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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

I call the meeting to order.

[*English*]

Welcome to meeting number 75 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to study the main estimates 2023-24.

We have with us today, from Elections Canada, Stéphane Perrault, Chief Electoral Officer; and Marc Limoges, chief financial officer. From the Leaders' Debates Commission, we have Michel Cormier, executive director; Jess Milton, director of production and engagement; and Chantal Ouimet, director of communications.

I'm going to pass the floor to—

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Madam Chair, just before the witnesses begin...

The Chair: Is it a point of order, Mr. Cooper?

Mr. Michael Cooper: I just have a housekeeping matter—very brief.

The Chair: Housekeeping?

Mr. Michael Cooper: I just see, I think, an oversight on your part. I see that we have an additional 30 minutes added to deal with committee business. The only item of committee business is with respect the production of documents related to the question of privilege concerning MP Chong. I note, again, that it's in camera. I presume that that's an oversight.

I have a motion that has been put on notice. We dealt with the first component of that motion with respect to a list of witnesses. Now we are going to be addressing the second part of that motion, or some other motion. I just want to clarify that I would expect this to be done in public.

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, I'm going to continue with this meeting and take into consideration what you're saying. I will have conversations with everyone just to make sure that we have the will of the committee. Your preference is to be in public. It was not an oversight: usually when we discuss committee business, it is in camera. That's what I went from, but I'll get a sense from everyone, and maybe we can resolve that closer to one o'clock. Is that okay?

Mr. Michael Cooper: Yes.

The Chair: Leniency. Thank you so much.

Welcome to our guests. PROC committee members and everyone watching really do appreciate your being here for estimates.

I will pass the floor to you, Mr. Perrault, and perhaps you can then just pass it straight to Mr. Cormier to maximize your time together. Is that suitable?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): That's perfect.

The Chair: Excellent.

Welcome to PROC.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to speak with the committee today about Elections Canada's 2023–24 main estimates.

I will also briefly update the committee on some of our priorities for this year.

Elections Canada is funded under two distinct authorities: an annual appropriation, which covers the salaries of indeterminate staff, and an ongoing statutory authority for all other expenses. This funding model ensures Elections Canada's independence by allowing it to access the funds required to plan and deliver elections, which may occur at any time, as we know.

The committee will vote today on the annual appropriation, which amounts to \$49.7 million and represents the salaries for some 530 indeterminate positions. It is virtually the same amount as last year, which was \$49.3 million.

Planned spending under the statutory authority is reported annually to Parliament for transparency and accountability, but is not subject to a vote. For the 2023–24 fiscal year, \$155.1 million has been earmarked. Once again, this is very close to last year's figure. This includes \$69 million for the agency's operating expenses, \$45.6 million for election readiness activities to ensure that we maintain a minimum level of capacity in case an election is called, and \$30 million for infrastructure modernization and service improvement initiatives.

Also, a number of by-elections will be held this year. Four of them are in fact happening now. I would like to remind the committee that because we cannot predict whether or not there will be by-elections in a given year, expenses related to those events are not included in the main estimates. They can vary, but on average they are around \$1.2 million or \$1.3 million.

• (1105)

[English]

An important aspect of our election readiness activities this year relates to electoral boundaries redistribution. As you know, a representation order with a new map of federal boundaries is expected to be proclaimed early this fall. Elections Canada will then have seven months to prepare for an election using the new boundaries. Any election called after that seven-month period would take place under the new map.

Because of the minority context, Elections Canada is faced with the unprecedented situation of having to pursue its preparations for an election under two different sets of maps and be ready to switch instantly from one to another at the end of the seven-month period. This is no small undertaking. Returning officers will need to be appointed for each of the two maps and make preparations for both. IT systems and databases—some 95 in total are required to produce, for example, voter information cards, to pay poll workers and to publish election night results—will also need to be adjusted to reflect and operate under the different maps.

In the spring of 2024, if no election has been called during the seven-month period after the proclamation of the representation order, we will need at that point to be able to pivot overnight and be ready to hold an election, should one be called, based on the new map. I know that redistribution also creates uncertainty and challenges for political parties and your electoral district associations as they prepare for the next election. Elections Canada will support them as they too realign themselves with the new boundaries, moving money and closing off old district associations.

As we prepare for the next election, we are planning to improve and modernize our services. A key element of modernization is the introduction of electronic lists of electors that will allow voters to be served at any table in their designated polling location. This will reduce wait times and help address the very serious challenges created by a diminishing workforce. We plan to introduce electronic lists in a way that is prudent and gradual, ensuring at all times the security and reliability of the voting process. A software solution is being developed by Elections Canada. Data will be stored on a secure database in Canada and will be accessed through a private secure network. Importantly, voting will continue to be paper-based and the count will be manual.

We plan to deploy the e-list in a by-election this fall, should there be one, and then to use the technology in several polling locations should an election be called in 2024—or, more broadly, if an election takes place on the fixed election date in 2025. Longer term, e-lists could enable most electors to vote anywhere in their electoral district, should Parliament decide to authorize this.

As well, we will continue to focus on removing barriers to electoral participation for indigenous electors, students living away

from home and electors with disabilities. Elections Canada right now is working with post-secondary institutions to offer services on campus and improve services to indigenous communities, in particular by increasing voting opportunities at advance polls in remote communities.

I also plan to return to this committee later this year to seek approval for a pilot project to include indigenous languages on the ballot in Nunavut.

Finally, in the longer term, we are pursuing a broader review of our services to indigenous electors. I aim to report on the results of this review to the committee next fiscal year.

[Translation]

I now yield the floor to Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Michel Cormier (Executive Director, Leaders' Debates Commission): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

[English]

First, thank you for inviting the Leaders' Debates Commission to review our 2023-24 main estimates.

The commission, as you know, is now seeking a total of \$3.4 million in funding for the current fiscal year. We won't be spending all that money unless an election is called. The \$3.4 million shown in the main estimates represents planned spending should a federal general election be called. It includes an amount that is frozen. It's a kind of reserve fund, if you like, of \$2.8 million, which will only become accessible if Parliament is dissolved for an election.

That means that if no election is called, the operating budget for 2023-24 is \$596,814. This funding basically covers the salaries and operational costs of the commission.

• (1110)

[Translation]

In accordance with our mandate and former commissioner David Johnston's commitment to spend the commission's budget responsibly, cost-effectiveness continues to be a driving principle. The commission's secretariat works remotely. We have vacated the office space we occupied in Ottawa. We have one full-time employee and three part time, including the commissioner. The advisory board meetings are also held remotely, to reduce travel expenses.

[English]

Because we're in a minority government situation, however, the commission needs to be prepared to organize debates as soon as an election is called. Much of that work needs to be done well in advance, including preparations for a request for proposals; the contract that is awarded to produce, promote and distribute the debates; other initiatives, including consultations with political parties and other stakeholders, ongoing talks with security agencies, and the development of policy documents. We also typically hold three to four meetings with our advisory board every year.

We are working to improve the debates ahead of the next election. After the 2021 experience, which drew significant stakeholder criticism, we carefully assessed the lessons learned. We recognized in our report that was published after 2021 that the last debates did not deliver as well as they should have on informing the voters on parties' policies.

[Translation]

The commission is now keenly focused on improving the debates so that they better serve the public interest. We are spending time consulting with debate organizers here in Canada and abroad to identify best practices as they relate to both format and especially moderation. This is all done remotely. The commission is also part of an international community of debate organizers that regularly exchanges information. The knowledge that we are gaining through these consultations will inspire the changes that we are looking for in the next debates. We believe that debates play an essential role in Canada's democracy, but we also believe that they should be produced and organized in a cost-effective manner.

[English]

Thank you. We will now take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will enter six-minutes round starting with Mr. Nater followed by Mrs. Romanado, Madame Gaudreau and Mrs. Blaney.

Mr. Nater, go ahead.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and through you, thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

I'm going to start with Mr. Perrault. In 2018, Bill C-76 received royal assent. One provision in that was the register of future electors. In your departmental plan, it states a goal of 25% being on that list. Could you tell the committee how many future electors are currently on that list?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I believe, Madam Chair, that the number is approximately 13%, so we're well short...and we need to do some work on that. We are partnering with provinces to get that data.

Mr. John Nater: Do you expect to hit the 25% goal?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: We'll be happy to report back next year on that.

Mr. John Nater: I look forward to that.

You mentioned in your opening comments that you hoped to deploy the e-list in a future by-election, so am I to assume that it's not being deployed in the current four by-elections?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It is not. It is still being worked on. It is being tested, and it will not be deployed until I am satisfied that it is ready and secure to be deployed.

Mr. John Nater: We know there will be a by-election held in at least one additional riding, likely Durham, as well, but Calgary Heritage must be called by June 30, I believe. Will it be deployed in the Calgary Heritage by-election?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It will not.

Mr. John Nater: It will not.

You mentioned in your opening comments that a software solution has been developed by Elections Canada. Can you confirm whether that software solution was developed in house or externally?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It was developed in house based on the security standards.

Mr. John Nater: Are you confident that the expertise existed to appropriately develop that software solution in house?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'm confident and it will be tested thoroughly, and we will be working with security partners of the Government of Canada to make sure it is satisfactory.

Mr. John Nater: You mentioned that the data will be stored on a secured database in Canada and accessed through a secure private network. Can you confirm whether or not any cloud solutions will be used to access that data?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It is a private cloud solution.

Mr. John Nater: Has this cloud solution been reviewed by any agencies external to Elections Canada?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It has gone through a very robust security assessment and it is monitored both privately and publicly in the sense that it's monitored by our private sector partner as well as by the Communications Security Establishment of Canada.

● (1115)

Mr. John Nater: To confirm, you're not yet comfortable with deploying it.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The solution needs to be fully tested before I can deploy it in a by-election.

Mr. John Nater: Would you commit to coming back to this committee prior to deploying it?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Prior to...? I'm sorry.

Mr. John Nater: Would you do so prior to deploying the e-list?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I would be happy to come back to this committee prior to deploying it.

Mr. John Nater: Okay. I appreciate that commitment.

I'll now turn briefly to Monsieur Cormier and the Leaders' Debates Commission.

I think you probably undersold yourself a little bit in your comments about some frustrations, we shall say, with the 2021 debate.

