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Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Good evening, colleagues, witnesses, guests, and subs sitting in—Mr. Barrett.

Welcome to meeting number eight of the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations. Pursuant to the motion adopted on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, the committee is meeting on its study of Canada-China relations.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid mode. It is also being televised and will be available on the House of Commons website.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are participating by video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When members are asking you questions, however, you don't need to wait for me to recognize you during that period. At the end of their time, I'll have to cut off whoever is speaking, as you'll see.

[Translation]

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Please speak slowly and clearly.

[English]

When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute, please.

I'd now like to welcome two former ambassadors of Canada to the People's Republic of China: the Honourable John McCallum and Mr. Robert G. Wright. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Wright, I'll go to you first for a two-minute statement, please, and then I'll go to Mr. McCallum.

Please proceed.

Mr. Robert Wright (Former Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, As an Individual): Thank you for inviting me to participate tonight. I'm happy to be here.

My name is Rob Wright. I was a career public servant for more than 38 years. I served in China as ambassador from 2005 to 2009. Before that, I served as ambassador to Japan from 2001 to 2005, and before that I was deputy minister of international trade for six years, from 1995 to 2001.

My time in China was mostly when Stephen Harper was prime minister. Hu Jintao was president and general secretary in China while I was there, and Wen Jiabao was the premier.

I retired in May 2009, eleven and a half years ago, and I'm fully retired. I have been since that time. I have done no work in China or Canada since my retirement, although I keep an interest in China, of course, and I am a senior fellow at the China Institute of the University of Alberta. I give public talks from time to time. If somebody asks me to talk about public service or about China, I'm always happy to do so, but other than that I haven't been engaged at all in any commercial activity.

That's the extent of my opening statement, Mr. Chairman.

• (1835)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Wright.

Now we'll go to Mr. McCallum.

This is not your first time at committee. You have five minutes. Please proceed.

Hon. John McCallum (Former Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Good evening, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

I will be giving my presentation in English, but I would obviously be pleased to answer any questions in French.

[English]

I commend the committee for its engagement and interest in the evolving Canada-China relationship. I thought I would outline, in respect of my time as ambassador, what I understood to be the objectives of the Canadian government policy in China and how they changed during my tenure.

I want to highlight for the committee, however, some limitations on what I can say here today. First, I don't intend to offer much comment on events or issues that are currently in front of the government and this Parliament. I'm not of the view that governments are anxiously waiting for the policy recommendations of retired ambassadors, ministers and others.

Second, the extradition process for Meng Wanzhou is now before the courts, so I won't be commenting on that.

Finally, I should say that I'm here on my own behalf and that my comments are purely personal.

In March 2017, I went to China as ambassador with a double mandate from the government: to expand our relationship with China and to voice Canada's concerns on values and human rights.

I'll give you three examples of our actions in the area of human rights.

First, I am proud that in 2018 Canada spearheaded a letter from 18 ambassadors to the party secretary of Xinjiang province to request a meeting on the subject of the treatment of Uighurs.

Second, in July 2017, then Governor General Johnston had a 15-minute conversation with President Xi Jinping, in which he asked the Chinese government to allow the jailed Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo to be moved from his prison in China for medical treatment in Germany. Xi Jinping said that Liu Xiaobo was too sick to travel, and it turned out that Xi Jinping was right, because we learned later that Liu Xiaobo had died on that same day.

My third example relates to China's arrest of human rights lawyers in 2015, known as the "709" crackdown. I particularly remember Li Wenzu, the very brave wife of one of the lawyers, who had not had any contact with her husband for more than two years and who told me she was concerned because her husband had a stubborn streak. She met our Prime Minister and also Angela Merkel. We made representations to the Chinese regarding these human rights lawyers, and eventually Li Wenzu's husband was released.

We addressed security issues on a case-by-case basis, with our focus on what we thought to be Canada's national interest. On the one hand, we worked with the Chinese on major criminal cases and on efforts to reduce the production and export of amphetamines to Canada. On the other hand, we turned down Chinese requests for an extradition treaty. We also turned down a good number of official visa applications in cases where we felt that the applicants' activities in Canada might not be in the national interest.

I believe I fulfilled the dual mandate I received from the government. We were active on human rights issues and awake to Canada's security concerns, while at the same time pursuing a policy of enhanced engagement with China. This approach permitted a

positive Canada-China relationship. Both sides were keen to pursue mutually beneficial opportunities while also speaking frankly but respectfully on the issues that divided us.

Everything changed in December 2018, with the arrest of Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver, resulting from a U.S. extradition request, closely followed by the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in China. From that moment onwards, the top priority of the government and of me as ambassador was to secure the release of the two Michaels. I was in frequent touch with their family members as well as with ambassadors of like-minded governments.

As one of relatively few Canadians who have actually visited the two Michaels in detention, I was determined to do whatever I could to secure their release. On more than one occasion, I tried to convince the Chinese that if they were unable to release Kovrig and Spavor, they should at least improve their living conditions.

Sadly, as you all know, Canadian efforts in this area have so far been unsuccessful.

• (1840)

The Chair: Mr. McCallum, excuse me. I'm afraid your five minutes are up. Perhaps you'll have opportunities during the question and answer period. Obviously, you'll have time to add more.

Now we'll go to the first round of questions, beginning with Mr. Genuis for six minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McCallum, I'd like to ask if you have any regrets about actions you took or statements you made as ambassador. Is there anything for which you wish to take this opportunity to apologize, either to Parliament or to the Canadian people?

Hon. John McCallum: I think I've done some useful things in my career, such as in the case of Syrian refugees, as defence minister under Chrétien when we said no to Iraq, and concerning Nelson Mandela's citizenship, but I've never claimed to have led an error-free career.

I have made a number of errors over the years, and since you ask me, I will mention one. I was invited to a meeting with Chinese government officials in the summer of 2019, and my purpose was to try to get them to release the two Michaels or at least improve their living conditions. I painted a dark picture of plummeting support for China among Canadians and I also mentioned as part of this darkness an impending election. In hindsight, I regret having spoken of the election. I don't think it was appropriate. That is one misstatement that I believe I made.

I don't think it made any difference, because at the end of the day the Chinese refused to release or even improve the living conditions of our two detainees, but that was an error I made. I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. McCallum. I appreciate your humility in acknowledging it. I would question the assertion that it didn't make a difference. The efforts of the Chinese government to influence Canadian society and Canadian politics are well documented.

Do you think it is reasonable to suppose that your intimation that you think a Liberal government would be better for the Chinese state than a Conservative government could have influenced the direction of Chinese government influence operations?

