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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger





## Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, February 7, 2023

• (1200)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to meeting number 50 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to continue its study on foreign election interference.

Today we have with us Mr. David Mulroney, Mr. Charles Burton and, on Zoom, Mr. Matthew Johnson from MediaSmarts.

We have made sure that the sound check and those kinds of things have been done.

Charles Burton is the senior fellow of the Centre for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. David Mulroney is a former ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, and I've mentioned Matthew Johnson, who is the director of education at MediaSmarts.

We will have up to five minutes for opening comments. I will just remind all members and our guests that all comments should be made through the chair.

With that, Mr. Mulroney, you have up to five minutes. Welcome to PROC.

**Mr. David Mulroney (Former Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, As an Individual):** Thank you.

I've travelled to Ottawa today because I believe the topic under discussion, PRC interference in our elections, is an increasingly serious problem and a key component of a broader campaign that threatens our sovereignty and the safety of our citizens. I worry that we have yet to address this threat with the urgency it deserves.

I've followed your discussions carefully and have heard some members ask why we are focusing on China. It's because China is a formidable military and economic power that, as a matter of policy, infiltrates and undermines organizations abroad perceived to be a threat to the Communist Party; it's because China is also the focus of concerns about political interference in the U.S., the U.K., Australia and New Zealand; it's because I believe that Beijing's ambitions and capabilities are growing; and it's because many of the victims of PRC interference in Canada are members of Han Chinese, Uighur and Tibetan diaspora communities that Beijing threatens with seeming impunity.

Beijing's tools include bribery, disinformation, collusion with criminal gangs and the ever-present threat of hostage-taking. It is increasingly sophisticated in its intimidation of elected officials who dare to speak the truth to Canadians.

Here in Canada, Beijing recruits proxies to parrot its talking points; to expand its influence in media, on college campuses and in government; and to launder its illicit financial contributions. The party's objective is to transform Canada into a compliant country that perpetually looks over its shoulder to be sure what it says and does meets Beijing's approval and that looks the other way when Beijing's extraterritorial reach extends into our communities.

Beijing's objective is a degree of influence—in our democracy, our economy, our foreign policy and even in daily life in some of our communities—beyond the ambitions of any other country. This is furthered by propagation of the falsehood that simply speaking up about PRC interference is itself racist and anti-Chinese.

Beijing's Canada policy is being advanced aggressively. Although it's not too late to push back, the longer we delay, the more difficult the task becomes.

I believe we need to do four things.

First, we must understand that China is the primary threat when it comes to foreign interference in Canada. Therefore, our defences, including election security, must be designed to counter techniques favoured by Beijing, such as the use of proxies.

Second, we should therefore act now to create a registry of foreign agents, something that would simply require transparency of those who disburse funds for, lobby for, or speak for foreign states in Canada. We must empower our security agencies and police to identify and bring to justice those who fail to do so. We need to hold current and former elected officials and public servants to higher standards of transparency, accountability and loyalty.

Third, Canadian police need to be more present in diaspora communities, better informed about PRC interference, and be enabled to act if they are to protect people who are being harassed and silenced by the Chinese state here in Canada.

Fourth, we must be prepared to expel Chinese diplomats involved in interference or harassment. Our failure to do so only encourages increasingly brazen meddling. This will trigger retaliation, but we must make it clear that expulsion is the inevitable consequence of such hostile behaviour.

A defining characteristic of a truly sovereign nation is the ability to shield its citizens and its institutions from foreign interference.

Thank you.

• (1205)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Burton, please go ahead.

**Dr. Charles Burton (Senior Fellow, Centre for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, As an Individual):** Thank you.

I heartily endorse everything that Mr. Mulroney has just said, and I'd like to go on to the serious allegations made in media reports that Chinese diplomats in Canada or other agents of China's Communist Party regime have been complicit in unlawful actions to influence the results of the 2019 and 2021 Canadian federal elections.

First of all, foreign embassies' expressing of their government's views on Canadian politics and our politicians is consistent with their diplomatic function, although I'd prefer that they didn't do that.

The Canadian embassy to China, on both of my diplomatic postings there earlier in my career, was doing the same sort of thing. I was involved in furthering Canada's foreign policy mandate to promote human rights, democratization and good governance abroad, such as by implementing Canadian government programming to encourage the Government of China to bring China's legislative and judicial system into compliance with the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including by holding free and fair elections at all levels of the Chinese government.

The difference is that what Canada does in this regard is done openly and transparently, whereas China's approach, as CSIS defines it, is: "purposely covert and malign", designed to deceptively influence and corrupt Canada's national policies, officials, research institutions and democratic processes.

This is very much in line with the distinctive political culture of the People's Republic of China as it has developed since the party was established by Chairman Mao and his cohort of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries over a hundred years ago. Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, along with Chairman Mao, has identified that his party possesses what he refers to as three treasures of the dharma, *fabao*, or, as they are sometimes translated, magical weapons. These are party building, armed struggle and the United Front.