I want to look a little bit further back in the past, to the 2019 debates commission, in which one of the moderators was actually actively suing one of the political parties at that time. Would you recognize that it was a mistake to have a moderator who was actively suing a political party at that time?

Mr. Michel Cormier: That has no relationship to the commission's work. The network had the rights to the material and decided to take litigation at the time, as they do in different situations.

Mr. John Nater: But wouldn't you agree there should be strict criteria delivered by the commission that anyone who's actively in legal proceedings with a political party shouldn't be part of that moderating panel?

Mr. Michel Cormier: That's not part of our mandate or the purview of the commission.

Mr. John Nater: Fascinating.

Have the criteria for participation in the next debate been established yet by your commission?

Mr. Michel Cormier: The commission has established the criteria for the last election. If a party gets 4% of the vote or elects a member to Parliament, they are qualified for the next debate. That's where we stand now.

Mr. John Nater: So that will be the criteria for the next elections debate?

Mr. Michel Cormier: I wouldn't want to actually talk for the next commissioner, but that's where we stand now.

Mr. John Nater: Would you recommend that to the next commissioner?

Mr. Michel Cormier: We'll have discussions with the commissioner. He has the final say on criteria, but we'll give them all the relevant information that's needed for that decision, of course.

Mr. John Nater: One of the challenges that we brought up—I was on the committee when this was first considered two Parliaments ago—was that once it becomes a government entity, it becomes subject to judicial review and to the courts. We've certainly seen in the last couple of elections instances where the commission was brought to court on this. One of the challenges, of course, is that the Attorney General is a member is a cabinet minister, where you're in a pretty clear conflict of interest.

Would you not agree it would be better if the commission were not a government entity and was therefore not tied to that apparent conflict of interest?

Mr. Michel Cormier: Our recommendation is for the commission to become a totally independent established commission through legislation. That's our recommendation. The litigation we have is above the commission's work, and we're trying to limit that litigation as much as possible moving forward.

Mr. John Nater: I believe that concludes my time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nater.

Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I'd like to welcome the witnesses and thank them for coming today.

My first question is for the Chief Electoral Officer.

Two days ago the Government of Canada announced additional measures to protect against foreign interference in the upcoming by-elections.

Can you elaborate a little bit here? With those four by-elections that are going to be scheduled for June 19, what are some of the initiatives you're taking to ensure the integrity of those four elections?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Of course, within my mandate, which covers a limited aspect, we do need to make sure that we understand the threat environment at all times, whether it's for a by-election or an upcoming general election. We do, for example, monitor on an ongoing basis now; it used to be only during the election period. We do monitor the social media environment to understand the narratives out there to see if there's disinformation on the voting process specifically. We also work with our government security partners, so we are engaged with the SITE task force, for example. There's an ADM steering committee, a coordinating committee, that looks at the security environment, and we're having meetings this week.

So there's ongoing work with our security partners.

• (1120)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

You touched on something that I think we've also been very concerned about with respect to disinformation campaigns, whether these are misleading voters on where they have to vote, or how they can vote, and so on and so forth. I remember we talked about this the last time you were here.

Can you elaborate a little bit also on your outreach to make sure that accurate information is being shared with voters?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Sure.

We have, of course, voter information campaigns during electoral events to make sure that voters have the information about the voting process. Throughout the campaign, this evolves and we provide timely information as we get closer, for example, to the advance voting and the regular voting. Beyond that, we continue with our Inspire Democracy program, to work with a broad network of civil society actors to provide a lot more information about the voting process and to help remove barriers to voting.

It is really important—increasingly so in the environment we're in—that we push out as much as possible accurate information about the voting process, and that we be seen as the authority on that information.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: You alluded a little bit that you would be coming back to us on this, but, if you recall, we did a study on indigenous languages on the ballot, and you mentioned Nunavut, where you will be rolling that out. Can you give us a little bit of an update on that? We were really hoping that we could get indigenous languages when needed on the ballot across Canada.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: The committee's report recommended starting with Nunavut, and that will be our focus and has been our focus. We have been in regular contact with Elections Nunavut to share their expertise and with other organizations.

We are meeting with the advisory committee of political parties in the fall. It was planned for the spring, but with the by-elections and everything going on, we moved that. They will have a role to play in validating how they want to be represented.

We need to do more work on the special ballot process, which is a bit more complicated, and come back to the committee for proper approvals and then go to the Senate after that, because it will deviate from the legal requirements. There is authority in the act for a pilot project to deviate from the rules, so I will be coming back for authorizations once we've finalized our approach.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: I would like to now move to Mr. Cormier.

Thank you again for being here. As an MP from Quebec, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the unfortunate situation with the English debate during the last election.

I would like to hear a little more from you on what processes you have started to put into place in terms of naming a new commissioner and making sure that we don't have a repeat in the next federal election.

Mr. Michel Cormier: After the 2021 election, we did a thorough post-mortem of the debates, and we also consulted widely with stakeholders here and people in other countries who produce debates to try to come up with recommendations for the best format and the best moderation formula, if you like.

The consensus that emerges from all these consultations with people who produce and moderate debates and people who participated is that it's best to have one moderator—probably an experienced journalist who doesn't pose loaded questions, who is knowledgeable about the issues and who doesn't try to participate in the debate but is there to help leaders exchange ideas and express their positions.

In our recommendations, we put the prototype of the moderator profile that we're expecting for the next election, and it coincides with what I've just said in terms of criteria.

Our intention is to work collaboratively in the next election with the producer to make sure that these criteria are respected for a more fluid and less constrained debate, where the timing is less done by the clock and where the moderator—

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Michel Cormier: —has time to let people finish their answers and make sure there's engagement.

The Chair: Madame Gaudreau, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to take a moment to tell Mr. Cormier that I'm reassured to know that the review conducted after the last election and the recommendations that came out of it will be used to prevent unfortunate events in the next election.

In the next few minutes, my questions will be directed more to Mr. Perrault.

We have a lot of steps to take in the coming months, I agree. I also understand your concern about the uncertainty of an election call. Normally, elections should be held on a fixed date. Otherwise, it can be quite a challenge.

I'd like you to give us a little more detail on the actual preparations and how you're going to deal with the situation, should an election be called.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Currently, returning officers are reviewing their polling divisions to make sure they are adequate on the current map. They're trying to see which locations could be used for polling, as a specific location can't be reserved right away, since we don't know the date. They're going to engage with indigenous communities, where there are any.

Also, as I mentioned, we're working with post-secondary institutions to ensure that, regardless of when the election is called, there will be an offer of services on campuses. This was not possible during the last election.

We were working from a model of 338 electoral districts. Some returning officers will be assigned a new riding, and they can start to see, based on the proposed changes, how they should adjust. A lot of information sharing needs to take place between regional teams to coordinate this transition.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'd like a clarification. In the planning summary, what exactly does the budget item for regulatory oversight correspond to?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: It's a set of activities. For us, it particularly focuses on making sure that the rules of political financing are known and understood, that candidate reports from political parties and constituency associations are produced, initially, and then audited.

This also includes the work of the Commissioner of Canada Elections, which is carried out independently, but is included in the main estimates under this budget item. It's not the largest item financially, but it's an extremely important role regarding election integrity.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: The purpose of my question is to see what actions are being taken in budgetary matters to safeguard the integrity of our elections. I'd like to have more details on the action plan underway. It has to be said that people are watching us and need reassurance.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I've heard the term "integrity" here, and I think it's important to take the time to look at that.

We have to recognize that we live in an open society. We will continue to be the target of influence on our information from all over the world, through the media and social media. Some countries have airtight systems, and that's not desirable. What we want to have is a resilient society, and that starts with a good knowledge of electoral rules and processes.

You'll have noticed that at Elections Canada, we're putting out more and more information on measures to control election security, that is, elections which fall within our mandate. Obviously, the whole issue of foreign influence, which we're hearing a lot about, goes far beyond the holding of elections. We therefore need to work with partners. Political parties and candidates also have a very important role to play. We really need to make a collective effort, but we have an important role to play.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's a good challenge for you to meet.

In fact, we know that you have met with the Communications Security Establishment to establish every possible rule to secure the ballot. However, I'd like to have more information.

From what we've heard, things are moving fast and, we often don't see cyber-attacks coming. Can you reassure people by giving specific examples of measures that are being taken, whether in the budget, in the process or in meetings, to prevent our country from falling victim to cyber-attacks?

• (1130)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: First of all, it's important to know that everything we do in IT is based on an approach that puts security at the heart of our systems design.

In addition, staff periodically receive cybersecurity and phishing awareness training. People know about these issues, but it's important to have reminders. So we have a staff training program.

Outside the Elections Canada shell, we have monitoring that's done in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, which is part of the Communications Security Establishment and monitors the security of our systems and infrastructure 24/7.

We also have partners in the private sector.

So there are several layers of surveillance.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have one more question.

In the confidence and supply agreement between the Liberal Party and the NDP, there is a stated desire for the official voting day to extend over a three-day period. Is this realistic in terms of human, material and financial resources?

I'd like to know what you think about this. Unfortunately, you only have a few seconds to respond.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a very important question. I've met with representatives from the different parties, with the minister, too, but with regard to the others—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here today and for their important testimony.

I'm going to come to Mr. Perrault first. I'm really interested in what is happening around the work to open up the opportunity for people who face barriers in voting.

I'm really interested in some of the following groups. One is indigenous voters living on reserve. We've heard from different indigenous communities that they sometimes have struggles getting polling stations on their reserves and they know that there would be a far better turnout if those were there. There are also the residents and administrators of long-term care facilities, and students who live on their college and university campuses. I think you've spoken a bit about that and it's really important to get that vote out.

There are also persons with disabilities and voters living in poverty. I think I've talked in this place before about, in my first election, seeing a place in our riding that was very low income. They literally had a polling station down the hill, but they had to travel quite a great distance without any vehicles or bus system to a location where they couldn't get access to voting.

Making sure that people have access to voting is really important.

I'll tie into that, just because it resonates with me, the idea of the confidence and supply agreement that we have. Of course, one thing we've really been fighting for is that wherever you are in the riding, we want you to be able to access the poll. I have a large rural riding, so people travel. They're often still in the same riding, but because they're not in their polling station, they can't vote.

I'm just wondering if you could talk about those two things. I think there's some interconnection in that as well.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There certainly is.

Madam Chair, I'll try to answer as best I can in the limited amount of time.