Hon. John McCallum: I don't really know what they do. They don't confide in me. I have said to you that I thought that was a misstatement. It was something I should not have said; it could have been subject to misinterpretation.

It had no effect, in the sense that my sole objective was to build a case to favour the two Michaels, and it had no effect on that. It was still an inappropriate statement; I acknowledge that point.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Minister.

I wonder whether you regret any of the comments you made with respect to the Meng Wanzhou case.

Hon. John McCallum: You're probably referring to a press conference I gave in Markham, where I tried to describe the overall situation. I began by saying that we believed the two Michaels had been arbitrarily detained and that we were working with other countries to try to get them released as quickly as possible.

I also gave some description of the Meng Wanzhou case. I made some comments about how the burden of proof is lower for extradition cases, so that went against her, but I also commented on some of the legal arguments she might have, which I just picked up from the media.

The case was not at that point before the courts, so I'm not sure that what I said was inappropriate. I know some people thought it was, but I was really just trying to give to this group the overall lay of the land of the situation with regard to China at that time.

• (1845)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay, Minister, just so your comments are understood, it sounds like you're saying that you maintain that the comments you made in that press conference about Meng Wanzhou were acceptable. I just want your meaning to be fully understood.

Hon. John McCallum: The comment about the election was, I think, inappropriate. The overall comments about the situation with

regard to detainees and Meng Wanzhou in Markham I thought were okay.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you for clarifying your views on that.

Do you believe that the United Front division of the Chinese Communist Party is operating in Canada?

Also, much has been written about the phenomenon of elite capture, whereby western elites are brought under the influence of the Chinese government through gifts and other enticements. Do you believe that the committee should be concerned about the phenomenon of elite capture in Canada by the Chinese Communist Party and by the United Front Work Department?

Hon. John McCallum: I assume you are implying that I might be one of those elites, but I assure you that—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Do you believe the committee should be concerned about that phenomenon, Mr. McCallum? I wasn't asking about you in the context of that question.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay.

Certainly I think that sometimes Chinese people come to Canada for inappropriate purposes, and that is why we turned down a number of visas. We felt they were likely to be doing inappropriate things in Canada of various kinds, as you describe.

I think there is this idea of requiring former ambassadors to list the clients for whom they work. I think that right now we are not able to divulge the names of our clients, but if that law were in place, we would comply.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We'll now go to Mr. Oliphant for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both Mr. Wright and Mr. McCallum for joining us tonight. We're honoured by your presence.

I'm going to start with Mr. McCallum. I just want to note that you're an accomplished academic and a practising economist. You're a seasoned politician and a long-time public servant. You served as Canada's diplomat in complex and difficult appointments. I want to begin by thanking you for that life of work.

Unlike my Conservative colleague, I am not going to interrogate you. I'm actually less interested in the past than I am in the future. You don't report to us, but what we would like you—both of you—to do tonight is to help us. We genuinely want to learn from you so that our committee can give a report to Parliament and to government that can actually further the relationship that Canada has with China.

I've been to China twice, once when you were an ambassador—and that was a good trip—and once when you weren't ambassador—and that was an okay trip. You've been to China many times, and you served for almost two years as our ambassador, so you know more than I do and, I think, more than anybody on the committee.

With the work of this committee, we've been hearing two stories.

On the one hand, we hear about the importance of engaging with China economically, socially and culturally. We hear about it in terms of the need of our farmers and their markets. We hear about it in terms of the relationship between scientists, researchers, academics and entrepreneurs, who want a relationship with China, and we hear about how that is a reality in today's world due to their sheer size and impact.

On the other hand, we hear that they don't follow the rules. They're not predictable or dependable. The international rules-based order is not being followed. It's not a level playing field. We have concerns about how we are to accomplish that engagement, importantly, and deal with a partner who doesn't play by the same rules we would.

We're at the point now where Canada is looking into the future to say, "How do we do that?" I'm wondering if, given your experience, you can advise us. I think the government is very clear. It's writing a new China policy. The China of 2016 is not the same as the China of 2020. Is there advice you can give to us on how to deal with that dilemma?

• (1850)

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you very much for your question, and I'm delighted to see some familiar faces again.

I think China is always a two-track issue. As I described in my comments, on the one hand, my job was to try to expand ties with China; on the other hand, it was to express our values on human rights.

I think over time that has evolved. Since 2018 or 2017, issues against China have increased substantially, primarily through our two detainees but also through other events. We now have more information about the Uighurs and about Hong Kong. You know the list.

I think at the end of the day, the government may or may not wish to take stronger measures vis-à-vis China. I'm not here to comment one way or the other on that, but I think that is one of the things the government is looking at. I think now that we're, thankfully, about to get a Biden administration, that could have an effect on the overall global direction in terms of China-U.S. and China-Western world relations. I think that is very important.

At the end of the day, though, I would just say that China will remain important to Canadian universities and Canadian farmers. I think we'll still want their tourists. Therefore, I don't think it's a question of closing down those economic activities, but it's always a case of balancing those two sides of China.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

Mr. Wright, I wonder if you want to add any comments on that.

Mr. Robert Wright: Sure. Let me start by saying that since I retired in 2009, China has changed remarkably. They have become more assertive. We've seen evidence of this in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. John McCallum has referred to the situation in Hong Kong and, of course, in Xinjiang province. Those are very worrying trends. China is much more willing now, it would seem, to use coercive diplomacy or even hostage diplomacy than they were at the time that I was there.

When I was there, I found the Chinese tough, difficult to deal with, but always open to input from Canadians. We had relatively easy access to whomever we wanted to talk to at that point in time. I'm not sure that situation is still the case today. I'm just not close enough to it to be able to say.

I do think we can pursue a relationship of closer economic cooperation and at the same time not be naive about the actions that China is taking here in Canada and around the world. We have the capacity to do that. We know that China is active in different areas that we're not comfortable with here in Canada. We know that they don't always play by the rules.

However, we can work with colleagues from other countries. We can develop multilateral approaches to deal with those difficulties and still engage economically and in other areas with the Chinese.

I don't see it as being one or the other.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Wright and Mr. Oliphant.

[*Translation*]

Next, we go to Mr. Bergeron for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here this evening, gentlemen.

I'm delighted to see you again, Mr. McCallum. Just as you were leaving the House of Commons, I came back. It's a pleasure to have you with us.

We have a lot to learn from the experience of each of you. From your unique vantage point, you were able to see what was happening in the People's Republic of China. Thus far, the committee has had the privilege of meeting with and hearing from a number of your predecessors and even successors. We listened to their points of view.

