



## Foreign Interference Commission

### Public Consultation Process

## Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with five individuals belonging to the Tamil Canadian community in a consultation meeting organized with the assistance of the Human Rights Coalition. This is the summary of the information provided during the consultation meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option of anonymizing themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.

## Executive Summary

- All attendees are members of Tamil Rights Group, which they described as a non-profit organization in Canada working towards justice and accountability for human rights violations faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka. Certain attendees discussed the experiences that led them to become advocates on behalf of the Tamil Canadian community. One attendee discussed their experience fleeing civil war in Sri Lanka and the ongoing impact that violent and terrifying experience has had on them and their loved ones.
- Certain attendees spoke about the Sri Lankan government's ongoing disinformation and misinformation campaign about members of the Tamil diaspora. Certain attendees discussed this campaign's success in affecting Canadian's views of the Tamil diaspora. Certain attendees discussed the impacts of this campaign as carried out against specific individuals, including personal reputational, emotional, and financial costs. Certain attendees discussed the impact it had on the treatment of refugees and the handling of their refugee claims.
- Certain attendees spoke about efforts by and on behalf of the Sri Lankan government to interfere with efforts to recognize the Tamil genocide in Canada and to educate Canadians about the genocide. Certain attendees spoke about efforts to block the construction of a genocide memorial in Brampton. Certain attendees spoke about the limited education provided on the genocide and related history.
- Certain attendees spoke about the need for Canada to unequivocally acknowledge the genocide. Certain attendees discussed the need for Canada to cast a critical eye on the statements of foreign governments before responding. Certain attendees discussed their hope that the Canadian government would use its international standing and relationships to seek to curb the Sri Lankan government's ongoing targeting of the Tamil diaspora and hold individuals responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable.

## 1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

### Participant 1

Participant 1 described their journey as a child from Sri Lanka to Canada, stating that their earliest memories are full of fear and uncertainty. Participant 1 explained that their childhood home in Colombo [the capital city of Sri Lanka] was targeted in state-sponsored pogroms because their family were Tamils. Participant 1 said that they were forced to flee to Jaffna [the capital city of the Northern Province, a Tamil-majority province in Sri Lanka] with only a few of their belongings. Participant 1 said that their early experiences and their memories of violence, which continued to affect their family, fueled a lifelong passion for human rights. Participant 1 said this passion led them to become an advocate for Tamil people.

Participant 1 described their work with another organization that advocated for Tamil people in Sri Lanka and served as the voice of the Tamil community worldwide.

Participant 1 said that they were designated as a person of interest by the Sri Lankan government in 2011 on an official Sri Lanka government gazette because of their involvement with this organization, even though this organization is allowed to operate in Canada and all other countries in the world except Sri Lanka. Participant 1 said that this designation has turned their life into a living nightmare, where their every move is scrutinized. Participant 1 described a number of consequences flowing from this designation, including being temporarily placed on a no-fly list, denials of border crossing, and interrogation. Participant 1 explained that they were detained in Singapore for interrogation, and forced to provide access to their social media accounts and cellphone on one occasion. Participant 1 felt Sri Lankan authorities are also sharing their information with other countries in an effort to intimidate them and deter them from continuing with their advocacy efforts. Participant 1 said that the fear that they fled from in Sri Lanka has

followed them to Canada. Participant 1 spoke about the anxiety and stress they have experienced as a result.

Participant 1 said that their peaceful activism, which includes speaking to governmental policy makers and working on advocacy committees, has made them a target. Participant 1 said that many Tamils refrain from speaking out publicly for fear of the repercussions.

Participant 1 said that their advocacy work has taken a deep emotional toll on them. Participant 1 lamented the fact that they may never be able to return to the country of their birth nor share that country with their close loved ones.

Participant 1 implored the Canadian government to take a stance against the Sri Lankan government, to hold the Sri Lankan government accountable, and ensure that Canadians are allowed to exercise their rights and freedoms. Participant 1 said that the Sri Lankan regime must be sent a clear and unequivocal message that their actions have consequences.