Proximity is a critical aspect of accessibility and so is the flexibility of being able to vote anywhere.

When I talked about electronic lists, this is the foundation for it. It has merit on its own because of the efficiencies and the better services to voters, but it is also the foundation for voting anywhere. You need electronic lists if you are going to allow electors to vote at any polling location. We are working on that very actively. Hopefully, we will at some point see changes in the legislation to allow more flexibility.

Proximity is important. That's where I'll come back to the previous question. When you look at the number of days of voting and you're talking about over 15,000 or close to 16,000 locations that need to be leased for their regular polling day, if you need to have those locations for three days, we expect that we would lose 25% to 40%. That would have a perverse effect—an unintended consequence—on the accessibility. When you talk about voting days, you need to look at it very carefully to see what the impact is on those communities that may lose a polling station.

The ability to vote anywhere is part of an answer to that problem, but it does not remove the hurdles for those who do not have the mobility to vote anywhere. These are complex and difficult issues. They need to be examined very carefully as we move forward on these aspects.

In terms of indigenous electors on reserve, as I said, our priority—my priority—for the next election is to leverage some of the provisions in Bill C-76 that allow for advance voting for less than four days where there are small, remote communities that cannot support and do not need four consecutive days of voting. That is a firm commitment that I've made to make sure that wherever we are desired—and I understand that in some communities there is not a wish to see Elections Canada in the community—we will be present at least for one day for advance polls. That would be a significant improvement.

As I indicated in my remarks, we are looking at a much broader review of our services to indigenous electors in Canada. That's a long-term review. We've started to meet and we've met with over 230 communities across the country in 60 sessions. We will do a second round of meetings next year. I will come back to this committee with a report on the recommendations to improve services to indigenous electors—not just on reserve, but more broadly.

In terms of voters with disabilities, you may have seen in my departmental plan that we are looking at procuring software to enable electors who are visually impaired to validate independently that they have marked their ballot in the way they intended to. Right now, we have a template that they use, but they can never be absolutely sure that they marked it properly without the assistance of someone else. In terms of independent voting—which is really important for the dignity of people with disabilities—we hope to be able to provide a solution this year and roll it out in a by-election.

● (1135)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'll ask this very quickly, because I only have a few seconds left. I know a lot of the folks who are working to run these elections are elderly.

What's the strategy around addressing that issue as we see people age out of the program? How are you attracting new people?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There's a shift, of course in demography. What we're seeing, though, is that the electronic lists are a real opportunity to make the voting process more efficient.

The Chair: That was excellent and so concise.

We're going to do part of the second round. We will go with five minutes to Mr. Cooper, followed by five minutes to Mr. Turnbull.

[*Translation*]

After that, Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney will each have two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Perrault, with respect to digital voter lists you indicated, as I understood you, that these would be piloted in the event of by-elections beginning in the fall. Hypothetically, if there were no by-elections and we went to a general election, would Elections Canada deploy the digital voter list system?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I would only deploy it, first of all, if I'm very confident in the security and reliability of the solution, following a thorough engagement with the advisory committee of political parties and, hopefully, through this committee as we indicated earlier.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, and I appreciate your acceptance to come back to this committee before the system is deployed or piloted.

You mentioned that a robust security assessment has taken place or is in the process of taking place. Can you elaborate a bit on what steps are being taken in that regard? What's our our timeline?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Yes there are different components to the system. In terms of hosting on the cloud solution, that cloud solution has been tested. It is in use right now for other services that we use, and it is monitored by the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security. That part of the solution is secure.

In terms of the hardware, we will ensure that there is a supply chain integrity check on whatever hardware is used at the polling locations. We have not procured the software. This is a procurement that will be launched next fall. We have some devices that are checked and secure for our pilot project, but a larger scale procurement will need to take place, and supply chain integrity, as always, will be part of that.

In terms of the software, it will be robustly tested prior to being deployed.

● (1140)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Supposing that cloud storage doesn't raise any significant security concerns, what about when data finds itself on devices at thousands of polling stations across the country? Steve Waterhouse, a former information systems security officer at DND, acknowledged before this committee that this increases the security risk.

Can you elaborate or comment on that?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There's always security risk. There is in the paper process as well. We have lists that are circulating in the campaigns and at the polls, and we have guidelines in place to make sure that they are recovered.

Electronic lists of voters and voters who have voted are also supplied by us to political parties. It's the entire environment that needs to be examined.

However, you're absolutely right that one of the aspects is making sure that there's good control on those devices once the information is loaded, when it's accessed and when it's recovered after the election process. That is integral to the security of the e-list solution.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that, because it's 338 ridings and 200-plus polling stations on average per riding.

In line with that, how is Elections Canada going to reliably vet staff who are handling this data right across the country in 338 ridings and hundreds of polling stations per riding?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Madam Chair, the data that is on that list is the same data that is currently used by poll workers and by campaign volunteers. It is basic information that includes the voter's name and address, as well as a unique identifier that is used by parties to make sure that they are looking at the right person when they harmonize their lists.

That is the very same information that is circulating right now with the parties, with the campaigns and with the poll workers. There is no change in that regard.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Where did this idea originate? Was it a directive from a minister, or was it an initiative of Elections Canada?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I have to say, Madam Chair, that we are one of the last jurisdictions in Canada to rely solely on paper lists. Provincially and territorially, electronic lists are the norm now. Quebec is moving towards that. They are, with us, one of the late jurisdictions to do so. It's been demonstrated to be highly effective in managing the service to voters much more fluidly, providing better service with a reduced workforce.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Perrault and team, for being here today.

I have two or three lines of questioning. We'll see how far I get. I know the chair will cut me off if I get beyond my time limit.

We had some conversations in our foreign interference work about non-tagged attack ads from previous campaigns. I have a general concern about misinformation, disinformation during elections. Obviously it falls outside elections as well, which is deeply concerning.

How do we prevent these things from happening? Do you have the resources you need?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I'll come back to the preamble of your question regarding non-tagged attack ads. One of my recommendations last June—and I do look forward to the opportunity to go

through those recommendations—was to expand the requirement to identify the source of the communication, whether it's advertising or text messages or emails, to make sure that all electoral communications are identified by their source.

I think that is an important aspect of increasing the transparency of the electoral—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: If I may follow up on that, is there a way that you propose to be able to identify those sources? Is it an investigative body? What type of mechanism would be required?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: My recommendation would be to require political parties, third parties and candidates to have an identification, whichever form of communication they use to reach out to electors.

It's a regulatory requirement. If there is a failure to identify, then it is enforced through penal mechanisms under the act by the commissioner.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Our government already passed the Elections Modernization Act to make some of these things contraventions of the Canada Elections Act.

● (1145)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Bill C-76 did increase transparency by requiring a digital registry of online advertising. Again, I do have recommendations in my recommendation report to expand and build on that in terms of the digital world.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much.

One of the questions that have come up in past conversations is about when parties sometimes knowingly distribute false information during the election period. Is that a contravention of the Canada Elections Act?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are current offences—for example, for impersonation, if that is used to prevent electors from voting.

There are no offences if the goal is to undermine the trust in the results or the trust in the process. That's why I have made a recommendation to expand that.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: This is exactly my concern. In the 2019 election the Conservative Party of Canada actually paid for flyers that went to every house in my riding claiming that the Liberal government was implementing a capital gains tax on the sale of primary residences, which they knew to be false, because the government had denied that measure multiple times and made it very clear.

I'm wondering whether this is a contravention of the act currently or whether we need to change it in order to prevent parties from doing those kinds of things. They are a form of domestic interference, in my view.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: This is a very complex area, Madam Chair.

I have not recommended, and would not recommend, rules regarding the truth of campaign speech. I think that is not an area for me to delve into and for the commissioner to enforce. That would be highly problematic. However, there are some rules in the act right now for false information. They tend to relate more to the process, but there are some on candidates and campaigns. I think that is something that should be examined by this committee.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I think knowingly sending out false information is, and should be, something that we have very clear guidelines and rules for to prevent those things from happening, and to have real repercussions when people do not follow those guidelines.

Would you not agree with that, Mr. Perrault?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: Again, my recommendation is that if, knowingly, someone presents false information in order to disrupt or discredit the voting process, then that belongs in the act as a prohibition. I'm not recommending that there be sanctions for false information in campaigns, but that is, of course, something the committee may wish to examine.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

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

This is an interesting discussion.

One question just occurred to me: how is it that we are lagging behind others, electronically and technologically, when it comes to getting as many people as possible to vote in elections and do their duty?

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: That's a good and important question.

That's not unusual when it comes to nationwide elections in a G7 country. We have to be careful when introducing new technologies. We'll often first look at what's happening at the municipal level, and then at the provincial level. When the level of confidence in a new technology is high, as is the case with electronic lists, and we feel it can be deployed federally and that it will be useful, we tend to do it.

We work in collaboration with our provincial counterparts. It's not necessarily a bad thing that the federal government isn't among the first to embrace technological innovation. It's just that certain security issues don't arise in the same way in a national election in a G7 country as in a municipal or provincial election.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm making a connection with what we heard earlier about possibly extending the voting period by up to three days. As I understand it, the pilot project for electronic lists will allow an individual to vote even if he or she is outside the riding. How could this be beneficial, given that it would be quite a challenge to get the material and human resources needed to hold the election over three days? The aim is to encourage as many people as possible to use their right to vote.

• (1150)

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: I want to clarify something. Electronic lists would allow voters to vote anywhere in his or her constituency, because the ballot paper is specific to the constituency. The elec-

tronic list is not the same as electronic voting; it's simply a way of managing the voters' list in the constituency.

If someone wants to vote outside of their electoral district, that's possible right now. To do so, they must go to a returning office and vote by special ballot.

As for the issue of the three-day period, if we want to give people more time to vote, they can do advance voting. In every election, we see a significant number of voters who vote in advance instead of voting on the official day of the election.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I don't think you got to answer my question fully about the elderly population and what the transition plan is. As we know, the population is smaller in the younger groups. How do we get a turnout for these things?

There's another aspect of the question that I'm interested in. Accessibility to voting matters a lot to me. I'm curious about any plans that you have, or currently implement, to attract people who work on both the elections side and the volunteer side who speak multiple languages just to provide information for people. I think that is definitely one of the challenges for newcomers or new citizens to Canada who may have okay English or French but may really need information provided in their first language to best understand.