I want to ask you about certain comments made by other Canadian ambassadors to China. Back in March, Howard Balloch brought to the committee's attention three premises regarding the People's Republic of China and its relationship with Canada, premises he referred to as occasionally recurrent and often fallacious. It's the third one I would like to discuss. I will read it for you: "Third is the premise that there is out there somewhere, simply waiting to be formulated, a comprehensive and coherent new 'China Policy' to serve as a course correction for all of Canada's involvement with the huge and enormously complex China."

The government announced that it has a new policy for its dealings with the People's Republic of China. The government has not released the policy and, we are given to understand, may not necessarily do so. Given Mr. Balloch's third premise and your respective experiences, do you think the government is misguided to think its new policy will help it deal effectively with this new China?

• (1855)

Hon. John McCallum: It's a pleasure to see you as well, Mr. Bergeron.

I don't know what the government's new policy is. As Minister Champagne stated, our policy towards China is evolving. When I was the ambassador, the situation wasn't what it is today. That speaks to the need for an evolving policy. The arrest and detention of the two Michaels is a serious issue for Canada. I think the government has good reason for wanting a change in policy. I also think Mr. Biden's election could make a difference.

As a retired ambassador, I don't really want to be doling out advice to the government, but given the evolving nature of the situation, it's natural to think we may need to do certain things differently as far as our China policy goes. I agree with my colleague that, going forward, Canada will need to do the two things it has always done: pursue its economic interests, while upholding its values and human rights.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

What do you think, Mr. Wright?

[English]

Mr. Robert Wright: Thank you.

I'm not sure what premise Howard may have made, but I certainly see the need these days for the government to reassess the approach to China. I think it's timely. I look forward to seeing what they have to say.

As I say, things have changed dramatically from the time I was there, when we had easier access and a more cordial exchange with the Chinese. I can say in all honesty that the Chinese listened carefully to what we had to say. They may not have agreed with us, but they did listen carefully to what we had to say.

My impression now is that it's much more difficult than it was then. I wish the government well and I look forward to hearing what their recommendations are for the future.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

We know that more than 600 people work for Canada in the People's Republic of China, or at least in the greater China region. Of those 600 or 650 people, nearly 500 are locally engaged staff, as they are called.

The People's Republic of China seeks to exert influence, even internationally, over other states' dealings with it. Do you not feel there is a risk that the current regime will try to influence residents, Chinese citizens in China, who work for foreign governments?

In other words, what safeguards are in place to ensure the integrity of the people working for Canada in the People's Republic of China or the greater China region?

Hon. John McCallum: Are you referring to embassy staff?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I am referring to the embassy, consulates and the like. I am actually referring broadly to all the employees who work for Canada, 500 of whom are locals, Chinese people.

• (1900)

[English]

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

[Translation]

Hon. John McCallum: All right. I see.

I always say local staff are vital to our mission in China. They have the expertise we need. We must be careful, yes, but they are essential to the embassy's operations.

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen.

[English]

Mr. Harris, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank you both, former ambassadors.

On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm getting an echo in my ear.

The Chair: I'll just stop the time for a minute to see if we can fix that with the technicians.

Do you have it on the right channel?

Mr. Jack Harris: I'm on English. I was getting a delayed repeat of my voice, but it seems to have disappeared at the moment.

May I start the time again?

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Jack Harris: I want to thank former Ambassador Wright and the former ambassador and former colleague of mine in the House of Commons, Mr. McCallum, for joining us tonight. I think we overlapped from 2008 to 2015, most of which time I was the defence critic for the NDP. We had many conversations.

Mr. Wright, may I start by asking you about your time? I think it's important to try to understand a little bit about what the relationship was and what the expectations might have been about China and China's future at that time. I'm guessing—maybe you can correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Wright—that since you had been a deputy minister of international trade, you would have been appointed to this role partly due to your ability to deal with trade matters and presumably with Canadian investment issues in China, which I gather were fairly robust at the time.

The issues in Hong Kong we've heard a lot about over the last couple of years. Hong Kong was partway through the early stages after the handover. Could you describe the sense of what Hong Kong was doing and what the expectations were for China?

Mr. Robert Wright: There certainly were great expectations for the future of Canada-China trade and advancement—that's correct—and that was an important part of our portfolio. The portfolio of any ambassador is much broader than the economic interests, of course, and we pursued actively human rights questions, as well as questions related to educational exchanges, scientific exchanges and what have you. It was a broad agenda, but trade and investment were an important part of it.

At that point in time—this was from 2005 to 2009—there was a great sense of optimism, both here in Canada and in China, I would say, that the prospects for trade and investment between our two countries were very strong. The Harper government was not terribly well disposed to China initially. It took some time for them to develop the confidence that this was a relationship worth investing in, but after the visit by a range of ministers in the Harper government, there became a growing recognition of the fact that the relationship could grow, and that, indeed, in the growth of the relationship, we could have some influence on the direction that China would take.

With reference to Hong Kong, Hong Kong was then a very strong economy, one where, of course, there were up to 300,000 Canadians. It was easy for Canadian business people to do business there and to establish business relationships with Hong Kong and, through Hong Kong, with the mainland. I don't know now whether that situation is still the case.

I'm discouraged and I'm disappointed, of course, at developments over recent years, in particular with the implementation of the security law. Some of the confidence of the business community in Hong Kong has disappeared, and of course there is now a recognition of the fact that the opportunities for business people to work more closely with Hong Kong in the future may have been affected.

I still remain optimistic with Hong Kong, simply because the people of Hong Kong are great entrepreneurs. They're globalists and they're interested in doing business in all parts of the world. My hope would be that the mainland, China, would live up to its obligations under the transition agreement and allow them to continue

as an important part of the Chinese economy, but also an important part of the global economy.

• (1905)

The Chair: Mr. Harris, we're not hearing you. I'm just going to hold for a moment. You weren't muted, but we just couldn't hear you.

Would you please keep talking? We'll see if we start hearing you again.

Mr. Harris, can you hear me? No, you're muted now. A moment ago you weren't, but we stopped hearing you.

Mr. Jack Harris: I'm afraid I've done even worse—

The Chair: Now it's going, so I'll get your time going again and you can carry on, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Okay. Thank you.

Am I right in saying that the events of the last several years, including the democracy activities, the pro-democracy demonstrations going on for some years...? Was any of this foretold during your period as ambassador in China, or is that something that was all after you left?