## Participant 2

Participant 2 said that Patrick Brown [Mayor of the city of Brampton] announced the building of a memorial to the Black July genocide in 2021<sup>1</sup>. Participant 2 said that the memorial in Brampton was being erected in response to the destruction of a memorial to that genocide in Sri Lanka. Participant 2 said that the building of the memorial was supported by a unanimous vote in the Brampton municipal council. Participant 2 said that local Sinhalese Canadian groups lobbied against the memorial, and that the Sri Lankan consulate formally asked that the construction be halted. Participant 2 said that the Brampton memorial was also a focus for the Sri Lankan government, as they understood the Canadian high commission in Sri Lanka was summoned by the Sri Lankan government on the matter. Participant 2 described these events as concerning because they sparked fears about what would happen if Tamil Canadians spoke out in favor of local Tamil groups.

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<sup>1</sup> **Note:** Black July is the name given to the anti-Tamil pogroms that occurred in Sri Lanka in July 1983.

Participant 2 said that civil society groups in Canada and elsewhere, including within the United Nations, systematically operate in fear of advocating for or on behalf of Tamil groups. Participant 2 said that traveling to Sri Lanka or conducting humanitarian work in Tamil areas has led to mistreatment, including arbitrary arrest. Participant 2 said this contributed to the general feelings of fear experienced by Tamil Canadians.

Participant 2 shared their understanding that many Tamil rights advocates and activists have been named to Sri Lanka's terrorist list. Participant 2 said that the weaponization of terrorism charges against Tamil Canadians perpetuates the myth that all Tamil people are terrorists. Participant 2 said that this has directly impacted the lives of Tamils living in Canada. Participant 2 said that Tamil Canadians have missed out on job opportunities in the Canadian government as a result. Participant 2 said that Tamil Canadians have been denied entry or been subject to restrictions when seeking to travel to other countries.

Participant 2 said that the United Nations has recognized the human rights abuses that have been perpetrated against the Tamil people.

### Participant 3

Participant 3 described themselves as a proud Tamil Canadian committed to the principles of democracy.

Participant 3 said that they have been involved in the Tamil media landscape for years. Participant 3 said that their use of their media platform to criticize the war and genocide made them a target for Sri Lankan agents in Canada.

Participant 3 said that they ran for public office. Participant 3 said that they were falsely accused of being a terrorist, with links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the "LTTE"), during their campaign. Participant 3 said that these false accusations were intended to tarnish their reputation and suppress votes in their favour. Participant 3 said that the Canadian media spread the false narrative that they were a terrorist sympathizer which negatively impacted Canadian public perception of them. Participant 3 said that other tactics employed included writing letters to their political party and efforts to

embarrass the party. Participant 3 said that this disinformation and misinformation campaign was orchestrated by agents of the Sri Lankan government in Canada. Participant 3 said that the disinformation and misinformation campaign had a deep impact on them both personally and financially. Participant 3 believes that they were targeted because during the Sri Lanka civil war, they were a vocal critic of the Sri Lankan government and denounced human rights abuses committed against Tamils.

Participant 3 said that as part of the above-noted disinformation and misinformation campaign, a Canadian Sri Lankan journalist had been hired to focus specifically on them. Participant 3 said that they had several conversations with this journalist, to confront them about the campaign they were orchestrating against Participant 3. Participant 3 said the journalist advised them that they would continue the disinformation and misinformation campaign because Participant 3 was linked to advocacy movements for Tamil rights and heritage. Participant 3 said that after their campaign, which was unsuccessful, was over, the journalist arranged a meeting between Participant 3 and a high-ranking Sri Lankan consular official. Participant 3 said that the journalist's ability to coordinate this meeting confirmed to them that the journalist was acting in coordination with the Sri Lankan government. Participant 3 said that during that meeting, the Sri Lankan consular official denied any involvement in the disinformation and misinformation campaign. Participant 3 said that they did not speak to law enforcement as their political party had rules and everything was happening in the open in the media. Participant 3 said they did not want to impair their party's chances of winning an election.

Participant 3 said that many other Tamil Canadians have had their reputations falsely and unfairly tarnished.