I'm wondering if there are any recruitment strategies around that.

Mr. Stéphane Perrault: There are two aspects to that, Madam Chair.

First, we have changing demographics. We are by law allowed to recruit 16-year-olds. You don't have to be an 18-year-old to work at a polling station. Increasingly, as I was trying to begin to explain, I think technology will reduce the pressure on the workforce. We can better serve electors with a smaller workforce. It's critical for us, quite apart from the idea of voting anywhere, to have an efficient voting process. That requires an electronic list solution. I'm a firm believer that it's a necessary aspect of dealing with the shifting population.

I should say that in terms of the ability of our workers to use the electronic devices, these are simple devices. As I said, they are used without issues at the provincial level and below. These are the same workers, and they've become accustomed to it.

In terms of recruiting people with linguistic diversity, one of the key aspects here is that we are recruiting locally. The makeup of our worker population is the same makeup as the local population in the district. We don't hire broadly outside the district. In a way, it's built into the system. But when we do outreach—for example, through our Inspire Democracy program—we have a module on working on elections.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

On behalf of PROC committee members, I really do want to thank you for your time here today, and for all the important work that you do.

Should something come into your minds later on that you wish you had shared or want to share, please just send it to the clerk. We'll have it translated into both official languages and shared around.

With that, we wish you a good rest of the day. You're always welcome back.

I know, Mr. Perrault, we'll for sure see you again, but the invitation is always open to everyone.

Thank you so much. Keep well and safe.

For the purpose of committee members, this has brought us to the end of the estimates. We're going to do quick votes on estimates before we suspend to do sound checks for the next panel.

Is there consent to group the votes on the main estimates 2023-24 for the purpose of voting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Excellent.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$423,319,199

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

LEADERS' DEBATE COMMISSION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$3,363,347

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$49,722,365

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$91,983,908

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the Main Estimates back to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

An hon. member: On division.

The Chair: Excellent.

We will suspend really quickly and start the next panel, we hope, at noon sharp.

Thank you so much.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Welcome, everyone.

The committee is now meeting to study foreign election interference. In our next panel, we have Madame Tausha Michaud and Mr. Walied Soliman.

You will each have up to five minutes for your opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions by committee members.

[*Translation*]

Welcome, Ms. Michaud. You have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Tausha Michaud (Senior Vice-President, McMillan Vantage, As an Individual): Thank you.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, my name is Tausha Michaud. I'm a senior vice-president at McMillan Vantage, one of Canada's premier public affairs and communications consultancies.

I have loyally served the Conservative Party and Conservative movement within Canada as a volunteer and senior staff member in government and opposition. Most notably, I had the honour of serving as chief of staff to the former leader of the official opposition, the Honourable Erin O'Toole.

I served in this role from 2020 until 2022. I describe it as an honour because it truly was. Erin O'Toole has been a mentor and a dear friend for 15 years. My passion and commitment to the Conservative movement very much grew because of his influence, which has instilled in me a profound respect for public service and our country's institutions.

During the 2021 campaign period, I also had the privilege of acting as a senior adviser to the leader. At the request of Mr. O'Toole and campaign manager Fred DeLorey, I was appointed as a backup representative to Conservative Party campaign chair Walied Soliman on Canada's security and intelligence threats to elections task force. My campaign role had me on the road with the leader, and the expectation was that I would attend meetings in situations where Mr. Soliman was unable to participate. At the direction of Mr. O'Toole, I was always to conduct myself with his guiding principle: Do the right thing in the interests of the nation first.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the security clearance that was required for my role on the task force committee, I am obliged to maintain the confidentiality of certain aspects of this matter. I stand ready to provide all necessary insights within the bounds of what is permissible.

While we grapple with the implications of foreign interference, we must remember that our strength as a country lies in our unity, our resolve and our shared commitment to democratic principles. I firmly believe that together we can rise to the challenge and ensure that citizens feel confident that our security establishment and parliamentarians are taking the necessary next steps to future-proof against real or perceived foreign interference in our elections.

There are a couple of points I would like to share on the record. I do not believe that foreign interference changed the outcome of the 2021 election campaign, although I do feel strongly that several volunteers and some candidates were subject to inappropriate tactics and intimidation. While the elections task force was well intentioned and set up in a manner that suggested it would be operating in a robust, information-sharing fashion, it ultimately left me with the impression of ambivalence, lack of coordination and authority and a complete failure to share relevant intelligence or provide meaningful advice.

My hope is that elected officials and our security establishment will refocus their efforts on implementing concrete, meaningful policy to ensure that legislative changes are implemented ahead of the next federal election.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I'm happy to take any questions and respond to the best of my abilities.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Mr. Soliman, welcome. You have the floor.

Mr. Walied Soliman (Chair, Norton Rose Fulbright Canada LLP, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear and participate in the important work of this committee. I apologize that I was unable to attend at the previously proposed times, but hope that my testimony will be useful to you today.

I serve as the Canadian chairman of one of Canada's leading and largest law firms. I've been involved on and off as a volunteer for the federal and provincial Conservative parties, and municipally for a variety of candidates, for my entire adult life.

While principally, I have been a Conservative, I have donated to both Liberal and NDP candidates whom I have come to know and who I thought would make great representatives.

I have known the Honourable Erin O'Toole my entire adult life. He is an honourable family man, military man, lawyer and politician. I was thrilled when he decided to run for leader of the Conservative Party. While his campaign seemed like a long shot when he first got started, my family and I enthusiastically threw our full support behind him.

Canada needs as many Erin O'Tooles as possible in each of our political parties. He has just the right amount of partisanship coupled with the pragmatism needed to run this complex nation.

In 2021, Erin asked me to be the campaign co-chair for the upcoming federal election. The campaign co-chair role in our party was really a "fill the gaps and take on certain higher profile problems to solve" role. The campaign was run by a first-class team, in-

cluding Fred DeLorey, whom you've heard from, Tausha Michaud, Dan Robertson and many others.

The common thread of this team was a drive to win, but ethically and with the best interests of the nation as best as we can interpret that in each of our actions. The tone was set by Erin. As Tausha put it, do the right thing in the interest of the nation first.

In mid-2021, I was appointed by Erin to be our party representative to Canada's security and intelligence threats to elections task force. Mr. O'Toole took the task force's mission very seriously. Mr. O'Toole wanted to ensure that we played our role in ensuring the integrity of the process.

The security clearance process was very extensive. I'd never been through such a comprehensive process. The task force met in heavily-secured buildings in Ottawa, where your phone and iPad were left at the door. Often, we were not permitted to leave with presentations or, sometimes, even take notes. Initially, I was very proud of our security establishment and the level of care it seemed to be taking.

Unfortunately, I can now confirm the following.

One, in several in-person meetings with briefings from multiple security stakeholders, not once were we made aware that there was any threat posed to the integrity of the 2019 election—not once.

Two, in fact, we were told very generically that there is interest in our elections from many global actors, but that there was, in fact, no evidence to suggest that there was anything for any of us in any of the political parties to worry about in 2021. We now know, unfortunately, that this was not entirely accurate.

I specifically raised two issues with senior members of the task force.

One, how are we to know, as political parties—all of us—if there is a fundraiser or candidate risk within our own party?

Two, it seemed that we were getting initial reports of issues in multiple ridings for the Conservatives, and we wondered if they had identified any risks associated with the 2021 election.

On both those questions, I increasingly felt that we were not taken seriously. After the election, and before the new government was sworn in, we spent more time providing everything we had to the task force and appropriate security channels. We were met with more shrugged shoulders, and I felt indifference. In our final call with the task force, I told them that I felt our security establishment had failed the process.

Political parties cannot formulate public policy under the threat that they are going to possibly lose ridings based on foreign influence because of, at least, a perception of a weak security infrastructure.

Here are my inputs for this committee.

One, as Tausha said, I don't know how many ridings were affected and whether or not the outcome of the election or Erin's leadership would have been any different.

Two, I did not believe that there was an appreciation in our security establishment for the chilling effect on public policy in all political parties that foreign interference may cause.

Three, I did not believe that our security establishment felt that it had the legislative tools to engage more transparently and constructively with senior members of political parties to foster confidence that the integrity of the system was, in fact, intact.

● (1210)

Overall I urge you all to leave partisanship out of this. It's too important. What's happened to Michael Chong should never happen again. No one on any side of the aisle should shrug their shoulders at this. Michael is quite brave and will continue to voice his perspective. I'm confident of that. Many might not.

The 2021 election is over—I'll be 10 seconds more, Madam Chair—but let's figure out what went wrong, how we can make our security establishment understand the chilling effect of the threat of foreign interference on public policy and let's make sure they have the legislative tools to work constructively with political parties.

I'll be happy to take your questions, keeping in mind, of course, that I can't share certain specifics regarding information exchanged with the SITE task force, as all members have confidentiality requirements.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I appreciate you have Zoom on gallery view, because then we can actually communicate with each other. As much as people believe that I like interrupting, I don't.

Madame Michaud only took two minutes and 42 seconds, so those 47 seconds you got are a gift from her. Send her a thank you.

With that, we're going to go into the six-minute round, starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Turnbull, Madame Gaudreau and then Madam Blaney.

As a reminder, if we just keep comments through the chair, it provides interpretation services with a moment to switch from one person to the other.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours. Thank you.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Soliman and Ms. Michaud, for appearing.

I'll direct my questions to Mr. Soliman, although if Ms. Michaud has something to add, she's welcome to chime in.

Mr. Soliman, you indicated that you had been providing the task force with pieces of information you had been gathering from various campaigns of interference activities or potential interference activities by the Beijing regime. As I understand your testimony, there appears to have been no follow-up by the SITE task force.

Can you elaborate on when you began to inform the task force, how frequently you were informing the task force and, more specifically, what response you received?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you.

First off, I did not say it was by the Beijing regime. Our role, as political actors, working with our security establishment, is to provide information and for them to make conclusions on those sorts of things.

Information was provided as it arose during the election to a small degree, and the larger amount of information that was gathered and put together was after the election and before the government was sworn in.

In terms of the reaction, I would say that in my two recommendations for things for this committee to look at, I truly did not believe there was an actual appreciation of the chilling effect that a perception, let alone an actual fact, of a lack of adequate protection from our security establishment would have on public policy. I really felt that was not understood. I think a big lesson from this, and I hope something our security establishment takes from it, is actually a greater appreciation for that.