The party has a United Front Work Department, consisting of a comprehensive work bureaucracy of over 40,000 people plus a much larger number of agents in foreign countries and within China who collaborate with them. The point of the United Front Work Department is to secretly develop and implement a strategy of carefully crafted deception about the true intentions of the Chinese Com-

munist Party. It engages in a massive program of influence peddling, disinformation and coercion to suppress all voices in Canada critical of the party's domestic and international policy. As it says on their website, its mandate is to rally as many allies as possible in order to defeat a common enemy.

As secretary of the Chinese embassy's Chinese Communist Party branch, the ambassador of China to Canada oversees this activity. Last December 23., for your reference, I sent the clerk of this committee a note listing 18 recent reports and journal articles that provide authoritative data on how this works in Canada and abroad.

Finally, let me note that over the weekend I pulled out my copy of Global Affairs Canada's publication entitled "Diplomatic, Consular and Other Representatives in Canada". I counted up the numbers of diplomats accredited to Canada by various countries. Japan has 46 people here. India has 35. The U.K. has 23. China has 146 diplomats accredited to Canada. It does make me wonder if a significant proportion of China's exceptionally large diplomatic cohort here are engaged primarily in United Front Work, monitoring agents involved in influence peddling, disinformation and coercion.

I would imagine that CSIS would know the answer to that question, and if so, I do hope that CSIS will be prepared to share with this committee that information about the United Front work mandate of the Chinese diplomats here in Canada

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Johnson, you have up to five minutes.

Welcome.

• (1210)

**Mr. Matthew Johnson (Director of Education, MediaSmarts):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

For the past few years, barely a day has gone by without disinformation making the headlines. Whether it's doctored videos of politicians or conspiracy theories about vaccines, it affects our health, our democracy and even our ability to tell what's real and what isn't. According to one recent study, two-thirds of Canadians consider it to be a major threat to our country.

Nor can we hope to outgrow this problem. Young people are not necessarily better able to recognize misinformation or disinformation than their elders and are more likely to encounter it in formats that make verification more difficult, such as videos, social network posts and podcasts.

While governments and industry are taking steps to address the issue, without a national commitment to digital media literacy, their efforts will have limited effect.

Digital media literacy education has repeatedly been shown to be an effective way of limiting the impact of disinformation, and Canada has long been a pioneer in this field. Today, however, we've fallen behind. In Canadian schools, digital media literacy is often introduced late, relegated to optional subjects, or taught as separate topics, such as online safety, misinformation or film studies, rather than as an integrated discipline.

Adult learners might have access to only a patchwork of mostly local programs aimed at teaching basic digital skills. A recent report from the Open Society Institute underlined this decline, finding that Canada now ranks seventh in their media literacy index.

Finland, the top-ranked country in the study, provides the kind of model that Canada once did. The focus on digital media literacy in that country is a direct result of concerns about foreign, particularly Russian, disinformation.

What can Canada learn from their example?

First is the importance of integrating digital media literacy across the curriculum, both as its own subject and in existing subjects. Rather than isolating it in one course or focusing on a single issue such as fake news, the Finnish curriculum takes a comprehensive approach, from teaching how to recognize misleading statistics in math class, to analyzing the visual appeal of ads or memes in art. Whether it's understanding how algorithms use our personal information to target us with election ads, recognizing bad-faith arguments, or learning how to identify and question our own biases and act as responsible sharers of information, Canadians need a full range of digital media literacy skills to be engaged and informed citizens.

Digital media literacy has consistently been shown to be effective in building resiliency to disinformation. One recent study found that participants who reported studying critical thinking activities and media literacy in school were 26% less likely to believe in conspiracy theories, while other research has found that education in media literacy makes people more likely to verify information and less likely to share misinformation.

Most recently, a task force on disinformation on the war in Ukraine identified the need to educate people about disinformation and media literacy as one of their 10 recommendations.

While curriculum in Canada is, of course, a provincial and territorial responsibility, there is room for the federal government to establish national standards for digital media literacy. On a broader scale, there's an urgent need to adopt a national digital media literacy strategy. All sectors and levels of government can collaborate to support equitable access; promote engaged citizenship and close the digital divide; provide adequate funding to develop, deliver and evaluate digital media literacy programs; and adapt those programs to meet the needs of everyone in Canada.

In order to be critical and engaged citizens, the youth in our research say they need to be able to make free and informed choices about what information platforms collect about them and how it is used, and to know how those platforms' algorithms decide what content to show them.

Digital media literacy is not going to be the only solution for disinformation, but it will be part of any successful solution. While regulation, legislation and platform policies are all likely to be parts of the solution as well, none of those will be possible without a populace that is sufficiently well informed and engaged to demand and make use of them.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll start with our six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

**Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my first question to Mr. Mulroney.

We have repeatedly seen the Prime Minister and Liberal cabinet ministers and MPs downplay Beijing's interference in our elections. Even at this committee on November 1, a member of this committee, a parliamentary secretary speaking on behalf of the government, said that it makes her wonder why there is such a focus on China, notwithstanding that CSIS has identified China as Canada's most significant foreign interference threat actor.

Do statements such as those from the parliamentary secretary give you any confidence that this is a government that takes Beijing's interference in our elections seriously?