Mr. Robert Wright: It was all after I left.

Mr. Jack Harris: Things were going well at that time, so things have changed. I guess one of the other premises, or false premises.... I'll get to Mr. McCallum in the next round. Howard Balloch talks about “the premise that the policy of broad and fulsome engagement has failed and that it was principally and naively aimed at changing China internally”. He calls that a “fallacious premise”. What do you think of that? Is it over, this idea that China will change because of engagement?

Mr. Robert Wright: I don't know. I would like to think not. I believed throughout my career that engagement is better than the alternative, so I still believe there's room for Canada to influence the direction China takes. I think we must stay fully engaged in that country and in Hong Kong to try to influence the directions they take.

Clearly, it has become more difficult over the last five or six years, ever since 2013, when Xi Jinping became president of China. There has been a shift, in my view, in the willingness of China to listen to input from other countries around the world. I regret this, because for the period that I was there, as I said, China was more open to ideas from Canada and from other countries.

Mr. Jack Harris: This may require a shift by us.

Mr. Robert Wright: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

Thank you, Mr. Wright.

We're in the second round now, and we'll go to Mr. Barrett, for five minutes.

Welcome.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair.

It's a pleasure to be joining you this evening as the official opposition shadow minister for ethics.

My question is for Mr. McCallum.

Sir, what is your relationship to the Wailian group?

Hon. John McCallum: Are you talking about the talk I gave about immigration?

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'm talking about any of your work for that group, sir.

Hon. John McCallum: Okay, I—

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll stop the time.

Mr. Oliphant, go ahead on a point of order.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I would like the member to clarify how this applies to the mandate of our—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That's not a matter of order, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: It is.

The Chair: Order. There should be one person at a time, please.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I would like a clarification. We have a standing order that we are following, and I would like to understand how that relates to the mandate of this committee to investigate the relationship between Canada and China, our bilateral relationship, including many issues.

I don't know how that applies to our mandate as a committee.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, on that point of order, it's—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I will recognize you, of course, but I want to ask that you wait until I recognize you before speaking.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's quite striking that the parliamentary secretary intervened after there was one line of questioning from the Conservative ethics critic. If he's going to complain about relevance, he could at least wait to hear the direction my colleague was going in.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): On a point of order, this is debate.

This is debate, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, Mr. Genuis has the floor.

Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I agree with Mr. Fragiskatos that the point of order by Mr. Oliphant was a point of debate. We should get back to the questions.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

Of course, I ask you to respect the mandate of the committee.

Mr. Barrett, the floor is again yours.

• (1910)

Mr. Michael Barrett: My question is for you, Mr. McCallum, with respect to the nature of your relationship with the Wailian group.

Hon. John McCallum: I gave a talk to some of their clients who were thinking about immigrating to Canada, and that became controversial in a *Globe and Mail* article. It was natural for me to encourage Chinese or other foreigners to immigrate to Canada, because I have for many years thought that immigration was good for Canada.

In light of the *Globe and Mail* article, which alleged that I had done something wrong in terms of the rules—which I did not think I had—I submitted evidence to the Ethics Commissioner and I had a conversation with the Ethics Commissioner. He agreed with me that I had done nothing wrong, that I had broken no rules, and that he was not going to launch any investigation. He said to me that I could report this to the public. I am now reporting it.

I broke no rules, according to the Ethics Commissioner, in giving that talk to that group of people when I was in China.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you have interactions with that group while you were serving as ambassador?

Hon. John McCallum: No. I never met them when I was serving as ambassador.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

Had you communicated with Minister Mendicino about your work with the Wailian group or Chinese immigration following your tenure as ambassador?

Hon. John McCallum: No. I had a conversation with Minister Mendicino, at his initiative, which was a general conversation about what he should do about levels of immigration post-pandemic. We had a talk about that. We did not talk about China, as I recall, and certainly not about any of my clients. When I spoke to those clients, I mentioned something that Mr. Mendicino said, but it was fully in the public domain. It was not inside information.

I put all of that to the Ethics Commissioner, and he agreed there was nothing wrong with any of that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Have you communicated with anyone at the Chinese embassy here at home since your resignation as ambassador?

Hon. John McCallum: I was invited to lunch once—a long time ago, before the pandemic—with the current Chinese ambassador. I had lunch with him.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What was the nature of the meeting?

Hon. John McCallum: I had known him in China when I was ambassador. It was just a social occasion, I suppose. I had lunch with him. That's all. It was dinner, sorry.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you agree that a foreign agents registry is needed for Canada? It has been proposed by former Canadian ambassador to China, David Mulroney, and endorsed by another former ambassador, Guy Saint-Jacques.

Hon. John McCallum: I would certainly, obviously, comply, if there was such a thing. Right now I cannot divulge names of clients, but we would find a way to do that if that was the law. It wouldn't really bother me if the government wished to do that. It's not a decision for me. It's a decision for the government.

If you're asking me for my opinion, right now the advice I give to Chinese companies, if they're seeking to invest in Canada and create jobs in Canada, is that they're already subject to all the restrictions of the Investment Canada Act, and also all the laws of Canada and of provinces and cities and their regulations.

If the government wants to do that, that's the government's business, and I would comply. I'm just not sure it gives additional information that would be useful to the government. I might be wrong, but that's my initial impression.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In your time as a member, you received \$73,000 in paid travel or gifts from the Chinese Communist Party or groups affiliated with them. Did gifts of this nature continue during your time as ambassador, sir?

Hon. John McCallum: The only government of China I have ever received money from was the government of Taiwan, when I went on a trip there with my wife many years ago. I have not received a penny from the government of mainland China as ambassador, as MP or as post-ambassador.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

Hon. John McCallum: The money for those trips came from the Government of Canada or NGOs.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McCallum and Mr. Barrett.

We will now go to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses for appearing tonight.

Mr. McCallum, it is great to see you again. I certainly have questions for you relating to the topic, but I simply want to thank you again for the work that you did, specifically on Syrian refugee resettlement and Yazidi refugee resettlement. Both communities are thriving in London, due, in large part, to efforts from people such as you and those around you.

You mentioned in your opening statement that there were achievements, and I think important achievements, relating to your time as ambassador. Could you highlight a few of those again?

• (1915)

Hon. John McCallum: As I said, I had this double mandate: on the one hand, to pursue greater economic ties, and on the other hand, to stand up for human rights and our values. I spoke mainly about the latter, because I think that's what many members of the committee are more interested in.