Not everybody is brave as Michael. There are many who would be a lot more hesitant or less amplified.

Secondly, particularly when we talked about whether there was something in our political party that we needed to be aware of, and by what standard they'd communicate with us, I felt they did not have the legislative tools to engage with us in a manner that was necessary, in my view, to ensure that the process was adequate.

Mr. Michael Cooper: How early in the process were you bringing forward concerns to the task force about potential interference activities?

● (1215)

Mr. Walied Soliman: I would say it was probably midway to three-quarters of the way through the election, and then definitely after the election.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Were these reports of interference that you were aware of principally in the greater Vancouver and greater Toronto areas?

Mr. Walied Soliman: They were, to the best of my recollection.

Mr. Michael Cooper: When Fred DeLorey appeared before the committee, I asked him whether he would agree with the analogy that the information that was being relayed to the SITE task force.... I recognize, of course, that he was not one of the two members; you and Ms. Michaud were. Based on what he understood and based upon conversations he had, he concurred that it was essentially a one-way street and it was effectively like sending information into a black hole. Nothing was followed up on.

Would you agree with that characterization?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Unfortunately, I do.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I take it, based upon your testimony, that at no time did the SITE task force alert you to any interference activities.

As I understood, what you said was that they told you that there were foreign actors who had an interest in the election, but that there was nothing actionable and nothing that should be of particular concern. Is that correct?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I'd say there were two concerns. The most alarming to me—and I think why I started really taking interest in this again—was that we were never told the extent of the issues in 2019. In fact, I left meetings feeling that nothing happened in 2019. To the extent it did, it was inconsequential. We've obviously now learned that was not true.

Secondly, the threats in connection with 2021 were very generic. There were multiple global players and things to watch out for. In fact, Mr. Cooper, I could tell you that I recall in one of the meetings, I sort of raised my hand and said that I work for a leader who wants to do the right thing; he absolutely wants to do the right thing. I asked them to help us help them.

I remember saying that we were in the fundraising and vote-getting business. If people put up their hands and say they want to hold a fundraiser for us, we gladly do the best searches we can and get them to do a fundraiser for us. That's in all political parties. We're in the vote-getting business. I don't think we thought we were getting adequate responses to that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you to the witnesses for being here. It's great to have you. I agree with some of the sentiments you've shared in your opening remarks.

Mr. Soliman, I want to start with you.

I want to start with a very basic question. We invited you to this committee twice. Why did we have to summon you to come before the PROC committee?

Mr. Walied Soliman: You know, I've always been a volunteer in the political process. I have client commitments and firm commitments. The previous times did not work for me—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Was it just a scheduling matter?

Mr. Walied Soliman: This time did not work for me, to be quite frank, but we've made it happen.

I have been eager to actually provide this testimony. I'm very glad to have this opportunity.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay, great. Well, we're glad to have you now. It's a shame we had to summon you, but we're glad to have you.

When you brought forward allegations of foreign interference to the SITE task force, you said—I think, publicly—that you felt that they weren't taken seriously.

What's interesting is that Jody Thomas, the national security and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister, came before this committee. When she was asked about that, she said that she had clear documentation of your asking questions and stating your concerns, along with a very detailed response back to you on or about October 22, 2021.

Can you confirm that you received that response?

Mr. Walied Soliman: First off, Mr. Turnbull, I thought it was quite gratuitous to just talk about the summons, given what I started off with.

Private citizens who serve in the political process as volunteers and who return to the private world are not available just at the beck and call of a committee. We make ourselves available; we try our best. I certainly [*Inaudible—Editor*]—

● (1220)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Soliman, but you as a lawyer know the power that Parliament has to summon individuals. The Conservative party has done that over and over again. We're just asking for the same due respect and concern for the very important work that's being undertaken at this committee.

I'm just remarking that it's a shame that we had to summon you. We're glad to have you now and we appreciate you being here.

Could you answer the question of whether you received a detailed response from Jody Thomas on or about October 22, 2021, please?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Those comments by Ms. Thomas were sent to me. I reviewed them. I was a little bit surprised by them, as I had no record of any written response. I, in fact, had it checked five days before or five days after October 22, so I did—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Sir, I don't mean to cut you off. I apologize.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Let me just finish, please.

I actually reached out to Ms. Thomas, which is the responsible thing to do, for clarification. I learned that her comments were in reference to a video conference with her staff, and they were not in connection with any written comments.

However, I was not satisfied with the conclusions of the security establishment at that time, which is what I've just basically said here.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Walied Soliman: I think it's important to just say, though, that I accept that Ms. Thomas made those comments in good faith. She and I have actually agreed to have a more fulsome conversation privately on some of our observations that, hopefully, could be helpful to her and her office going forward. But there was no written response—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. I got your response. Thank you.

You have made critical remarks about the SITE task force. Can you admit that at least the SITE task force—and the set-up of the critical election incident public protocol—was a mechanism that was an improvement from the past? That didn't exist before 2019. Can you admit that the mechanism itself is a good thing to have in place, which our government put in place?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I don't have any reference point, Mr. Turnbull, for what was in the past and how things were done then, and how things are done now.

I was very excited about this. I think it is an excellent thing to have in place. What I am telling you is that I just don't think it worked.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay.

Can you explain why you didn't raise your concerns about the SITE task force until after election day? In fact, I think you raised concerns approximately 18 months later, if I'm not mistaken. Why did you stay silent for about a year and half?

Mr. Walied Soliman: That's inaccurate.

Even in Ms. Thomas' testimony, almost immediately after the election our team put together as comprehensive a package as we possibly could for the task force and the security establishment. They did receive it. They did review it.

My conclusions, which are constructive—I'm not trying to be partisan here, Mr. Turnbull—were that they did not appreciate the significance of the impact.

Secondly, I don't believe they felt they had the legislative tools to constructively engage with all of our political parties.

I think those are two things your committee should be looking at.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: We are, and I appreciate those comments. I am just trying to get some of the facts here, because there have been lots of allegations, but no real acknowledgement, certainly from the Conservative members on this committee, that there have been significant steps taken to implement a whole-of-government approach to combat foreign election interference.

But I take you at your word.

You have also referred, in a Twitter thread of February 17, to there "clearly" being evidence of "tampering" by China in the 2019 election. Can you just tell the committee what evidence you have, and would you be able to table that evidence for the committee?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I think you've seen the same reports that I have, which unfortunately have been revealed through information that credible reporters have reported on through The Globe and Mail, and Global and others.

I think the biggest disappointment to me in this affair is the fact that we just didn't know there was anything wrong in 2019, and I hope that's something that's corrected in the future.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

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

For my part, I'd like to go into a little more detail, just to be sure I understand the chronology of events.

Mr. Soliman, during the election period, how many times were you in contact with the group of senior officials or with the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force? Can you give us a figure?

[*English*]

Mr. Walied Soliman: First off, I apologize that my French isn't fluent enough to respond fully in French, although I am taking French courses.

Thank you for that. I think your question was referencing the information that we would have given during the election, versus information after the election.

I want everybody to reflect on the fog of an election period, and candidates coming out during that period saying, "Hey, we think there's a problem." Most campaign teams during an election period would react by saying, "Look, just go back to campaigning. We're not going to have our leader stand up and say there is a conspiracy happening, especially when the SITE task force has not said there was anything wrong in 2019. There is nothing for us to be concerned about right now."

That is why, Madam, most of the information that we provided happened after the election, when the fog of the election was over and we fully put together the information. We tried to package it as respectfully and responsibly as possible and put it forward for analysis.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

I'm well aware of your good faith and recognize your expertise, Mr. Soliman. You said we didn't have the legislative tools. If we did, what do you think we should do first thing, right away?

[*English*]

Mr. Walied Soliman: Again, I think your question is, what legislative changes I'm speaking of as a lawyer. Is that correct?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's correct.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you.

[*English*]

My impression is that maybe, responsibly, our security establishment, when asked the question, "How can you constructively engage with us as a political party to identify if there is a fundraiser or a candidate that's a problem?", the response back would be that there has to be a very high level of certainty that there is a problem before our security establishment will defame an individual.

I respect that. That is the standard at law, but I wonder if you as legislators should be exploring if there is a lower standard in these specific circumstances. I'm confident that, after going through all the security clearances and things that we had gone through, if we were told that it's better for us to at least be watchful around this fundraiser or around this candidate, I think that we as a political party—and I'm confident, all the political parties—would be far more responsive.

The bigger issue, Madame, though, is the attitudinal issue. It is that we, as participants in the political process, understand that we are in the vote-getting and fundraising business. I'm not sure that our security establishment fully appreciated that. That was my impression. That was my fear. In their view, it was, "It's not really altering the election. Is it that big of a deal? Maybe somebody's amplifying some statements". The answer is, of course it is, because Michael Chong is a brave man. Not everybody is. I don't want our legislators to have to be brave in order to succeed. They can succeed. They should succeed by putting forward what they think is the best legislative policy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you. It goes a long way to explaining why you spoke out and claimed on Twitter that threats to our democracy specifically had never been raised, and that your concerns and worries had never been taken seriously. You also said that, when you tried to inform people on the task force about this issue, they only shrugged their shoulders.

As I understand it, you were speechless when you saw that none of this was being taken seriously.

What corrective action should we take for the next election? I'd like to hear more from you.

• (1230)

[*English*]

Mr. Walied Soliman: I really appreciate such a constructive question.

I think there are two things. I think that, as a committee and as a government, we need to be educating and reaffirming to our security establishment the importance of ensuring not just that there isn't political interference, but that there isn't even a perception of political interference. That's number one.

Number two is that there should be active, constructive engagement with the leadership of the various campaigns, especially after all of the security clearances, having to leave your iPad and phone

and not taking notes, which was kind of like out of a movie. There should be that constructive engagement and a dialogue wherein we understand where there could be problems, whether it's interference or whether it's within our own political parties, so that we can foster greater confidence.

I would love nothing more than to hear from future campaign chairs that they were able to solve problems with our security establishment and that they were able to ensure that the system works great.

Gosh, Madam Chair is going to hate me by the end of this.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's a strong word. I would never. I appreciate this communication, even through a hybrid format. I think you're demonstrating that technology is good, and we can communicate without communicating.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Blaney, you have the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair,

Thank you very much to the witnesses. We're here today to talk about this really scary and very serious issue. I appreciate your taking the time.