• (1215)

**Mr. David Mulroney:** One of the reasons I wanted to come today was to talk about China, because I noticed that discussion on where China fits in. People focus on Russia and other threats, and they are all threats. However, China is categorically different, and we need to understand that.

I was reading something that the director general of MI5, the British internal security agency, said. He said that Russian interference has an effect like a bout of bad weather. You don't want it, but that's what it's like. Chinese interference is like climate change. It is much more systemic. It's based on the large financial reserves that China has. It's delivered sometimes through the companies that China has seen invest in other countries. It has the capabilities. It also has the intent.

China, I believe, sees itself in a moment in the world when it has the potential to achieve global leadership. They believe the United States is a spent force. This is their moment. That is driving them to be bold and exceptionally threatening.

They are also very opportunistic and quick to pick the weakest target. My concern is that Canada not be the weakest target. Frankly, I have some worries on that score.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Thank you for that.

Mr. Mulroney, you were quoted in a November 7 Global News report by Sam Cooper that revealed that the Prime Minister was briefed by CSIS about a vast network of interference in the 2019 election. You said:

Canada is more exposed than other Western democracies to China's interference, and yet as the United States, UK and Australia strengthen their counter-interference laws and ramp up investigations into Xi's United Front networks, Ottawa remains strangely inactive.

Can you elaborate on that comment and speak to how this government is failing to respond in the way that it needs to on this level of interference by Beijing?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I believe that China picks the path of least resistance. Right now, when you look at the Five Eyes in particular, that's Canada. New Zealand isn't much further ahead, but we're not New Zealand. We're a more attractive target than New Zealand.

I think if you looked at the United States, Britain and Australia in the last two or three years, they have all had what they would consider a crisis in terms of Chinese penetration of their government and electoral systems—serious Chinese interference.

The Department of Justice and the FBI talk about opening two investigations a day. I think that was the quote I saw. First, they understand the threat and they're acting.

Australia has its registry of foreign agents, which requires transparency of Australians who act for foreign governments. The United States has the Foreign Agents Registration Act. It has also taken steps to prosecute people who have been found to be interfering in the business of Congress, and indeed congressional elections. The U.K. has identified a person who was very active in British politics and funded several politicians as a foreign agent working for China. Those things send messages.

Recently we also saw Britain leaning on the Chinese consulate in Manchester, England, after protesters were dragged into the consulate and beaten. The result was that five diplomats left the consulate.

They're taking action, but we aren't.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** I have a question for both Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Burton.

Before I get to that, just to clarify for the record, Mr. Mulroney, I thought I heard you say—to clarify that I heard you correctly—that Beijing's interference in our elections and its interference more broadly is growing.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** It is growing.

The allegations are what concerned me about the Global News report. I know that they're working on elaborating the details. The scope, if it is indeed 11 ridings just in the GTA, would be formidable and ambitious in any country. That growth and ambition and possibly a growth in capability are some things we have to take note of.

• (1220)

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Right.

Now for my question. The Liberals have often cited the establishment of the SITE task force and the critical election incident public protocol to say that they're taking action.

What do you say in response to that? Do you think that these mechanisms are sufficient to combat Beijing and other foreign interference in our elections?

That is to both Mr. Burton and Mr. Mulroney.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** Certainly, the disinformation that was launched in the recent election, in particular in Steveston—Richmond East at former MP Kenny Chiu, was largely in the Chinese language and largely inaccessible to people who are monitoring elections. In other words, we don't have the capability within the Canadian system to deal with activities in the diaspora community that could affect election results improperly.

In the case of Mr. Chiu, he didn't really have anywhere to turn with a complaint about being slandered and mischaracterized in the Chinese language. There was no means to identify where the source of the Chinese information in WeChat came from. There was nothing in the Conservative Party, or indeed within Elections Canada or even within the G7 rapid response mechanism in Global Affairs, that was able to come to terms with this, and he was unable to respond to these allegations, which were utterly false.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

When we hear the beep-beep, it's easiest if we let the next person go.

Mr. Turnbull, you have up to six minutes.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thanks to all the witnesses for your testimony today. I appreciated your opening remarks.

Mr. Mulroney, I totally concur that we have to take these foreign threats seriously. As I think both you and Mr. Burton stated, this is a campaign. It's over many years.

What's interesting to me is that from our conversations, somehow it seems as though the Conservatives just woke up to this threat during our committee meetings and proceedings just recently, whereas I think this has been a systemic issue for quite some time.

Would you not agree that these attempts at foreign interference in Canada's election process and other forms of foreign interference from China specifically have been ongoing for quite a number of years before 2019?

Mr. Burton, maybe we'll go to you first.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** Yes.

Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, since he came into power 10 years ago, has allocated a massive increase in resources towards the United Front Work Department, particularly their 9th and 10th bureaus, which are involved in engaging with persons of Chinese origin in foreign countries. There has been an increase.

Seeing that after what happened in the previous elections no Chinese diplomats have been declared *persona non grata* and no agents of the Chinese regime have been brought before a Canadian court to be accountable for alleged criminal activity emboldens the Chinese regime to do much more of it in the next election. In other words, the longer we remain passive and ineffective, the more encouraged they'll be that they can do more of this and get away with it.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you for that.