## Participant 4

Participant 4 made reference to the 492 Tamil asylum seekers fleeing the Sri Lankan civil war and Tamil genocide who arrived in British Columbia by ship, the MV *Sun Sea*, from Thailand in August 2010. Participant 4 stated that the genocide has been recognized by House of Commons, the Prime Minister as well as by the Ontario *Tamil Genocide Education Week Act*.

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government knew that the MV *Sun Sea* was on its way before it arrived. Participant 4 said that prior to the boat's arrival, the Sri Lankan government suggested that people on board the vessel had terrorist connections, including allegations that they were associated with the LTTE. Participant 4 said that Amnesty International has called these allegations unacceptable, and quoted a statement from the Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada [Mr. Alex Neve]: "It is disturbing to hear some public comments that seem to follow this lead by labelling Tamil asylum seekers as "terrorists" by the Government of Sri Lanka, before they have even had a chance to tell their story. Canadian and international law requires that refugees have access to individual and unbiased determination of their claim to need protection."

Participant 4 said that the Canadian Council for Refugees stated that some such allegations appeared to be coming directly or indirectly from the Sri Lankan government.

Participant 4 said that, because of the terrorism allegations, the Canadian government held the asylum seekers in detention while their applications were being processed. Participant 4 stated that this treatment of the refugees was a direct response to the terrorism claims made by the Sri Lankan government. Participant 4 said that, at the same time, there was an increasing anti-refugee and anti-Tamil sentiment among the Canadian public.

Participant 4 said that they themselves questioned whether the above-noted incidents were diplomacy or foreign interference. Participant 4 shared their belief that the above-noted incidents amounted to alternative warfare much like the PRC's efforts to destabilize Canadian democracy. Participant 4 said it was their position that responding to such baseless claims as if they were true, without due process, amounts to foreign interference.

## [Participant 5](#)

Participant 5 said their parents came from Sri Lanka to Canada as refugees and they were born in Canada. Participant 5 described struggling in their younger years with their Tamil identity and what it meant to them to be Tamil. Participant 5 said that the public

narrative about Tamils focused on terrorism, the LTTE, or refugee identities. Participant 5 said that this narrative was spun by the Sri Lankan government to justify the Tamil genocide. Participant 5 said they found themselves internalizing this rhetoric and feeling embarrassed about their heritage as a result. Participant 5 said this led them to distance themselves from their family. Participant 5 said that they came to realize that their view was the result of the Sri Lankan government's narrative about Tamils. Participant 5 recalled that there were protests by Tamil Canadians in Ontario that were met with anger by other Ontarians. Participant 5 expressed their view that this response from Ontarians was fueled by the disinformation and misinformation narrative propagated by the Sri Lankan government. Participant 5 described being angered by these events.

Participant 5 said that the Sri Lankan government has continually used the disinformation and misinformation rhetoric against Tamils, linking Tamils with terrorism and denouncing Tamil rights advocates and activists as LTTE members, at the global level.

Participant 5 referenced recent efforts to undermine provincial recognition of the Tamil genocide. Participant 5 said that they understand that the Sri Lankan government played an instrumental role in funding and strategizing these efforts. Participant 5 said that these efforts included publicly questioning the existence of the Black July pogroms, illegal seizure of Tamils' property, and the Tamil genocide. Participant 5 said they were struck by the focus on spreading disinformation about Tamils.

Participant 5 said that there has been significant confusion in the Canadian public about whether or not a Tamil genocide happened. Participant 5 said that school boards have been reluctant to adopt curricula that recognize the Tamil genocide. Participant 5 said that in these regards, the Sri Lankan government's efforts have been successful.

Participant 5 said that the provincial recognition of the Tamil genocide is very important to Tamil Canadians like themselves. Participant 5 said that such recognition is a source of optimism and a first step in acknowledging the trauma that Tamils have experienced.



## 2. Participants' responses to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*

### Participant 1

Participant 1 said that the Sri Lankan regime must be sent a clear and unequivocal message by the Canadian government that their actions have consequences.