I don't want to discuss these things for the future, but I'm happy to discuss them in terms of when I was ambassador. We did play a leading role in leading the charge among like-minded western ambassadors on the Uighur issue. I was pleased that we did that. We did not have nearly as much information back then as we have now,

but we were certainly leading the efforts to get those 28 ambassadors to sign this letter. I remember I tried to expand that outside of the usual group of countries to Muslim-led countries, and I didn't succeed in the end, but I got some interest.

That was a pretty major effort on our part, when I was ambassador, along with those other items that I mentioned.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The question of the Uighurs and what is being perpetrated is a matter that has concerned this committee and other committees in Parliament, as you well know. Are you saying that Canada led the effort, during your time as ambassador, to raise the issue on the global stage, or helped to lead the effort?

Hon. John McCallum: It's hard to define whether we were the one country most leading the effort. We were clearly right up there, and we did lead the effort on the letter to the party secretary of Xinjiang province that was signed by the 28 ambassadors. We definitely led that, and I would say we were very active in general.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I appreciate that.

I want to turn to Mr. Wright.

Mr. Wright, thank you for your previous service, of course.

I want to ask you a question that relates to how liberal democracies can best coalesce to counter the influence of a China that certainly has changed in recent years under its new leadership.

The point has been made at this committee—I think it is one that deserves serious consideration, and I'm glad that the government seems to be basing its foreign policy approach to China on it—that liberal democracies should come together around common and shared values to engage and confront China, if I can put it that way. That is an argument that has been made, as I said, by previous witnesses and by the foreign affairs minister last night.

My question for you is this: What do you think of that perspective? Second, if you are in favour of that, will it have an impact? Does China care? That is my question.

Mr. Robert Wright: Yes, I strongly support working with other liberal democracies, with other western countries, to talk about how we should engage with China and how we might influence the directions that China takes.

I still believe there are prospects that China will adjust as it becomes more involved globally. We can take certain [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Mr. Wright, I'm afraid you are frozen.

You were just saying, “I think we can take certain....” Please go ahead.

Mr. Robert Wright: Can I continue?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Robert Wright: I just mentioned the fact that the Trans-Pacific Partnership that we joined a couple of years ago is a good initiative. That means we'll be working with other countries in the region to promote trade and investment.

I know from experience, from when I was in China—and I'm sure it was the same when John was there—that we worked closely with ambassadors from other countries to talk about developments in China and how we might co-operate to try to advance common ideas.

I remain, if not optimistic, realistic about the prospect of changing things in the short term, but it is a pursuit well worth pursuing. As I was saying a little bit earlier, the fact that the U.S. government, the president-elect and his team have already indicated that they want to work more closely with partners on global issues, including relationships with China, is a very positive sign.

• (1920)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, it is your turn. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McCallum, for the comments you were making in response to my last question.

It's very important, in my view, and I understand why it is so crucial for us to have local employees working for us all over the world, regardless of the country. They are locally connected and understand the circumstances in their own country.

Given the security concerns that have been so widely reported in recent days and weeks, I am worried when it comes to the People's Republic of China, in particular. Although I am not questioning the importance of those employees, I would like to know what steps were taken, during your time as ambassador, to ensure the integrity of staff engaged locally to work in Canadian missions on Chinese soil.

Hon. John McCallum: Thank you for your question. I didn't have enough time to finish answering it earlier.

As I said, those people are essential, in my view. Three-quarters of our staff are people from the region. They have much-needed knowledge, but there are security concerns. You're right. For that reason, those staff members are not permitted to access certain information or certain computers. The rules are very strict when it comes to that. It is possible that, more recently—since I left my post—the awareness level around those security concerns has increased and the rules have become stricter. I am not sure. I would say Canadian officials are cognizant of the security challenge and take steps accordingly. Regardless, Canada can't carry out its activities abroad without the support of local staff.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Would you care to add anything, Mr. Wright?

[English]

Mr. Robert Wright: I agree completely with what John McCallum has said. The locally engaged staff make up a very important part of our embassy as well as our consulates around China. There is a hard line that we draw between access to information, access to important information, that is open to Canadians and closed to Chinese citizens. We recognize that fact, and even over the time I was there, that was very carefully maintained. I'm sure that's still the case.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Now we will go to Mr. Harris for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. McCallum, as I said earlier, it's good to see you again.

When you were appointed from cabinet, I guess, to the position, there was a bit of surprise. It normally had been a post that was reserved for career diplomats, and you have a lot of political experience. Do you think your association with the actual government and the party in power was a factor in your work and what you were able to do? Was there some reason why that was an important consideration—

Hon. John McCallum: Well, look, I think you have to go back and realize—

Mr. Jack Harris: —in having you go to China, and was there a difference in the way you worked as a result of that?

Hon. John McCallum: I'm sorry if I interrupted you. It's nice to see you again.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

Hon. John McCallum: I think it's a delicate matter as to how many political versus diplomatic appointments you make. Recently in the U.S., it's gone the other way with the diplomatic appointments, so that's good for the diplomatic service.

In my case, I think there was a desire back then.... Remember that we said 2016 is not 2020, so the attitudes were different. We wanted to up our game with China, and it was thought that if we appointed a politician to be ambassador and put China on the same level as the United States, the U.K. and France, it would be well perceived by the Chinese and that would help Canada achieve its objectives. I think that was part of the thinking behind my appointment.

• (1925)

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you for clarifying that.

I have a short question, Mr. McCallum. When Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig were seized several days after Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Vancouver, was there any doubt in your mind that there was a connection between those two?

Hon. John McCallum: No doubt. I'll put it this way. If Meng Wanzhou had not been arrested, I am very confident that the two Michaels would not have been arrested either.

Mr. Jack Harris: Was that ever acknowledged by the Chinese authorities in your presence?

Hon. John McCallum: Not explicitly, but there were a few times when it came close to an implicit acknowledgement.

Mr. Jack Harris: I think my time is up, Mr. Chair, as your fingers are getting a lot closer.

The Chair: You have about three seconds left.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Mr. McCallum.

The Chair: I'm trying to give indications to members of what time is left, so I appreciate members watching that and doing their best to stay within their time.

Now we will go to Mr. Chong for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McCallum, it's good to see you again. I hope you're doing well.

For those of you who haven't read it, I recommend your book, *Unequal Beginnings*, about the Ontario wheat boom in the 19th century, which was based on your Ph.D. thesis. I remember reading it while I was procrastinating at the Robarts library at U of T many years ago.

Mr. Wright, it's good to see you as well.

My first question is for Mr. Wright. It was asked previously of Mr. McCallum.