I understand that. It's becoming more acute over time in terms of the general assumption that we're essentially not meeting this threat.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** They're putting a lot more resources into it. It's becoming a much more central part of the Chinese government's foreign policy.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Got it.

Mr. Mulroney, I have a quick question for you, just to follow up on that

You mentioned the registry of foreign agents that you've recommended. I recently looked at an article that I think you were quoted in or that was published on a website here. Maybe you could give us a little bit more information on that, and then I want to share my time with my colleague MP O'Connell.

Could you speak to that a little bit more? How does that work?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** What would happen in the way it works in Australia is that if you.... The issues they are concerned with are that if you are disbursing money for a foreign entity that is either part of the government or controlled by the government, if you've lobbied for them—and some of that's already captured by lobbying legislation, but this is specifically for foreign governments—and if you communicate, if you deliver their talking points, you have to be transparent. If someone's on *Power & Politics* talking about foreign policy, Canadians deserve to know if that person's also being paid by a foreign state to say those things. They certainly need to know if a politician or a public servant, whether current, former or recently retired, is being paid.

The Australian government also works to identify entities that they think are representative of foreign states. There's an appeal process, but once that identification is made, if you work for them along those lines, you need to be transparent.

• (1225)

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

We'll go over to you, Ms. O'Connell.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, for sharing your time.

Madam Chair, through you, I'd ask that Mr. Cooper table with this committee my full quote, because I would hate for misinformation to be spread within this committee.

Mr. Burton, I want to speak quickly about the comments you made when you brought up the example of Mr. Kenny Chiu and the election campaign. Were you aware of the testimony we had in this committee from members of the critical election incident public protocol, who spoke about the process that our government put in place for the 2019 and 2021 elections for parties to have full security clearance?

They described the process by which parties could bring specific examples. You said that Mr. Chiu had no opportunity to find out what was happening because there's a difference between activity and impact. In fact, in the description of the process for the critical incident report, they spoke about how parties could, in fact, bring really specific examples to CSIS, to the national security community. They could brief the parties, and the parties could take action or inform their members.

Your comment that there was no process would have been the case under the previous government, but in this instance Mr. Chiu could have raised it with his party and his party could have brought it to the national security community. They could have provided a full briefing, but they didn't. We heard from the critical incident report that no instances were brought forward from the Conservative Party.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I think what happened in the case of Mr. Chiu was that on the same day that a poll came out that showed that the Conservatives might achieve a minority government, this massive campaign of disinformation on multiple Chinese-language websites directed at people in Canada appeared. It was a matter of gathering information.

I mobilized some friends in the Honk Kong community to go through the Internet to try to find out where it came from, and we failed to do so. I think it's really that it happened too fast, and immediately Mr. Chiu's numbers started to plummet as soon as the thing came out.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Perhaps the party should have brought that forward using that incident report.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to start off by giving the witnesses the opportunity to make any suggestions that they may have.

We spoke of Finland, especially in terms of its education and awareness programs. We also spoke of areas in which we should urgently and radically change tack. Many things are worrying me. Since 2019, I have been interested in the legitimacy and ethics aspect of the disclosure of interests process. As we have just seen, the cat is out of the bag.

In your article, Mr. Mulroney, you state that “for the activity to be lawful, there must be some form of disclosure that identifies the source of the material and on whose behalf it is being shared.”

You have surely heard the testimony given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on December 13. I would like to hear your take on what she said. I quote: “As for foreign interference in the 2019 elections, I did not have any information in that regard. I think you heard the Prime Minister about this”.

And yet we are talking about transparency and responsibility in matters of disclosure and the importance of setting aside partisan concerns. What should we do then? I am embarrassed by what is going on at the moment. People are watching us, and we have to show them that we must radically change tack so as to prevent the worst from happening.

I would like to know what you think.

• (1230)

[*English*]

**Mr. David Mulroney:** Thank you for that question. I have thought about that too.

I must say I've followed all of your proceedings. I listened to our officials, who spoke about the defences we have against interference. They are all very impressive and very capable people, and I know some of them, but I am left with a misgiving. My concern is that sometimes when we design something, we design what we want; we don't design with a view to what actually needs fixing. We don't look at the target. We are motivated by what we enjoy doing or want to do or think is best, without checking.

The impression I had after listening about our various defences was to think back in history to the 1930s, when France constructed the Maginot Line. They were not going to suffer what happened to them in World War I, so they were going to build defences that went from the borders in the low countries all the way along the borders of France to Spain. It was impregnable, and it gave the French great confidence. However, the Germans didn't follow that plan. They had another plan. They entered via the Ardennes, and France fell. It was a disaster because they had designed something as they saw fit.

I don't think we've designed entirely the right defences, and that's why my concern with proxies is so acute. I've heard your discussions. People quite legitimately admit that the use of proxies foils the system. The Prime Minister has talked about the consulate giving the money directly, but if someone doesn't give the money directly—if the consulate gives the money to someone, who then gives it to someone else, who then passes it on—the effect is as problematic. That's what we have to get at. We have to have other systems to back up the systems we have.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you.