Participant 1 implored the Canadian government to take a stance against the Sri Lankan government, hold the Sri Lankan government accountable for harassment of the Tamil diaspora, and ensure that Tamil Canadians are allowed to exercise their rights and freedoms.

Participant 1 spoke about the use of universal jurisdiction to prosecute those responsible for war crimes and genocide. Participant 1 urged the Canadian government to expand and use universal jurisdiction laws, which currently require the accused to be present on Canadian soil. Participant 1 said that Canada should follow the examples set by Belgium and Argentina and prosecute people regardless of where they are, issuing international arrest warrants and providing for convictions in absentia. Participant 1 said that this could serve as a significant deterrent to those who seek to harass Canadian citizens. Participant 1 said a lack of action on this front sends the dangerous signal that serious crimes can go unpunished, and that people can get away with murder.

Participant 1 called on the Canadian government to collaborate with its international partners to strengthen the universal jurisdiction framework to eliminate places of refuge for the worst perpetrators.

## Participant 2

Participant 2 said that a formalized process to protect Canadian citizens working on international human rights issues is required, suggesting that it would be prudent to use a variety of relevant measures including security and intersectional feminist measures.

Participant 2 said it appears that the Sri Lankan government feels that it can interfere in Canadian decisions. Participant 2 said this is demonstrated by the Sri Lankan government's condemnation of the Canadian Prime Minister's remarks on Tamil Genocide Awareness Day and the events that followed. Participant 2 said that these events indicate disregard for Canadian sovereignty, pose direct challenges to the powers of the Canadian government, and serve as precedent for interfering in the Canadian government's recognition of important issues and events.

Participant 2 noted that many groups have urged the Canadian government to initiate proceedings at the International Court of Justice. Participant 2 said that the Tamil Rights Group has formally requested the Canadian government's support of its submission to the International Criminal Court. Participant 2 said that this support would send a strong and clear message that Canada will not ignore breaches of international law.

## Participant 3

Participant 3 said that Canada should formally recognize the Tamil genocide at an official level. Participant 3 explained that currently, the Tamil genocide is recognized at the federal level through a motion of the House of Commons, but not officially by the Canadian government. Participant 3 said that such official recognition would send a powerful message to the Sri Lankan government and limit its ability to interfere in Canadian democracy through falsehoods. Participant 3 said that the Sri Lankan government enjoys a sense of impunity because they feel that what they did was right, but it was a genocide. Participant 3 said that official recognition would in many ways stop Sri Lankan interference in Canada's democracy, particularly in respect of the Tamil Canadian community. Participant 3 expressed their hope that Canada will use the many bilateral measures available to it to ensure Sri Lanka is held accountable.

## Participant 4

Participant 4 said that global diplomacy is not absolute and that comments made by foreign governments must be reasonable and within reason. Participant 4 said that Canada must review and undertake informed consideration of such statements before providing its official response.

Participant 4 said that a national foreign interference commissioner or an independent agent of Parliament should be tasked with responding to foreign interference. Participant 4 said that such independence is required for accountability. Participant 4 said that the person(s) filling this role should, among other things, work with intelligence agencies to develop threat assessments and engage in outreach to affected persons and communities.

## Participant 5

Participant 5 observed that the current sanctions do not seem to work, stating that they appear to provide inadequate deterrence to stop the Sri Lankan government from interfering in Canadian affairs. Participant 5 referred to the Sri Lankan government's involvement in Canada's Tamil Genocide Awareness Week Act and the Brampton Tamil genocide memorial as examples of the failure of the deterrence approach.

Participant 5 suggested that a task force be struck to investigate Sri Lanka's Canadian asset holdings and to consider whether other high-ranking state officials should be added to the sanctions list. Participant 5 suggested that this task force also be charged with ongoing monitoring and deterrence efforts in respect of Sri Lanka's efforts to interfere in Canadian affairs.

Participant 5 said the Canadian government should put pressure on the International Monetary Fund to put stricter regulations on the release of funds intended for military spending by Sri Lanka, including seeking a commitment from the Sri Lankan government regarding the intended use of the funds.