Mr. Wright, a foreign agent registry has been proposed by former ambassadors David Mulroney and Guy Saint-Jacques. A foreign agent registry has been put in place in Australia. My question is, do you think a foreign agent registry is needed for Canada?

Mr. Robert Wright: It's not something I've thought about. I have to be honest with you.

It wasn't something that was discussed while I was serving in China, but I would have no reason not to support it. I don't think it's a bad idea. Just for the record, though, so I'm very clear, I have no clients who are Chinese or Canadian, so it wouldn't bother me. I could see some merit in doing so, particularly given the concerns that have been raised recently about the effect of certain Chinese representatives in Canada.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

I'd like to move on to talk about Canadians who are wrongfully detained. According to Foreign Affairs, thousands of Canadians are imprisoned in more than 85 countries around the world—some 1,400 Canadians at last count. Foreign Affairs has also said it is aware of 123 Canadians who are detained in Chinese jails.

One thing that has confounded me is this. Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig are two of those Canadians detained, but there are also Canadians Hussein Jalil and Robert Schellenberg. To remind everyone, Hussein Jalil is a Canadian of Uighur origin who is still detained in China, and Robert Schellenberg is a Canadian who is now on death row in China.

Mr. Wright, why do you think the government makes the release of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig the priority, but not other Canadians wrongfully detained, like Hussein Jalil? I am wondering if you can give us your perspective on that.

Mr. Robert Wright: I was in China when Hussein Jalil was detained, and he was detained by the Chinese as a Chinese citizen. In fact, he was travelling on a Canadian passport. As you probably know, we were never given consular access to Mr. Jalil, despite the fact that he is a Canadian citizen. That is an issue of some regret for me, that over the course of my time in China, we were never given access. As you know, he was subsequently sentenced and is still serving time in China.

I can't speak for recent years, but I don't think the government is giving greater attention to one detainee over another. My own sense is that the government—and I know this from my experience in Beijing, my experience as ambassador—pays close attention to all Canadians who are detained.

The nature of the way that the two Michaels were detained, as it would seem, in direct retaliation for the arrest of Madame Meng Wanzhou, is something that has clearly captured the attention of Canadians, and rightfully so. I can understand why Canadians feel particularly strongly about this, but that's not to say that Canadian officials in China and in Global Affairs Canada aren't paying a lot of attention to the other detainees as well.

● (1930)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Wright.

Mr. McCallum, you mentioned in your opening comments that beginning in 2018, the Liberal cabinet decided to make the release of the two Michaels a priority in the Canada-China bilateral relationship. Why are those two Canadians a priority and not a Canadian like Hussein Jalil? Is it because Hussein Jalil has a second citizenship, or is there another reason?

Hon. John McCallum: I remember that I made representations on behalf of Hussein Jalil in China, and I also spoke to people about him in Ottawa when I was ambassador. I visited Mr. Schellenberg when he was in jail, and spoke to his father. It's not as if we were not concerned about those people.

As Rob said, I think the fact that the two Michaels were seized in apparent retaliation for the Meng Wanzhou case has caught Canadians' imagination as something different and particularly unwelcome. It has had more high-level attention, for sure—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Hon. John McCallum: —but it doesn't reduce the importance of these others.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Chong's time is up.

[*Translation*]

It is now Mr. Dubourg's turn for five minutes.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is my turn to welcome you, Mr. Wright and Mr. McCallum. Thank you for your many years of public service. Your input is very informative.

My first question is for Mr. McCallum.

You said that, while you were ambassador, you helped get Li Wenzu's husband released. You even revoked the visas of some Chinese officials.

Is it common for an ambassador to do things like that?

Hon. John McCallum: When Chinese officials apply for a visa to visit Canada, our security officers review the applications because they are aware of the issues we've talked about.

As ambassador, I had a role to play as well. A number of cases come to mind. When we thought, but didn't know for sure, that people might do unacceptable or inappropriate things in Canada, we would refuse to issue them a visa. That happens depending on the relationship between the two countries in question.

It wouldn't surprise me if Canada's officials were stricter in 2020 than when I was ambassador given how much the relationship with China has deteriorated. Nevertheless, those are things that have always been done.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Wright.

I know it's been a while since you were ambassador, but you do pay close attention to the news.

What was your reaction when China imposed the security law and, then, when the elected officials resigned? What did you think? What was your reaction?

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Wright: I was disappointed, of course, though I can't say I was shocked, because if you follow China, you could see increasingly over recent years that the Chinese government was becoming more and more worried about democratic developments in Hong Kong, so I can't say I was shocked, but I was very disappointed because Hong Kong has always provided a very nice transition between the autocratic, non-democratic People's Republic of China and the rest of the world. It served a useful role, I thought, to China as well as to the rest of the world in playing that role. I was very disappointed to see that the efforts of the people of Hong Kong to

express themselves through democratic means were dealt with the way they were by China.

You could see over recent years, ever since 2013, well after I left, that the Chinese government had become more assertive in its efforts to crack down on any form of dissent. I think this is an unfortunate result of it. I'm sorry for the people of Hong Kong, and I am particularly sorry for the 300,000 Canadians who live there and who have very close ties with China as well as with Canada.

• (1935)

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you so much, both of you. I think I have no more time left and—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: That's fine.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We will now go on. We have the last half-hour, so we will treat this part of it as though we were starting a new hour and we will go to Mr. Genuis for six minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, I really want to drill down with Mr. McCallum on this issue of visa applications that were rejected, because we seem to be dancing around the reasons why this might have happened, with references to activities that weren't appropriate or that weren't in the national interests. Who were these people whose applications you felt it was necessary to reject? Were they affiliated with the Chinese military or the United Front? What kinds of titles did they have? What kinds of purposes were they pursuing in Canada that led you to believe that our security or our interests would have been threatened if these visas were granted?

Hon. John McCallum: I think there were probably two categories, and as I said, we were not always absolutely certain about this. There was a fog of uncertainty, and we also had information from security agencies who had views as well. One thing we certainly would not approve of at all is if there were individuals coming on behalf of Chinese security agencies to pressure family members to return to China or threatening their families, things of that nature. I know there had been cases of that and that was one thing we would strongly oppose.

A second area, as you indicated, would be people who wanted to try to exert inappropriate influence on the Chinese diaspora. Again, we didn't always know for sure what everybody was up to, but when the weight of suspicion was sufficient, we would deny a visa. I can't say what the proportion was, but I remember it being a pretty substantial number.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Ambassador.

