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• (1205)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 61 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to continue its study on foreign election interference.

Before we begin—and this is a point I would like all members to hear very clearly—I'll note that all comments should be addressed through the chair. There should be one person speaking at a time. This is a meeting we've been looking forward to, and I know it's really important to all of us. Therefore, I will ask that, when we ask a question or make a comment, we provide time for an answer.

I will also let you know that the health of interpreters and the people who do their important work on Parliament Hill is paramount to me, because it's the way we advance a country with two official languages. That's something I think most of us wholeheartedly believe in. My signal to you once again is that I expect only one person to speak at a time and that we maintain a bit of eye contact when we want to pass the floor, however we do that. We're capable of doing this. The clerk and I will maintain a consolidated speaking list of members wishing to speak.

Today we have with us Ms. Katie Telford, chief of staff to the Prime Minister.

As a person who observes the Sikh faith and a member of the Sikh community, I want to wish everyone celebrating Vaisakhi a happy Vaisakhi. This is a really big deal in our community, so I want to express that to everyone here in person and watching. Thank you.

Ms. Telford, you will now have time for an opening statement, and then we will proceed to questions and comments from committee members. Welcome to PROC.

Ms. Katie Telford (Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thought I'd start by explaining my role and how I receive intelligence.

My job is to advise the Prime Minister and manage the Prime Minister's Office. A key part of my role is ensuring he receives advice and information from all parts of government so that he can make the best decisions possible. This includes briefings from the national security and intelligence adviser, the NSIA, and other intelligence officials. I am usually with the Prime Minister for these briefings.

Sometimes we receive these briefings in secure settings known as SCIFs. That stands for sensitive compartmented information facility. All of our phones and electronics get locked up by the elevator and don't enter the floor, let alone the room itself. Other times the NSIA will request that I read a document that is brought to me by a CRO, a client relations officer. The CRO hands me the document, supervises me while I read it and takes it back.

Sensitive intelligence is treated with the utmost care. There is a rigorous vetting process to obtain top secret clearance, which I have, and there are equally important obligations one must uphold to keep that clearance. That is because publicly disclosing what our intelligence agencies know or how they come to know it can irreparably harm Canada's national interests and put people's lives in danger. It can also threaten Canada's ability to obtain intelligence in the future, because Canada is a net importer of intelligence.

In my years in this job, I have seen a huge range of intelligence from all parts of the world. Some of it has been wrong—proven wrong—and some of it has been right. For some, we may never know, or only with time will we learn, if it's true.

Even intelligence that is proven wrong can be useful. It can shed light on the motivations or agenda of the source or on a narrative being pushed. Intelligence often comes as fragments of information that then need to be analyzed, assessed and discussed to understand what they really mean. That work has to be done by situating those fragments in a wider context of information. As the deputy minister of foreign affairs told you at this very committee, “intelligence rarely paints a full, concrete or actionable picture.”

[*Translation*]

Our government has been strengthening the measures that protect our institutions from foreign interference since 2015. I can confirm hand on heart that this issue has always been a priority and that we have taken concrete measures in this area. It is therefore important to take a moment to look back at the work that we have accomplished.

The Liberal Party made a commitment in its 2015 platform to form what has become the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians. The current Prime Minister, who was an MP when the Afghan detainee scandal broke out under the Harper government, saw the need for certain MPs to access classified information, which was not possible at the time. That's why our government passed a law to form such a committee. For six years now, MPs of all parties with top secret security clearance have been able to look at classified information and study it independently before producing a report that is made public. This committee is now reviewing foreign interference in the federal election process, amongst other files.

The threat of foreign interference has evolved since 2015. After seeing what happened with the American election in 2016 and the French election in 2017, our government, in order to better protect the 2019 federal election, set up the critical election incident public protocol. This protocol was part of the whole-of-government plan to protect Canada's democracy that we put into place in January 2019. The government officials in charge of the protocol who had access to classified information on matters of national security concluded that the 2019 and 2021 elections were carried out freely and fairly.

In 2019, we also set up the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency. This agency reviews how our security and intelligence agencies evaluated foreign interference before and after the two previous elections.