I would like to carry on the discussion on this topic with Mr. Burton, who was nodding his head. What's more, during his testimony, he mentioned he agreed with Mr. Mulroney.

During those exchanges, I heard that we were a docile country and that we were just looking the other way. I did not hear the word lax but I may as well have.

What is going on with Canada? What is our big concern that is keeping us from taking action, given the knowledge and the tools that we have today and the education programs that we could offer?

What should I be saying to the residents of my riding? I would like to be able to answer their questions.

[*English*]

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I think there is a problem within Canada of a lot of influence from Chinese benefits going to people in positions of trust. When the Australian Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act came into effect in 2019, several former Australian politicians resigned from lucrative boards, including the former minister of international trade, Andrew Robb, who resigned from an \$880,000-a-year private consultancy with a Chinese billionaire who had achieved a 99-year lease on Port Darwin.

I do think this kind of legislation has a dampening effect on people who might feel that they need some funding for whatever purpose and that they can manage the conflict-of-interest aspect that may exist in it. I do think raising awareness of this and providing some mechanisms that ensure accountability is significant. That might encourage more champions within the government to take this matter more seriously and start pressing in cabinet for the necessary legislation to try to bring our Canadian practices and laws up to the standards of other nations.

That would include laws with regard to the transfer of classified technologies and dual-use military technologies to agents of a foreign state. We have a lot of trouble prosecuting these matters, because our laws are not as strong as those of the U.K. and the U.S. It's another area. There are just so many areas of concern about the challenge of China that we need to be able to address.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, you have up to six minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Chair. I'm going to direct my first questions to Mr. Johnson.

I appreciated your testimony today. As we're discussing all of this, what I hope we're all going to come back to, despite our political differences, is how we make sure our systems are strong enough and how we make sure that we're building trust within Canada and holding all systems to account so that people have faith in our processes. That's something that I'm really aware of.



You talked a lot about disinformation and how many people are being pulled into that world. They don't always have the tools that they require to evaluate it more objectively and understand where the source material is coming from. I definitely see that in my constituency, and I'm actually surprised in my role by how many people send me articles just to ask, "Is this true or not?" I am now given the capacity to decide for them, and that's not a role that I think an MP should take on.

You mentioned in your testimony the idea of having a national media literacy strategy to evaluate programs. Could you expand on that and what that role could potentially look like?

Within that, I'm also very curious about what sort of digital media literacy awareness we need to see focused. I represent a more rural and remote area of the world. Are there things that are specifically important for those communities and for indigenous communities? Those are two groups that I represent for which I'm particularly concerned about the impact of disinformation and how we get the proper tools to those communities to be able to address that problem in a meaningful way.

• (1235)

**Mr. Matthew Johnson:** Thank you. I'll start with the second part of that question.

Our model of digital media literacy is composed of four competencies. The first of these competencies is access, the ability to access digital media and other media as well. It is the one that underpins the other three competencies, which are to use, to understand and to engage with media. We see access as underpinning the other three because you can't do any of the other three if you do not have access. Access is also unique in that it is both a skill and a condition, because we need to provide full access to digital media to everyone in the country.

We know that as a country, Canada generally does have good Internet access, but we also know that there are pockets, places where Internet access is slow or unreliable. We know from our research with teachers that Internet access within schools is frequently unreliable, and that's undeniably a much bigger issue in rural areas, in remote areas, and among indigenous and northern communities.

We need to be committed to finishing the job of providing every Canadian with good-quality, reliable Internet access. Of course, that means in every school as well. We need to be teaching those access skills, because one of the issues is that many people do face barriers beyond simply being able to access it technically. In many cases, there are barriers caused by disability, language, poor literacy skills and of course poor digital literacy skills. Breaking down those barriers must be a component of digital literacy or a digital media literacy plan for the country.

Equitable access is certainly an important part. It's also really important to ensure that it is a whole-of-society plan, because we know that no one has grown up with these technologies. Adults are just as much in the position of needing to become more digital media literate as young people are. We can't kick the can down the road by only covering it in K-to-12 education.

Of course, we need to build a plan that draws connections between the different levels of government so that each level of gov-

ernment is playing a role in the strategy that makes sense and is complementary to the other ones.

Finally, digital media literacy programming for all sectors needs sustainable funding, so that we don't wind up in a situation that we've seen, when terrific programs got rolled out and either couldn't continue because funding ended or couldn't be maintained. We know that issues change, new concerns arise and new platforms become popular, so there needs to be a provision to make sure that programs that are being offered at all levels are maintained and updated on a regular basis.

• (1240)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I have 20 seconds. If you could add that on to my two minutes and 30 seconds, that would be great.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I want to take a moment to say that I'm really appreciating the pace at which we're speaking for the purpose of interpretation and the fact that one person is speaking and then the other person. I hope we can continue with this. That's very good. I want to commend you all for your good work.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I have many questions, so I will ask you to be brief in your answers.

I will start with you, Mr. Mulroney.