I think this is important in revealing that, back in the time when you were ambassador, you were aware of efforts to influence and even threaten the security of the Chinese diaspora in Canada, and visas were being denied on that basis.

Were you ever aware of cases where the government revoked existing visas or pulled the credentials of diplomats out of concern for the same kind of activity?

Hon. John McCallum: I can't think of any. I know there was a case where the Chinese wanted to have some sort of security agent in Vancouver, and we had suspicions—or it was more that the RCMP had suspicions. That was denied. They offered him a position in Ottawa, but they weren't interested. That actually provoked quite a long-lasting disagreement, or bad relations, between the RCMP and the Chinese counterparts.

I think the Canadian government agencies were onto this sort of thing at the time. I'm not saying it was rampant, but it certainly happened, and whenever we were thinking that it might happen, we tried to stop it.

• (1940)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Ambassador, were there ever cases where the RCMP raised concerns, but a visa was granted anyway?

Hon. John McCallum: Was that for me?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, it's for you, Mr. McCallum.

Hon. John McCallum: I honestly don't remember. I think there were certain cases where CSIS or the RCMP would simply say no, and we wouldn't have a choice. There might have been others where there was a recommendation, and on occasion we might have disagreed with them. I don't remember.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. McCallum, if there are any records with respect to this that can be given to the committee or that Global Affairs can share with the committee, I think we'd very much like to see them.

I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. McCallum, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Champagne, appeared before the committee yesterday, he made it very clear that the China of 2020 was not the China of 2018, 2015 or prior. You are telling us the same thing today.

China is thousands of years old. For just over half a century, Canada has been trying to do business with China, but I would say it has always been tinged with hypocrisy. Now, the retaliatory arrest of the two Michaels has opened our eyes. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, himself, said that we have to look at China with eyes wide open.

This is my question. How can Canada continue to do business with China and carry on the same relationship as before, when it is now obvious to everyone that the Chinese Communist Party cannot be trusted in any interaction?

Finally, what is your best advice given the circumstances?

Hon. John McCallum: I think the government is trying to find an appropriate solution. It is true that these are challenging times. Finding the right answer isn't easy, but the government is doing its best.

I am no longer in the government, but I know it's doing its best.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Do you think there is anything the current government can do?

Conversely, do you think we can trust the Chinese communist regime now that we know everything that's going on?

[*English*]

The Chair: Please be very brief.

[*Translation*]

Hon. John McCallum: You have to put it in perspective. Yes, we want to have a relationship with the Chinese government, and Canada cannot control who the government is. While it isn't easy, it is what it is, so we have to accept it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*English*]

Now we'll go to Ms. Zann for six minutes, please.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Wright, and my next question will be for Mr. McCallum.

In January 2019, a number of academics and retired diplomats—including former ambassadors such as yourself, Mr. Wright—signed a letter that expressed deep concern about the detentions of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. In that you wrote:

We who share Mr. Kovrig's and Mr. Spavor's enthusiasm for building genuine, productive and lasting relationships must now be more cautious about travelling and working in China and engaging our Chinese counterparts.

The two Michaels, as we call them, have been detained now since December 2018, as you know. On February 4 of this year, Global Affairs Canada informed this special committee that there are actually 123 Canadians detained in Greater China, which includes Hong Kong and Taiwan.

What are the conditions under which Canadians are generally held when detained in China, and what is the most effective approach to advocating for the release of detained Canadians in China? For instance, what approaches adopted by other countries have been most effective?

Mr. Robert Wright: Those are tough questions.

To the first part, I think the way in which they are maintained, the conditions in which they're maintained are very difficult, and there is no question about that. We are given consular access to most Canadians who are detained in China, and we report back, but those conditions are tough. To the extent that we can influence the Government of China on their form of detention, we do so.

What's the best means to try to deal with this? My own view is that little is achieved by shouting publicly, loudly, at the Chinese on these issues. My own experience over the period I was in China was that the headlines on the front pages of newspapers about Chinese actions and about the fact that Canadians were detained in Chinese prisons didn't help resolve the issue. What helped was deliberate, ongoing, diplomatic contact with Chinese officials, working with them to ensure that Canadian citizens were treated fairly, that we had access to them, and that they were given a fair hearing under Chinese law to the extent possible.

Whenever we increased the public pressure on certain high-profile cases, I found that the management of the relationship with China became more difficult, not less difficult. Therefore, I've always advocated that we need to maintain a strong diplomatic presence there and a deliberate context, but to the extent possible, not turn these into—

• (1945)

Ms. Lenore Zann: —a circus.

Mr. Robert Wright: —public issues that made them, in some cases, more difficult to manage.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much. I really appreciate that response.

Mr. McCallum, in May 2017 you appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and you reiterated at that time that Canadian officials “work very hard on any cases involving the death penalty”. You said that there were five death penalty cases pending at that time and that Canadian officials were “working very hard to persuade the Chinese authorities, as we would work hard to persuade any government authorities...not to exercise the death penalty on Canadian citizens”.

What types of cases have typically led Canadians to be charged with the death penalty in China? Have Canadian officials been able to secure clemency for Canadians charged with the death penalty in China and, if so, under what circumstances?

Hon. John McCallum: The Canadian government—and I can only speak for the current government, the Liberal government—has been extremely forceful in opposing the death penalty and I, as ambassador, as well. I personally can't stand the death penalty, and the government agrees, so it is an extremely high priority, whatever the country, including the United States, to prevent death penalties from happening.

I agree with what Rob said, that headlines in newspapers don't necessarily help, but constant conversations and pressure, I think, do.

The Schellenberg case was particularly egregious. I hope the death penalty won't be carried out, obviously, but he was initially

sentenced to a prison term, and then on appeal he got sentenced to death, and he had been told that couldn't happen. It's a very difficult case.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you very much. I really appreciate that.

I think my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Zann.

[*Translation*]

Now, we move on to Mr. Bergeron for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I ask my question, I would like to revisit what you said a moment ago, Mr. Wright, about the ineffectiveness of talking tough and shouting publicly at the Chinese. I was a bit surprised to hear you say that because most of the witnesses the committee has heard from so far have told us the exact opposite—including some former ambassadors.

They maintain that, while it may have been effective up to this point to take a syrupy sweet approach with the Chinese government and to try to appease Beijing, that was no longer the way to go once Xi Jinping came to power. They said that, on the contrary, in order to really have some sway over the Chinese government, Canada needs to adopt the same tone as the Chinese and use strong, clear language that may not be entirely diplomatic.

You seem to be saying the exact opposite, Mr. Wright, so I'd like you to elaborate.