I'm going to ask a question of both of you. Both of you talked about not feeling heard or not feeling that it was taken seriously. I'm wondering if you could expand on that a small amount.

The next part of that question is, once you've outlined some of the things, specifically, what are some of the things you were expecting to happen in the task force that might have been more helpful to you? How would you have liked to receive that information?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Tausha, why don't you go ahead and start, please.

Ms. Tausha Michaud: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Again as a reminder, I was the backup operative. Our campaign was in very capable hands with Mr. Soliman. I think it was a situation where we've gone through this really robust security process and the assumption is that you can have a frank conversation about what's happening—even if some of it is just anecdotal in the beginning—and receive some guidance on how to respond in what is the most political of times during a campaign period. I think where my frustration stems from is just that when we presented information, we really were just getting shrugged shoulders and, yes, we understand that you're frustrated, we understand that you're upset, please move on. I think that's unacceptable.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: So you would like something that was actually like, "We're seeing this, what do we do next, how do we respond to this and what is the best thing to do?"

Mr. Soliman.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

My expectation going in was that there would be real engagement in a constructive dialogue where the experts were going to be informing us of threats against our party and threats within our party and that we would constructively engage and work with them on finding solutions that work within the law. I thought, Ms. Blaney, that with the seniority of the individuals whom each of the leaders appointed and with the security clearance and confidentiality that we had signed, that would be what we would get. I could tell you quite honestly, I went into it with such excitement, and it's not what we got. It's not what we got. I think that it should be a lot better.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think it's interesting what you're speaking of, because you mentioned, Mr. Soliman, in your introduction the need to have legislative tools. We know, especially with the example of Mr. Chong, that one of the challenges is legislative, that while the process in place right now allows for discussions to happen to the minister, the minister then basically gets to decide what happens after that.

When it comes to election time, I'm just wondering what outcomes of legislative tools do you think would be important moving forward. The other part of the question is about after the election is over, because I really hear what you're saying that when you're in the heat of an election, it's like you you have to respond as quickly as possible and move on because you're just doing exactly what you said, getting votes, raising money, connecting with the public. What would you recommend happen after the election to have that discussion about what worked, what didn't work and how can we move forward, because I think that can potentially be something that is also a legislative tool?

• (1235)

Mr. Walied Soliman: I think the key item from a legislative perspective that your committee needs to reflect on is what is the standard of suspicion, the standard of doubt, the standard of evidence that the security establishment should feel comfortable engaging with political parties on? I think right now that standard, whether it is legislative or in practice—I'm not sure, as I'm not a security expert—is too high. I think that at the very least, if you are cynical, you'd say that's the excuse. If you were generous, you would say that's the reason. We should take that off the table as legislators, I think.

But more importantly, Ms. Blaney, I hope that all of us as political parties could really help our security establishment appreciate the chilling effect this type of thing could have.

In terms of what happens afterwards, there's actually a very short period of time where SITE is still up and running and engages with political parties until the new government is put in place. It doesn't go on forever.

I saw some reports about SITE playing a role right now, and maybe that's new and a fantastic thing if it is the case. But it really is in place until the caretaker government has done its work.

Maybe there's something that's ongoing, Ms. Blaney, year-round where there are senior people from the political parties who are engaging with our security establishment. I would think and I'd hope that all leaders would have mature folks sitting around that table re-

ally working hand-in-hand to get the right outcomes. Maybe that's an approach to consider.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think that is an important approach to look at, especially when we recognize that the rapidly changing reality of foreign interference is moving at such a pace that having people who are in those key roles both during and between elections would really allow for a conducive moving forward with elections.

Thank you.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you, Madam.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Calkins, you have the floor.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Before I get started, I just want to thank our witnesses for being here.

Thank you, Ms. Michaud, for your public service.

Mr. Soliman, thank you for your exclusively volunteer public service up to this point.

I think I already know, but I just want to get it on the record, Mr. Soliman.

Morris Rosenberg, in his “Report on the assessment of the 2021 Critical Election Incident Public Protocol”, states on page 39, regarding briefings to political parties by the SITE task force representatives, that, “The party representatives were pleased with the thoroughness of the briefings and the openness of the NSA representatives”.

Was that your experience?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I read that, and I certainly don't recall saying that. Now, I'll say this: I certainly would not have said that after the last call we had with the SITE task force, where we expressed significant disappointment. There may have been a point when we were pleased with a meeting or something. Mr. Rosenberg is a senior and respected individual, but that was not my experience.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The cabinet directive on the critical election incident protocol provides that, with respect to interference activities, “Barring any overriding national security/public security reasons, the agencies will inform the affected party”. Do you feel that happened?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Again, my single biggest frustration is that I think we would have prosecuted and reviewed matters relating to the 2021 election differently had we at least known that there were possibly some problems with 2019, and, unfortunately, we weren't even told that. As we all know now, that was not accurate.

• (1240)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Do you believe that we would not know any better today had somebody not released information into the public realm?

Mr. Walied Soliman: One of the members asked why I didn't say anything until, I think, February 2023. The reason was that I accepted what our security establishment told us. I was upset about it. It didn't seem right to me, but, at the end of the day, I'm not a security expert; I'm a lawyer. If you have an M & A problem, I'm happy to help you, but I don't know what the difference is between a WhatsApp campaign run locally and something run by a foreign actor. No, it was quite frustrating that we didn't learn that until much later.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Erin O'Toole publicly stated that he believes the Conservative Party could have lost up to eight or nine ridings due to foreign interference, specifically by Beijing and specifically to help the governing party. Do you share that assessment, and, if so, can you elaborate? I'm assuming you would have had conversations with Mr. O'Toole in this regard.

Mr. Walied Soliman: I agree there's no question that some number of seats were affected, whether there were eight, nine or 12. I've read other reports that put it as high as 15. The answer is, I don't know.

I also want to be very careful. Our task force talked about many global players; they did not just speak about Beijing. I really think that probably some of the work this committee and others will need to do is dig into those questions.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: As this story has evolved, the government's defence is that it has created this process, and I'll just call it, for lack of a better word, this "cloud of information" with the task forces and everybody who's here. It's a cloud that information goes into, and one of the sources of that information would be reporting of incidents by political parties and any other intelligence sources that our intelligence agencies would have. Several reporters have mused publicly, based on the information and findings they have, that the government knew full well about Beijing's interference and let it slide because it benefited them.

Do you believe that's a possibility?

The Chair: I just have to pause really quick because the time has run out. If there is a next round, can I take this out of the next round? Do you want an answer or no answer?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You're the chair.

The Chair: We're agreed.

We'll give you a quick answer and it'll come out of the next round.

Go ahead.

Mr. Walied Soliman: The honest answer is that I don't know.

I've seen the same reports you have seen. I do not know.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our guests who are here, Madam Michaud and Mr. Soliman.

As a long-time party activist who's occupied some of the roles that you both have held, I'm very sympathetic to where you are. I hope you'll understand that my questions are not in a way to play a partisan game, but to try to elicit what we know, what went wrong and what we can do better going forward.

Madame Michaud, let me start with you, if I may.

You had indicated in your opening statement that you were chief of staff to the Honourable Erin O'Toole. Can you give me the dates, roughly—the month and year—when you were chief of staff to the leader of the opposition?

Ms. Tausha Michaud: It was August 2020 through February 2022, approximately.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I'm assuming you've been following the testimony. On Tuesday night, Mr. Chong testified that he had a number of meetings with CSIS since 2021 related to foreign interference.

By my count, three of those meetings occurred while you were chief of staff to the leader of the opposition. Did Mr. Chong inform you of those meetings with CSIS?

• (1245)

Ms. Tausha Michaud: He did not.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Here's what troubles me: How is it possible that one of your most senior members of caucus—a fellow who's widely respected, is a leader on many international files, and is especially a lead critic on the China file—didn't give you a heads-up that he had a meeting with CSIS on these issues? One of the meetings was at CSIS's request and the rest at his request.

Ms. Tausha Michaud: You'd have to ask Mr. Chong.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you.

Mr. Soliman, I appreciate the volunteer role that you played.

When Mr. DeLorey testified back in April, he made it sound as if foreign interference was something the party became alert to only after the election. You've said that if you had known what had happened in 2019, it would have coloured differently your approach to being part of the task force.

Did Mr. Chong inform you at any point that he had been in contact with CSIS or that CSIS had been in contact with him, and that there were some concerns about his being targeted or about undue influence by a foreign power?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Let me just correct something quite important. Information relating to the 2019 election would not have coloured my participation in the task force. It was an honour and privilege to do so.

Hon. Greg Fergus: That's fair enough.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Information in connection with the 2019 election, which has since been made public, without any question would have impacted how we prosecuted that election and, I would expect, how each of the political parties would have prosecuted that election.

In connection with anyone else—

Hon. Greg Ferguson: I'm glad you raised that point. I don't mean to cut you off. Really it isn't because it's not interesting, but I have about a minute and 10 seconds and there's an important question I want to get to.

You talked about the standards perhaps being too high before they engage with political parties. You also mentioned in your opening statement and in a reflection that if the standards were too low, you understood why: You don't want to just helter skelter make accusations, because that could have a chilling effect on parties and people's participation.

If you were told to watch out for person X who's fundraising for you, even if that person were totally fine and totally clear, could that have a chilling effect on your engagement with that person or the responsibilities you would give them in a campaign?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I'll tell you this. Of course there needs to be a balance, and that's why each of the leaders needs to appoint people who are trusted, who are respectful of the process and who will take that information and deal with it in an appropriate manner.

It is why, as a committee, you need to be exploring what that standard should be. This shouldn't be upsetting to any of the members around the table, because I believe that this is something that will impact each of you.

Hon. Greg Ferguson: 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'd like to get more information to understand the chronology of events.

It's true that we talked about the threshold being too high. However, I'd like to hear you talk about why you're so sure. At what point did you think or believe that certain ridings were the target of interference? Was it during the election or when you were taking stock of it?

[*English*]

Mr. Walied Soliman: Again, let me start off by apologizing for my lack of fluency in French. I will answer in English.

When you're in the fog of an election and you're getting feedback, the instinct is not to turn around and say, "There's foreign interference". That would have looked very foolish at that moment, particularly given the information and access to information that we had in the task force.