You are very active on social media. You stated that an example must be given from someone high up, such as the Prime Minister himself. Allow me to quote you:

[*English*]

But little will happen so long as the PM is fixated on demonizing domestic critics, fomenting ever deeper division at home. CCP couldn't be happier.

Could you explain why you said that?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** The thing that shaped my thinking about this was my experience on the Manley panel when we were deciding whether to extend the mission in Afghanistan. The mission was failing because Foreign Affairs was doing its thing and CIDA was doing its thing and the Canadian Forces were doing something else.

The panellists had a number of recommendations, and the government took them all. The first was that the Prime Minister had to lead. You can't get all of the uncoordinated and disparate parts of government to work together unless they have very firm and direct leadership. They are looking to see what is coming from on high, and I don't think they're seeing it clearly enough.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Do you believe that the Prime Minister is not doing enough currently to counter foreign interference efforts?

[*English*]

**Mr. David Mulroney:** Yes. I think his China policy took a long time getting on the right track. I think he was originally—he said it himself—naïve when it came to China, and the country has paid a price for that, but I haven't seen the actions to follow up on that new understanding, that new awareness of China.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Burton, you have said that Chinese influence being peddled by the United Front Work Department was particularly profitable to influential people. We have learned that Chinese businessmen have given \$1 million to the foundation set up by Mr. Trudeau's father. We also learned that a lot of money is being given to universities.

Is this the type of influence that is being sought currently by the Chinese communist regime in order to pave the way so that it can get involved in Canadian business and indirectly influence our politicians?

[*English*]

**Dr. Charles Burton:** Yes. With regard to that particular instance some years ago, I believe that the person who coordinated the joint donation to the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation was a member of the standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which is the lead United Front coordinating body in China. He was attending a fundraiser for the Prime Minister in the home of a Canadian of Chinese origin. He was not a Canadian, and therefore could not donate to the Prime Minister.

Everybody else, I believe all of them, looking to me from the photographs that appeared in mainland overseas Chinese newspapers—in other words, the photographs of who was at the party—initially appeared in China, not in Canada. On the Prime Minister's schedule, I believe they were identified as private meetings. They were all Chinese faces. I imagine they all could well have given the maximum allowable under law.

The question is on this issue of proxies, as Mr. Mulroney pointed out. It's extremely difficult for us to note. We certainly cannot make allegations against Canadians without evidence for that, and we don't have any evidence.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** You also mentioned having noticed a massive disinformation campaign deployed in the Chinese language. During the most recent elections, newspapers reported that a minority Conservative government might be elected. You say that unfortunately, Kenny Chiu was probably one of the victims of that campaign.

You therefore sincerely believe that Chinese interference influenced the election results in certain ridings. Is that correct?

• (1245)

[*English*]

**Dr. Charles Burton:** Is that for me?

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** It's for both of you.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** Obviously we don't know why people put an X next to whatever candidate they put it to—what factors inform that decision. However, within Canada, with the exception of the Falun Gong media—the Epoch Times, which I do not regard as a reliable source of information—they are all well identified as being under the control of the People's Republic of China. There are no Canadian-Chinese language newspapers that do not reflect the views of China, and—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** According to you, Mr. Burton, did that have an effect on the election results?

[*English*]

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I'm sorry; I didn't hear the translation.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Do you believe that changed the results of the election?

**Dr. Charles Burton:** My subjective judgment was that the impact was enormous.

People like to believe negative things. They're much more appealing than positive things. My personal view is that if it had not been for that disinformation—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** —Mr. Chiu would still be in Parliament today.

**The Chair:** Respectfully, we can make the beep-beep go longer, if that would help. I just don't think it helps. I will leave that with all of us, because we are able to do well.

Ms. O'Connell, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, I would like to ask this of Mr. Mulroney.

During your tenure as ambassador, did you ever make a recommendation for a registry for China to the government that you served?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** No, I did not.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** What was the reason for that, or when did you realize that perhaps that was a mistake and that something of this nature should be implemented in Canada?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** When I was ambassador to China, my focus was on China. When I retired and I wrote a book and travelled across the country and talked to people, I began to see that our China problem wasn't in China. It was now in Canada.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** But as ambassador, would you not—

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I talked constantly about the importance of security, threats to information and the need for ministers and members of Parliament to guard their documents safely. That was a real focus for me. I met with all of the senior security people in Ottawa when I came back. We talked about what was happening, so now that was a priority for me.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Okay. Good.

What was the government of the day's reaction? What concrete steps were then put in place to deal with the security threats and to inform MPs and things like that?

**Mr. David Mulroney:** Again, I wasn't back in Canada for how elections were run—

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Sorry. Not just elections—

**Mr. David Mulroney:** —but I think the government was appropriately security conscious when they were in China. That's the only thing I could see—that when they came to China, they were appropriately security conscious, as were other governments.

I travelled to China with Mr. Chrétien and with Mr. Martin as well.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Okay, but you didn't have specific recommendations to the government of the day, based on what you saw in your role.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I had a lot of recommendations. I remember bringing together the economic deputy ministers and the defence and security deputy ministers to talk about the situation we were getting into back in 2010-11, when more than half of Canada saw China as this unlimited opportunity and the other half saw it as a threat. I said we need to integrate this now. I had some success in that, but not complete success.