• (1950)

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Wright: It's not so much ineffectiveness. My real comment was that over the period I was there—and I have to remind you that this was from 2005 to 2009—it was a different government in China. My experience over that period in time was that headlines didn't resolve issues. Ongoing, consistent and principled diplomatic contact and discussions did resolve issues.

I can't speak for today's environment. I know that the situation has changed dramatically. I know there's a lot of frustration with actions China has taken in recent years, with good reason, and I can understand why people would be saying now that the kind of diplomacy we practised over the period I was there hasn't proven to be effective, particularly in dealing with these newer or other consular cases. I was really just speaking about my own experience.

It's certainly not syrupy-sweet diplomacy. Anybody who has been engaged in bilateral discussions with the Chinese knows that there's nothing syrupy-sweet about it. We went in with tough positions. We explained our positions honestly and frankly to the Chinese, and they gave us frank responses. I found that approach most effective over the period we were there when I was appointed as ambassador in China.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Wright.

Mr. McCallum, would you care to add anything?

Hon. John McCallum: I agree with what Robert Wright said. While it doesn't change the fact that I agree with his comments, I would point to something other people have suggested—instead of going it alone, Canada should work with countries like the United States to perhaps get better outcomes. I think that's a good idea.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

When you were the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Mr. McCallum, the Chinese government introduced a so-called talent recruitment program and set up a number of recruitment agencies in Canada.

Why did you, as the minister, authorize those agencies on Canadian soil?

Hon. John McCallum: I was not aware of that. I'm not sure I understood your question. Are you saying the Chinese government had agencies in Canada to recruit Canadians to go to China?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: That is, indeed, our understanding.

I have a follow-up question. What would you say is the Chinese government's aim in recruiting people on Canadian soil?

Hon. John McCallum: I don't know. Usually, it's the opposite. We are the ones recruiting people in China.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I see.

Hon. John McCallum: My apologies. I don't have any information on that.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: No, I understand. You can't provide an answer. These things happen.

When the Minister of Foreign Affairs was here yesterday, we talked about the fact that a Chinese company is interested in purchasing a gold mine in northern Nunavut. The Chinese's interest in purchasing the mine seems to be both geostrategically and commercially motivated.

When you were ambassador, did you get the sense that the Chinese were interested in Canada's north?

The Chair: Please keep your answer brief.

Hon. John McCallum: I'm being told that I don't have any time left, but I do not recall that, no.

• (1955)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Now we will go to Mr. Harris, for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. McCallum, you were talking about visas a few minutes ago with some of my colleagues on the committee. Are we talking about all categories of visas, or are we looking at diplomatic visas

for people seeking to work with the Chinese mission in Canada? Are we talking about all visas that might come your way or just those for agents of the government? I'd like to have clarification on that.

Hon. John McCallum: We're talking about official visas, and I think that's a pretty broad category. These are for people working not just for the government directly but also possibly for various agencies of the government. There would be large numbers of such visas. Everything is large in China, but we had large numbers of them and we, as I said, turned down a certain proportion.

Mr. Jack Harris: Was there a general awareness, in your time as ambassador, beginning in 2017, of the extensive attempts by the Chinese to have foreign influence in Canada? Was that part of your briefing when you took on the job?

Hon. John McCallum: We certainly knew that was an issue, and I remember speaking to heads of various universities in Canada and asking them if they thought it was a big problem. As I recall, most of them, at the time, did not think it was a huge problem. They were aware of it. They thought it was potentially a problem, but I don't think it had become a great concern at that time. That may have changed now, but back when I was ambassador, we certainly were aware of it. We took certain actions on visas, as I've described. I, as ambassador, spoke to university heads and others, asking them the extent to which this seemed to be an issue where they worked, and I got mixed answers. I always got the impression that it was nowhere near as serious in Canada as it was, allegedly, in Australia.

Australia is a bit of a stalking horse for Canada, in the sense that, largely because we have the United States as our neighbour, China is much more important to Australia than it is to Canada, and so Australia is usually several years ahead of us in many ways, including in things like free trade agreements and other actions. Therefore, often what happens to Australia today is a guide for what might happen to Canada down the road, but I remember that it was more serious for Australia at the time than it was for Canada.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. McCallum, while you were in China, were you familiar with something called Operation Fox Hunt, which involved Chinese security officials and the RCMP within Canada?

Hon. John McCallum: I believe that's what I was referring to earlier, when they go and make threats to Chinese people about family back home and things of that kind. Is that right?

Mr. Jack Harris: That would be in an effort to get them to come back to China, but they had no extradition treaty with China. Do you know why the RCMP would be involved in that? Would that be something that would work through the Canadian embassy?

Hon. John McCallum: The RCMP would certainly not be involved in putting pressure on illegally getting people to go back to China or making threats against them. On the other hand, Canada does not want to be a haven for criminals, so if there were cases... We don't have an extradition treaty, but there were some people we did extradite, or that the RCMP did. But it would have to go through the courts. It would have to be fully legal. It would have to be genuine and there would have to be assurances given by China, certainly on the death penalty and probably on other things.

It's not as if we had no contact with the Chinese in terms of serious crimes. We did, but we would not have been involved in threats made to Chinese about their families and this kind of thing.

Mr. Jack Harris: A report was tabled last March in the House of Commons by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, which we discussed yesterday at the public safety committee. It talked about this Operation Fox Hunt that had been going on for several years. The situation changed at a certain point.

Were you involved in any of that issue at all as to what was actually going on? Was there a diplomatic decision about this happening that you're aware of?

• (2000)

Hon. John McCallum: I don't remember that. What I do remember is that the RCMP would work with the Chinese on what they regarded as legitimate serious crime, and they would be partners in trying to solve that crime, but at the same time, the Canadian government would try to prohibit inappropriate pressures put on Chinese in Canada to come back to China.

Mr. Jack Harris: Are you suggesting that the only filter for people coming into Canada to carry out this type of work or any other potentially intimidatory or coercive influence would be your visa work?

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please.

Hon. John McCallum: It's an imperfect process. I'm sure some of those people did get through, but we do our best to stop it when we know about it. The inspection of visa applications is one approach. Perhaps there are others as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. John McCallum: The information from various agencies goes into decisions on visas. It's not just the embassies.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank both former ambassadors. I know that we all very much appreciate your testimony today.

It's certainly good to meet you, Mr. Wright, and good to see you, Mr. McCallum.

[*Translation*]

That concludes the first part of our meeting.

We will suspend and move in camera to discuss committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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