I would say that it really started crystalizing in the days—not weeks, but a week to 10 days after the election. There was some information and some expression of concern as it came in, but in a quiet way and through the channels that we thought were appropriate. Afterwards, again, we didn't run and hold a press conference. We were respectful. We were truly respectful of the process. We put together a package. We sent it to the right people. We engaged with

them in dialogue, and I truly feel that those two issues were the outcomes, an ambivalence—

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you. I also understand that when you receive information from authorities, you try to accept it. I understand that you have accepted it, Mr. Soliman.

I have a question about the evidence you've collected. I don't want to know all the details, as I only have a few seconds left. Having said that, do you think the task force was in a position to come to the same conclusion as you, in light of the grey areas where it was impossible to find evidence? When it came out in the open, were you in agreement with the task force?

[*English*]

Mr. Walied Soliman: The feedback that we received from the leadership of the committee, particularly after the election, led me to conclude that, first, there was not an appreciation for how serious an issue this would be just to have the perception that there is something wrong, let alone fact. Second, I did feel that possibly there was a legislative tool gap, which is something I hope you'll explore.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Blaney, you have the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Soliman, to come back to you, I appreciate that you said a couple of times that it wasn't just one country and that there was concern expressed about multiple countries. As we go forward, it is important that we recognize that this is an ever-changing, quickly changing reality, and there are multiple countries that we should be watching very carefully.

I also appreciate that you talked about this not being a partisan issue, because collectively we should all focus on making sure that our systems are as robust as possible to increase the confidence of Canadians. I appreciate that.

You have talked about the task force and the threshold. I heard both of you say very clearly that you went through a very robust process, so after that robust process, when you feel like you've really been checked out, you were expecting an open dialogue that would be helpful.

During the election process and when you were working with the task force, was there any guidance to you on how to work with the multiple campaigns across the country and that, if there were concerns coming from those different ridings across Canada, how that would be fed to the task force? Also, on the other side, if there were a concern, did they ever talk about how you would work with that particular region in addressing it?

Mr. Walied Soliman: Tausha, would you like to take the first crack at it and then I can jump in?

Ms. Tausha Michaud: It's a great idea. That makes perfect sense to me. I think Mr. Soliman and I both thought that's exactly what would happen. In the aftermath, particularly of the October 21 meeting that was referenced, that was not at all what happened. I won't speak for Mr. Soliman but for me, but I think it was incredibly disappointing and completely unacceptable because this whole process was set up for that exact reason.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Soliman, is there anything you'd like to add? You have about 25 seconds.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Go ahead, because I agree with Ms. Michaud.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm just wondering because we currently are seeing some of the realities. We're not seeing people taking part in these systems. If I think of the current leader, he's not getting the CSIS briefings. I'm just concerned that if we don't use those systems, how do we critique them in a meaningful way?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I think these are things your committee is going to have to look at—other investigations are going to have to look at. I would urge you to not just reflect on actual interference and actual issues, but even just the perception. I would love the outcome of this to be a system where future political candidates and future political chairs, and chiefs of staff and campaign managers have full confidence in the system.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to just give a quick two minutes to Mr. Cooper, followed by Mrs. Romanado.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Soliman and Ms. Michaud, I take it that you have been following the proceedings of this committee as they pertain to its study on foreign interference. In that regard is there anything that has been said at this committee by any witness that you would like to correct the record on?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I have not followed it carefully other than through newspaper reports. If something comes up I will certainly let you know.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Michaud.

Ms. Tausha Michaud: Thank you, Madam Chair.

For me I guess there are the comments that Mr. Rosenberg had consulted the parties. As one of the two designates on the task force, I can confirm I have not corresponded with Mr. Rosenberg.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Mr. Soliman, had you been in contact with Mr. Rosenberg?

Mr. Walied Soliman: As I answered in the previous question, not that I recall.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You had used some very strong language, probably justifiable language, but nonetheless strong language. You told the task force in the final call that the security establishment had clearly failed our democracy, and yet at page 39 of Rosenberg's report he says that the parties gave the task force effectively a clean bill of health. How is one to reconcile the two?

Mr. Walied Soliman: I don't know. I think you'd have to ask him.

Mr. Michael Cooper: He never talked to you, and he never talked to Ms. Michaud. Do you know who he talked to from the Conservative Party?

Mr. Walied Soliman: First of all, I'll say that I don't recall. I have no record of that. It certainly would not have been the conclusion after the engagement that we had with them, but I don't know what else to add to you on that.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and through you I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today. I especially appreciate the fact that you both have provided us with very non-partisan testimony. As you know, we're all in the same kind of business and sometimes partisanship can cloud a lot of the work we do. I really appreciate your honesty and your feedback.

I want to start with Madame Michaud.

In your capacity of chief of staff to the Hon. Erin O'Toole—whom I've had the great pleasure of working with as well in my time here on the Hill, and who will be missed—can you give us some recommendations on how we can improve the communication? You understand that with Mr. Chong, when the Prime Minister found out about what happened to him, he arranged for a briefing with the national security and intelligence adviser and Mr. Vigneault. Could you give us any recommendations that you would suggest we include in this report not only on what could be done in government to help improve and make sure that MPs are feeling safe and that our democracy is protected, but also in how SITE can improve? They did testify that they're new to the political world as well. They don't know how we work. If you can give us any feedback that would be most appreciated.

Ms. Tausha Michaud: To your last line there, I think that's the exact problem. Mr. Soliman has outlined it repeatedly. The security establishment simply does not understand how the political process works leading up to and during an election.

I think it is incumbent upon legislators and parliamentarians and even, frankly, campaign experts to be brought into that process and help the security establishment understand the political realities that would take place, not just in a campaign period but also in routine business between election cycles.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank you both for taking the time to be here. I totally recognize that it's hard to just drop and come when we need you to come. You both did appear, and it means a lot to PROC committee members.

If anything else comes to mind that you would like committee members to know, please just send it to the clerk. We'll have it translated in both official languages and share it around.

With that, Madame Michaud and Mr. Soliman, thank you for your time and your service. We hope that you have a good rest of the day.

● (1300)

Ms. Tausha Michaud: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Mr. Walied Soliman: Thank you.

Good bye.

The Chair: PROC committee members, we are going to continue with our meeting in public. As per the top of the meeting, Mr. Cooper had asked for the floor.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm going to move a motion relating to the production of documents concerning the question of privilege respecting Michael Chong. The motion has been distributed to members, I believe.

The Chair: I will just confirm that I think you sent it to us. The clerk does have it, and the clerk was going to distribute it.

I think it would be fair if we started by reading it into the record.

Do the interpreters have it? Do you want to give me two seconds?

Thank you. I understand that everyone has it.

Mr. Cooper, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll now read the motion into the record:

That, in relation to its order of reference of Wednesday, May 10, 2023, concerning the intimidation campaign orchestrated by Wei Zhao against the Member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other Members, the Committee

(a) order the production,

(i) within one week, of the July 2021 CSIS report entitled "People's Republic of China Foreign Interference in Canada: A Critical National Security Threat", together with all records concerning the transmission to, distribution within, analysis of and handling by, the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development and the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, of this report, and

(ii) within three weeks, of all other memoranda, briefing notes, e-mails, records of conversations, and any other relevant documents, including any drafts, which are in the possession of any government department or agency, including the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force, the Critical Election Incident Protocol Panel, any minister's office and the Prime Minister's Office, containing information concerning planning or efforts by, or on behalf of, foreign governments or other foreign state actors to intimidate a Member of the House of Commons,

provided that

(iii) these documents be deposited without redaction with the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, in both official languages,

(iv) a copy of the documents shall also be deposited with the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, in both official languages, with any proposed redaction of any information which, in the government's opinion, could reasonably be expected to compromise the identities of employees or sources or intelligence-collecting methods of Canadian or allied intelligence agencies,

(v) the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel shall promptly notify the Committee whether the Office is satisfied that the documents were produced as ordered, and, if not, the Chair shall be instructed to present forthwith, on behalf of the Committee, a report to the House outlining the material facts of the situation,

(vi) the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel shall assess the redactions proposed by the government, pursuant to subparagraph (iv), to determine whether the Office agrees that the proposed redactions conform with the criteria set out in subparagraph (iv) and

(A) if it agrees, it shall provide the documents, as redacted by the government pursuant to subparagraph (iv), to the Clerk of the Committee, or

(B) if it disagrees with some or all of the proposed redactions, it shall provide a copy of the documents, redacted in the manner the Office determines would conform with the criteria set out in paragraph (iv), together with a report indicating the number, extent and nature of the government's proposed redactions which were disagreed with, to the Clerk of the Committee, and

(vii) the Clerk of the Committee shall cause the documents, provided by the Office of the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel pursuant to subparagraph (vi), to be distributed to the members of the Committee and to be published on the Committee's website forthwith upon receipt; and

(b) makes the evidence received during this study available for its study on foreign election interference.

Madam Chair, the motion before the committee is straightforward and critical to getting the answers that MP Chong deserves, that members of the House deserve and that Canadians deserve.

How is it that an accredited Beijing diplomat was threatening the safety and security of a family member of a sitting member of Parliament and seeking to intimidate that member by threatening his family? How is it that CSIS knew about it, drafted a report on it in July of 2021, which, in turn, was circulated to the Prime Minister's own department and to relevant departments, including Global Affairs Canada, and that, notwithstanding that, for two years, the member for Wellington—Halton Hills was kept in the dark?

● (1305)

It wasn't until he was notified by The Globe and Mail that he was made aware. The Prime Minister has claimed, incredibly, that he had no idea—this from a prime minister who supposedly is briefed regularly on national security matters, who supposedly reads everything; and from his chief of staff, who came before this committee and claimed that supposedly nothing is held back from him.

It is very difficult to believe the Prime Minister at the best of times, but as MP Chong clearly stated before this committee, if it is true the Prime Minister didn't know, then that is also extremely problematic and raises real questions about his "fitness" as Prime Minister in dealing with serious national security issues. This is including something as serious as an accredited Beijing diplomat seeking to intimidate a sitting member of Parliament to interfere with their ability to do their job, to speak on behalf of their constituents, and vote in this place on behalf of their constituents and on behalf of Canadians.