I was very conscious of the security situation vis-à-vis China. I had also been assistant deputy minister for Asia in Ottawa when Mr. Chrétien was Prime Minister, and Mr. Martin, and I saw how the Chinese ambassador of the day worked then too. I was very vocal about that.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Right, but subsequent measures needed to be implemented so that they would remain in place for successive governments, and those legislative or regulatory changes didn't happen.

You mentioned the MP security or MP awareness. This was something I raised as a parliamentarian myself, that MPs get little to no briefings or training on how to even deal with that. Clearly, that issue persisted even past your time in flagging it.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** They always got a briefing from me.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Absolutely. Thank you.

Madam Chair, if I have time, I want to get to a question for Mr. Johnson.

You spoke about literacy. My colleague Ms. Blaney raised literacy and education, and if I have time, I'd like to quickly ask about legislation.

I as a Canadian found it very concerning and upsetting to know that, for example, hashtags could be hidden in codes and program-

ming for videos, and that Canadians wouldn't even know, unless they knew what to look for, that they themselves were being targeted. Is there a role for legislation, or also for governments, to require platforms or some sort of awareness for Canadians that if there are hidden hashtags, Canadians know they are being targeted? You can't just hide coding for specific groups to then share.

• (1250)

**Mr. Matthew Johnson:** I can't take a position on the specific legislation, but what I can say is this: There certainly is a role for appropriate legislation and regulation in addressing disinformation.

It is also not possible, as the British scholar Sonia Livingstone has said, to be literate in something that is not legible. In order for Canadians to be able to critically engage with the media that we consume, it needs to be at a certain level of transparency, whether that transparency has to do with making things like hidden hashtags clear or whether it is about making clear how algorithmic decisions are made in delivering or recommending content.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you.

I have very little time, but in terms of the use of local media by foreign state actors to somewhat legitimize content, is that part of the literacy program you would also recommend?

**Mr. Matthew Johnson:** I would say that the literacy program that we recommend and the programs that we currently deliver would address that. It wouldn't be targeted. It's not targeted specifically at that, but certainly any digital media literacy program is going to address how to evaluate whether or not a source of news is reliable and how to read news critically.

**Ms. Jennifer O'Connell:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to talk about the foreign agents registry toolbox.

My question is for both witnesses.

Yesterday, Minister Mendicino testified before the Special Committee on the Canada-People's Republic of China Relationship. He spoke of the toolbox, but he didn't really answer the question when asked when the tools would be made available. I would like to know what you think about an issue that was raised: the minister said that he was worried about perhaps offending people because of their nationality or the current situation. He also spoke of stereotypes.

At the end of the day, is the Canadian government is trying to keep some information on Chinese interference on the down-low so as not to offend the Chinese-Canadian community, either because it does not want to foster a feeling of stigmatization, or because of fear of retaliation?

Both of you may take all the time you need to answer this question.

[English]

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I saw those comments, and I must say that I was discouraged when I saw them.

There are a couple of things to consider. The most important is that a with lot of what China is doing in its interference, the first victims are in the diaspora community. The Chinese state will say to a Chinese student at a university, “We heard that you were speaking about independence in your class, and that could be bad for your family back home”, or they say to Uighurs, “You’ll never see your mother again if you keep this up”, so in terms of not acting and finding reasons not to act, by all means be careful. Be sensitive and be respectful in terms of how you do it. The very fact that you announce that you’re doing it already sends a message to the Chinese, a very important message, a message we are not sending.

I would announce the registry. Then do the consultations and hear from the Chinese community, but also hear from the Tibetan community, hear from the Uighur community, hear from Falun Gong activists, who are all being persecuted here in Canada by agents of the Chinese state who increasingly act like it’s a little piece of China.

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I think that certainly the legislation is by no means directed towards one group. It’s called “foreign”, so any foreign power that’s involved in trying to interfere in Canadian affairs by providing benefits to people in a position of trust in the civil service or Parliament should be made accountable. It’s not that you would simply declare benefits that you’ve received from one specific foreign state, but from any foreign state, so it’s even. The resistance to this idea—

• (1255)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mrs. Blaney, you have two minutes and 45 seconds.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

The question I’m going to ask this time is for Mr. Mulroney.

I found it interesting. You talked about the four points that you thought were priorities. Of course, there was the registry for the foreign agents and then having Canadian police participate more in ethnic communities. I believe I got that right. I’m just curious about how those two things could potentially intersect, because I’ve heard things from different ethnic communities—for example, the Uighur community—that have brought forward concerns or tried to bring forward concerns to the RCMP and police, and it’s like they just get passed around. Nobody really knows how to address that issue, but the threat is real in Canada.

I’m just wondering how those two things could coincide and support one another so that we have more supports for people in our

own country who are under those threats that you both have mentioned so clearly.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I don’t disagree with Mr. Mendicino’s idea of a tool box. We need the registry, but we need other things, and I think we need to train our police to be more aware of what’s happening.