We also set up rapid response mechanism Canada and the security and intelligence threats to intelligence task force. Both help us to detect foreign threats to our democracy and disable them.

As the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs has told you, we have more and more tools to fight foreign interference.

David Johnston, the former Governor General of Canada, will present his recommendations on the issue by May 23. He will have unlimited access to classified documents to do his work and obviously, we have already confirmed that we will accept his recommendations.

[English]

Still, I know you have questions about what the Prime Minister's Office was told about specific intelligence and what we did as a result. I will do my best to answer your questions. At the same time, I must respect the law and the same boundaries the directors of CSIS and the NSIA did when they appeared before you. These constraints are exactly why NSICOP was created.

What I can say here is this: When we receive intelligence briefings of any kind, we don't leave any stones unturned. We usually start by asking a lot of questions: questions like how credible the intelligence is, who else has been briefed, who else needs to be briefed, what decisions are in front of decision-makers, what actions have already been taken, what actions can be taken and what authorities are needed to take them. Very often they are not within the Prime Minister's or cabinet's authorities. By that, I mean those are decisions for law enforcement or intelligence officials, and you've heard from them about the tools they have available, like CSIS's threat reductions.

All that being said, if there are actions to be taken to protect national security, we do not hesitate. Let's remember that foreign interference threatens all democracies. It comes from many authoritarian states, like China, Russia and Iran. It targets all aspects of society: our communities—particularly diaspora communities—our universities, research institutes, all levels of government and all political parties. It is not a new threat, but it is an evolving threat. It is a threat we will continue to do our utmost to guard against.

I want to end by addressing the debate around my appearance today and whether I am the right person to appear before you. I am a consumer of intelligence, not the one who briefs on intelligence. The NSIA is the person who directly reports to the Prime Minister on these matters. On top of that, for all the reasons outlined today, these matters are extremely sensitive, and the law limits what I can talk about in this public setting.

Ultimately, I have accepted this invitation because I want Parliament to work.

I've devoted most of my professional life to getting people involved in politics: to run for office, to advance the causes they believe in and to make a difference in their communities and in their country. That's why I'm here, and I believe it's why we're all here. Protecting our democracy is one of the most important things we can do and one of the most important parts of my job. Campaigns, politics and democracy are all about people expressing their rights and electing who represents them. I will always fight for these rights and defend against any attempts to undermine them.

With that, I will do my very best to answer your questions.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Telford, for those opening comments and for being here with us today.

We will now commence with six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Brock, followed by Ms. Sahota.

[Translation]

Then we will go to Ms. Gaudreau, who will be followed by Ms. Blaney.

[English]

As always, one person will speak at a time.

I will give a quick reminder that this is the procedure and House affairs committee. It is not a courtroom, so if we can provide some time to ask a question, make a comment and give an answer, that will allow our interpreters to work best.

Interpreters, can you see me?

[Translation]

Can you hear me? If there's a problem, please raise your hand and I will suspend the meeting to allow you to do your work, which is very important for us all.

[English]

Mr. Brock, the floor is yours.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Telford. Thank you for your attendance today.

Ms. Telford, did the Prime Minister receive a series of briefings from Canada's national spy agency beginning in January 2022 on Beijing's election interference, specifically in the 2019 election?

Ms. Katie Telford: I believe you received from the national security and intelligence adviser and from the Privy Council Office a listing of briefings that the Prime Minister has received on this subject.

Mr. Larry Brock: Yes. You're referring to the document that was undertaken by the national security officer, Jody Thomas, on March 1 of this year, which we received this morning at 10 o'clock. I've looked at this, and there is no indication about any briefings in January 2022. However, it's noteworthy that the commentary on the beginning of page 1 indicates that the list is not exhaustive, as the records are not complete in all cases, and that this only represents formal briefings as opposed to informal briefings.

I'll ask the question again. Did the Prime Minister receive a series of briefings beginning in January 2022 on Beijing's election interference in the 2019 election—yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think the answer may have been given in the question, which is that the preamble in the memo talks about how there are all kinds of conversations that go on about some of these topics that can't all be captured in terms of formal briefings. You have the list of formal briefings that were provided in the memo.

