests are often more important than elections, which are more



effectively regulated. This is what is happening in ridings across Canada. I think that by eliminating non-citizens from voting, we might cut down on a lot of it.

I also think that foreign actors are motivated not just by a desire to exert influence but by the fear that if they do not, others will. If it gets harder, by preventing non-citizens from voting, that may take down the neon Open sign and do much to improve the situation, without intruding on the prerogatives of the parties to run things in the way they like.

The big parties, through their representatives in the Commons, get to decide on the legislation that governs these contests. They want to preserve their power over these processes, and should do so. They want to approve who they like, disqualify who they like, sometimes by setting nomination retroactive cutoff dates for membership sales. A lot of what they do is sleazy, but does not jeopardise the national interest. Allowing non-citizens to participate does do that.

It would not be easy to change. If one party excludes non-citizens from participating, they will be giving up an advantage. They won't act in unison. They might agree to legislate a limit.

The other thing we need is greater transparency, which might cut down on foreign interference and other skullduggery.

Journalistic scrutiny, imperfect though it may be, is a vital part of resilient information ecosystem. I believe this inquiry is only happening because of the work that journalists did to bring the issue to light.

Journalism varies in quality. The commissioner, who has access to secret material, will have a better sense as to which stories were accurate and which were not. I suspect it is a mixed track record.

I will point out that even inaccurate stories, although they can be damaging to individuals and institutions, can play a role in highlighting an important issue, because they provoke responses.

As Albert Camus said: "La presse libre peut sans doute être bonne ou mauvaise, mais assurément, sans la liberté, elle ne sera jamais autre chose que mauvaise."

A free press is the most important safeguard of our democracy. But the business of journalism is struggling. Journalistic organizations are becoming weaker and poorer. Changes to the advertising business are part of the problem, but research also shows that a significant percentage of citizens in Canada and similar countries are turning away from the mainstream media, paying more attention to partisan and activist media that may include disinformation.



Mainstream media still has a significant audience, though, and investigative journalism remains vitally important. The commissioner will be aware, for instance, of the Globe and Mail story that revealed the government of Canada was aware of threats to MP Michael Chong's family but had not informed him.

This kind of work is difficult, best handled by experienced journalists working with good editors and lawyers.

Unfortunately, few of the journalists doing this work now have roots in the multicultural communities where greater scrutiny is warranted, and may feel squeamish about reporting on it, as if they are sniffy about newcomers participating.

Because of business issues, there are fewer teams capable of doing in depth investigative work and normal beat reporting than there were and there will likely be fewer still in the future.

This is worrisome, because journalists are often the people who uncover cheating, by domestic or foreign actors, or make the public aware of it when it is uncovered by investigators. In practice, I have come to believe that they feed one another — journalistic investigations spur on official investigators and vice versa, without collusion.

Do not expect the cheaters to be forthcoming about it. Do not expect party officials to help uncover cheating. In my experience, they are as likely to attack the journalists or investigators trying to uncover wrongdoing, and they may be dishonest and will almost certainly be secretive.

This behavior may become more common as affective polarization increases. A growing number of Canadians hold hostile feelings not just for politicians they oppose but also the supporters of other parties. In this environment, partisans fear the other party and long for victory. I believe this will increase the likelihood of cheating and make it harder for journalists and investigators to uncover it.

This dynamic, this watchdog function, is imperilled. Since the nature of appropriate government funding for journalism is the subject of partisan debate, I don't think it appropriate for an inquiry to propose funding journalism.

I do think, though, that more robust rules around proactive disclosure would be helpful. I will not get into the details, which are the work for specialists, but in general we want to follow the money.

Who are the organizers? How much are they paid? Have they signed contracts stipulating that they will act in an ethical manner? Can we see them? Can we see the receipts? When?



The parties can rightly say that bureaucratic requirements should not be so strict so as to discourage participation in a virtuous and necessary business of politics. But merely publicly reporting who is getting paid and for what should not be an insurmountable barrier. Laying out a more complete record helps keep everyone honest. Memories change. People prevaricate. Documents are unchanging.

When I was doing investigative work on electoral wrongdoing, I spent many hours poring over databases maintained by Elections Canada, combining tiny scraps in the public record with reporting relying on confidential sources. If you increase proactive disclosure, you will increase the scrutiny, which helps keep the system clean.

I hope this inquiry results in recommendations that strengthen public reporting that is accessible to journalists and to member of the public, NGOs and other partisans.

The Watergate scandal in the United States led to the first laws providing for this kind of public reporting. Sometimes scandals lead to reforms that increase accountability and transparency. I hope that will be true in this case.