This motion essentially provides for two key things. The first is the production of papers for where this CSIS memo went.... As Jenni Byrne, the former deputy chief of staff, highlighted to this committee, there is a tracking system. Michael Chong also mentioned that there is a tracking system that would make it very easy to determine exactly whom this memo went to and when it went to various officials and departments. It's important to know that. It certainly is relevant to understand where this breakdown occurred or whether something more serious happened, namely that the Prime Minister or senior officials in his office knew about this and covered it up for two years.

The second component of the motion relates to production of all other memoranda, briefing notes, emails and other documents surrounding this memo and surrounding the government's knowledge of intimidation attempts by Beijing directed towards members of Parliament.

The process for the production of documents set out in this motion is one that balances, on the one hand, the need for this committee to be able to see as many of the documents that are out there as possible, while at the same time protecting national security interests.

The motion recognizes that the PCO, quite frankly, is in a conflict on this. The heart of this issue is a memo that went from CSIS to the PCO, and what happened after that is a critical question.

It is imperative that it not be the PCO, that it not be this government—which has so much to answer for—that gets the final say over what is produced and what isn't, what is redacted and what isn't. Given that, what this motion provides for is that the government—through the PCO, through the normal process—review documents, identify what documents are relevant and make what they see as appropriate redactions, and then provide them to the parliamentary law clerk.

• (1310)

He has a full national security clearance. Unlike the PCO and this government, he is completely independent and not in a conflict. Give him the opportunity to look at and compare the unredacted version of the documents and suggested redactions, then make a final decision on—having regard for national security and other considerations—what the final redactions should be. Thereafter, the documents come to this committee.

This process is not a novel one. In fact, it is one that involved the parliamentary law clerk, who recommended this process. It was one that was adopted with respect to the production of documents from PHAC in relation to the Winnipeg lab scandal. Those documents were never produced. The Liberal government blocked their production, resulting in a finding of contempt of Parliament for the chair of PHAC and highlighting the lengths to which this government has gone in the past to cover things up and not be transparent. I hope that won't happen in this case.

The PCO and the Prime Minister.... This government is in conflict. We need an independent process, and we need to move ahead expeditiously because it's not just a matter of calling witnesses. It's important that we call witnesses, and we've made some progress in

that regard, but we need, to the greatest degree possible, unredacted documents.

What we don't need is what this government has provided, with the support of the NDP, in the past: an ATIP standard of production with respect to redactions, which has resulted in page after page of blank documents. It's completely unacceptable. It's completely unnecessary and I would hope that, if the Liberals are sincere and truly concerned about what happened to Michael Chong and his family and want to get answers, they will support a process that allows this committee to truly do its work and empowers the parliamentary law clerk, not the Prime Minister's Office and the PCO—which are in a conflict—to make a determination as to what should be redacted and what should not.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

I have Mr. Turnbull on my list, followed by Mrs. Blaney.

Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I appreciate Mr. Cooper's remarks, although I don't agree.

I think we've all expressed concern about the allegations and the question of privilege that Mr. Cooper mentioned. I think all we're really concerned about here is protecting national security and ensuring that information and documents are shared in a responsible manner. The standard on this committee, in the past, has been to follow—at least twice in this study on foreign interference—the normal ATIP rules and abide by that standard.

The specific part of what you proposed here that strikes me as challenging is that the documents be deposited without redaction at the Office of the Law Clerk. I have concerns. I legitimately don't want information to be shared publicly that should be dealt with in a sensitive manner. That's the only concern I would like to share.

I will stop there. That's one concern. As I read through it.... It's a longer motion. It's not as simple as Mr. Cooper made it out to be. I'll certainly review it and let you know if I have any other concerns, as well.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I thank the member for bringing forward this motion. This is really concerning. I appreciate that in the motion he said, "the Member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other Members". I think it's very clear that one of those other members is somebody whom I also have partnership with in our caucus.

This is really serious. Trying to navigate this very complex issue, knowing that we need to have clarity and accountability but also knowing that we have to honour national security, because we don't want any of those people who have already faced challenges to be put in an uncomfortable position.... We want to make sure that as we move forward we don't threaten any of the relationships we have with other countries that we share information with. These things are very concerning to me.

I also want to let the committee know that I am leaving today for a trip for the NATO Parliamentary Association. I do have a hard stop of 1:30. I will need to leave or I'll miss the plane. I'm sure I will not be in a happy reality then.

I have a couple of questions for the member. I read it closely. What I think I read is that there was an understanding that every piece of information coming to us would be translated prior to it getting to the law clerk. I have had a conversation with the law clerk. I've been fairly transparent that I'm trying to understand what this motion is, making sure that we are following the very best rules and acknowledging that we do need some information to help us go through this process.

I definitely heard that one of the holdups could be the translation. That concerns me because then, of course, the timelines that we're putting in this motion won't necessarily be effective, just because we don't have the resources to get that done as quickly as possible.

The other question I have is this. Other committees that have addressed some fairly confidential issues have followed certain processes whereby, for example, information was shared in a room. You could go into the room. You weren't allowed to bring your phone. You would review information, which often was redacted, and then you could leave from that place.

This one actually asks for—if I understand correctly—all of that information to be put online. These are issues of national security. I'm not trying to be a pain here. I am very concerned. We have a responsibility to our country. We have heard so many witnesses say repeatedly that this cannot be partisan. Those things really do concern me. I'm not taking this lightly. I am trying to understand so I can make the best decision for the security of our nation but also recognizing that MPs need to have the right to do their work. I'm also recognizing that there are many Canadians in this country who are facing challenges. When they go to police and the RCMP, they are not being heard at all. No further action is taken. It's not just at this level. It is at a broader level that we have to provide leadership.

I'm hoping we can get this done sooner rather than later but I also want to say, on the record, that I need time to do my work as a parliamentarian, because I take this very seriously. I hope we can have some questions.

Chair, I hope you will let us leave at the appropriate time, and we'll come back to this as soon as we possibly can.

Thank you.

● (1320)

The Chair: I do have Madame Gaudreau followed by Mr. Ferguson and Mrs. Romanado, but because those questions were posed to

the member, I'm going to ask the member if he's comfortable trying to answer.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I will be brief.

First of all, with respect to Mr. Turnbull's concerns about the law clerk receiving fully unredacted copies of documents, that is true. That is a process that was previously adopted, and the parliamentary law clerk does have a full national security clearance. I don't see why that would be an issue.

With respect to the questions posed by Ms. Blaney, with respect to the translation issue, you are right. That is provided for at subparagraph (e)(iii). That's something we can work on to try to see that there isn't a delay, because I take your point on that.

As far as documents being posted online goes, that would occur only after the parliamentary law clerk had undertaken redactions. Those would be documents that would then be distributed to the committee. Those would be redacted copies, not unredacted copies, so there would be no national security issues at play. It would be an issue of transparency and obviously we want to be as transparent as possible for Canadians so there isn't a national security issue there.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

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

There are several things to consider.

First, we have a few minutes to make a decision that may be favourable or unfavourable. I'd like to remind you that we're on break next week and that time is short.

We want to find solutions going forward, we all agree on that. That said, as parliamentarians, we have a duty of respect to national security.

Further, we have to listen to our fellow citizens. In my case, I hear them telling me that we have to do everything we can. We need to use every means at our disposal to find the necessary tools to fix the situation, while always maintaining integrity and access to information. From what I'm hearing, I have the impression that it'll be a while before each of us feels reassured that what we are asking for will be done.

What troubles me somewhat is that, even though we're meeting again on Tuesday, and we'll all have agreed and we'll all be reassured, there is no guarantee that information won't be used in a malicious or partisan way, or kept secret.

How much time do we have? We also need to get these documents translated.

It really bothers me. It's Thursday afternoon. We have to make a decision. One overriding question remains: if we make a decision on Tuesday, can we hurry the process to deal with this as a priority, given the urgency and importance of the issue? We need to think as much about gathering all the documents as we do about respecting the disclosed information and translation. We need to consider all of these elements to make a decision. Otherwise, it will be difficult.

[*English*]

The Chair: Our committee can always change the priority, because we do it on a daily basis right now. If this is the new priority, then that's what we choose. When it comes to resources and all that stuff, it's a rhetorical question, because it matters what else is going on.

I think you're absolutely correct, to summarize, to say a bit of time might go a long way to get some of these i's dotted and t's crossed.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

• (1325)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Madam Chair, I'll be very brief.

I have several concerns with regard to this motion.

I'd like to echo what Ms. Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney said, and also Mr. Cooper. It is indeed important that we have the information. According to Mr. Cooper, the purpose of this motion is to find out who knew what and when. Witnesses who have appeared talked about a tracking system for the distribution of documents. As far as the 2021 report is concerned, the tracking system is perhaps the only thing we really need access to. In this way, we can bypass entirely the question of whether the document distribution process is airtight and all the other things which were requested, given the potential consequences on national security, as Ms. Gaudreau so clearly put it.

As for translation, as a Quebec MP, I firmly believe that documents must be available in both official languages. However, I don't think this can be done within the time frame contained in this motion. All we're doing is setting ourselves up for failure and there will be fallout for business.

In addition, I have concerns about the information being produced only in one version only without redactions made by our na-

tional security agencies. I have great respect for the law clerk and parliamentary counsel, but we have obligations to our allies, and I don't want Canada to be seen as the weak link in the great information chain. If that were the case, we would be compromising the security of Canadians, because some information would not be shared.

I'd like to ask Mr. Cooper to rewrite his motion so that it sticks directly to the information he's seeking and so that the planned process actually allows us to have all the information.

[*English*]

The Chair: You are the next person on the list. Do you really want to answer? There's not really anything to answer.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I think the motion is very straightforward.

The Chair: Perfect. I agree.

Madam Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are some parts of this that I'm a little concerned about. I'm concerned about, as Ms. Blaney said, putting the names of other MPs who may have been targeted and who may not want their names out there or that kind of information to get out. We have a duty also to respect the privacy of some of these MPs who may also be concerned about having their names as possible targets. So, I do have some concerns with this, and I just want to make sure I'm understanding it.

However, I know that Madam Blaney has to leave. Just the idea of putting MPs' names out there and their family members out there is quite concerning to me.

With that, I'm going to move that we adjourn.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1330)

The Chair: Have a good weekend. We'll see you next week.

Please take time to talk to each other and figure out a way forward. We can do it.

Thank you.

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