The work that Charles is doing in going into the Chinese language press and hearing what people are saying and doing is more important than we think. We think that’s obvious, but a lot of people aren’t aware of what’s being said here in Canada, so we need to have police who can do that, who can understand the pressures that these people are under. Again, they are people who have every right to expect the protections of the police instead of being told to go check with the Chinese police, as if they somehow don’t deserve our protection. We need to do a much better job, but I see that as a separate priority itself.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I guess when you look at all the things we’re talking about—the threats to our political systems, the influence that particular groups can have—I’m just wondering.... You stated very clearly that we need to have that foreign agents registry put into place, make that stance and then get onto the consulting.

To both of you, who would be at the top of the line to do the consulting with to make sure that this happens? What will that action do to impact China and what it’s doing in Canada?

**Dr. Charles Burton:** The Canadian Coalition on Human Rights in China is an organization that I’ve been advising since 2005. Coordinated by Amnesty International and consisting of Tibetans, diaspora groups, Uighurs, Falun Gong, democracy activists and many others, they have been requesting a proper government agency that would address their harassment by agents of a foreign state. There are some Hong Kong activists who get threatened with rape, young women who really should be able to have someone there who would address this and give them a sense that they’re safe again.

In terms of foreign influence, it would be important to reassure these Chinese groups and other groups that the legislation is not requiring that they all register with the state and that they all have to report all of their connections with China. It’s about people in positions of trust who are receiving benefits from a foreign state and who should publicly declare it.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We’ll now do a quick two-minute round, starting with Mr. Cooper.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Burton, CSIS advised the Prime Minister that when it comes to foreign interference, the policy of government should be “grounded in transparency and sunlight”. Repeatedly throughout the fall, we have seen talking points from this government that the 2019 and 2021 elections were free and fair and that they weren’t compromised. Then they rely on or cite the independent election panel findings, even though it was the finding of the election panel that the “overall” integrity of the election was not compromised—something very different.

In the face of that, is it your opinion that this government is being transparent with Canadians about the degree of interference from Beijing in our elections?

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I think CSIS, as compared with the intelligence services of our like-minded allies, is much less forthcoming about what's going on. Therefore, we need more information about what they know about what sort of interference may have taken place. I don't know the basis for the judgment that everything was okay and didn't affect the election. I'd like more detailed information to be able to make that assessment.

You know, when you look at something like the balloon incident, on February 15 the entire Congress will be getting a security briefing on this matter. I would like to see the entire House of Commons get security briefings so that our members of Parliament have a better understanding of the truth of matters and can form legislation and make decisions accordingly.

• (1300)

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Go ahead, Mr. Mulroney.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** I think the bar is way too low when you say that it has to affect the outcome of the election. Affecting one constituency disenfranchises Canadians and is a big win for China. Interfering in 11 is a major, major aggressive step by China.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** So the threshold is too high.

**Mr. David Mulroney:** It's far too low.

**Mr. Michael Cooper:** Sorry. It's far too low. That's right.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cooper and Mr. Mulroney.

Ms. Sahota, you have up to two minutes.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the panellists today. I think you've provided really great information. Like me, probably many members around this table are really intrigued by the idea of implementing a registry not only for foreign actors but also for disinformation. Those ideas have both been presented to this committee before as well.

What I do want to know from you, though, is this. Canada has a diverse community, with huge diasporas from many countries. We've heard from CSIS about countries playing an active role in interference in our elections. However, I again quote the Chief Electoral Officer that with the threshold we currently have, any interfer-

ence that has been happening for many past elections has not risen to the point of having a material impact on the election.

Having said that, I still want to know your opinion. I heard some comments about looking at images of fundraisers and seeing Chinese faces and making the assumption that perhaps those Chinese faces could have been influenced by foreign state actors. Don't we have to be a little bit careful, living in a country with so many different multicultural communities, that we don't level accusations and don't hinder the participation of communities from those different minority groups in the electoral process?

**Dr. Charles Burton:** I can take that one.

At that particular fundraiser, the presence of a representative of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference raised flags for me, because that's the coordinating body for United Front Work, but I absolutely agree with you. In our country, we want to have full representation of all of the ethnic groups that make up our nation, and we want to encourage more Canadians of Chinese origin to actively participate in our politics and represent their communities.

However, these representatives have to be committed to liberal democracy and Canada, and not have potential mixed loyalties to what they refer to as the motherland, which is not Canada.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Johnson, I see your hand is up. I'm sorry, because we've run out of time, but if you want to provide us with something in writing, I am sure committee members would welcome that—and from all witnesses—so please do not feel that the conversation has to end. You can provide information to us.

I want to thank you, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Burton, for giving us your time and for being with us today.

Committee members, really quickly, we had a reception today. We'll have an informal reception on Thursday, which means we've brought a couple of snacks in for our guests. I want to make sure that it is suitable for the clerk to be able to order those snacks so that we have them available again on Thursday.

Your motion has been passed for your budget. Brilliant.

With that, have a great day. See you on Thursday. The meeting is adjourned.





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