• (1215)

Mr. Larry Brock: So I can take that as a yes. He would have received some informal briefings in and around the time frame of January 2022, as reported by Global News on November 7, 2022.

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak specifically to what was discussed in briefings over the course of those months and whether it was related to what was in the reporting.

Mr. Larry Brock: Again, Ms. Telford, I'm not asking for specifics. I'm asking you to confirm that it is more than likely, and in fact did happen, that he received briefings along those lines in

January 2022, notwithstanding that it's not repeated in the particular document we got today.

Ms. Katie Telford: “Did” and “more than likely”, in my experience, are different things. I think it is quite possible that there were discussions throughout that time period around foreign interference. As I think the Prime Minister said yesterday, we have talked about these subjects a lot over many years because there has been a lot of activity and a lot of work done by the government on this front.

Mr. Larry Brock: The Prime Minister was briefed on China's Toronto consulate directing a large clandestine transfer of funds to at least 11 federal election candidates and numerous Beijing operatives who worked as their campaign staffers. That was the subject matter of those series of briefings in January 2022. Are you confirming that?

Ms. Katie Telford: No. Unfortunately, I can't provide information about what I have or have not been briefed on in an intelligence setting or in a public setting about intelligence. However, what I can remind the members of is what the NSIA said when she was here, actually, on March 1 at this very committee. She said, “the connection that was being made between 11 candidates and [the funds you're describing] was inaccurate.”

Mr. Larry Brock: If this were completely inaccurate, if this story of Global News on November 7 were completely inaccurate, you would have said so, your Prime Minister would have said so and your members of cabinet would have said so.

I am asking you specifically, apart from the issue of clandestine transfers to 11 candidates, about the other subject matter of those briefings. Is that false? Is that inaccurate in any way?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sorry. You might have to clarify the question.

Mr. Larry Brock: You've highlighted that there was an issue with respect to the Prime Minister's never receiving any information in respect to the transfer of monies to specific candidates. I'm talking about the broader description of evidence and intelligence that was shared with the Prime Minister in a series of briefings in January 2022, as reported by Global News.

Is that inaccurate?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to the reporting of Global News, but I can speak to my experience, which is that there have been a lot of conversations over many years. It's why all the different mechanisms that I outlined were put in place leading into the 2019 election and the 2021 election. There were further steps taken between those two elections.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

Did the Privy Council Office prepare a document entitled “Special Report”, date-stamped January 2022—yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to that.

Mr. Larry Brock: Why not?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm not sure what document you're referencing. If you can give me some information, I probably still won't be able to confirm whether or not it was something I saw, but I'd be happy to try.

Mr. Larry Brock: It was reported by Global News on March 8. It was reviewed by Sam Cooper, the reporter. It was date-stamped and finalized, suggesting it was intended to be read by the Prime Minister and senior aides, including you. It was derived from 100 CSIS reports from investigations beginning in January 2019, and produced by the intelligence assessment secretariat, a division of the PCO. It was part of a series of briefings beginning in January 2022, confirming the large, clandestine transfer of funds earmarked for the federal election from the consulate in Toronto, which transferred those funds to an elected provincial government official via a staff member of a 2019 federal candidate.

You are responsible, ultimately, for the PCO. The PCO is the arm of the Prime Minister. It's his own department. They report to you. You control the PMO. Are you suggesting that this special report, as prepared by the intelligence assessment secretariat, did not occur?

The Chair: Ms. Telford, before I continue....

As members of Parliament we've all served in the House. When you suggest "you", Mr. Brock, you are referring to the chair in this role.

Mr. Larry Brock: Yes, I am.

The Chair: You are referring to me.

• (1220)

Mr. Larry Brock: No, I'm not referring to you, but through you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I was hoping so. I did not hear those two important words, "through you".

Mr. Larry Brock: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: I did appreciate the exchange for the most part. It was nice that we were able to pause so the interpreters could do their work, but if we're going to be in a spot where we are perhaps putting words in other people's mouths, then I need us to go through the chair.

Mr. Larry Brock: Madam Chair, will you allow the witness to answer the question?

The Chair: It will be coming out of possible later time, but yes, I would love to do that.

Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: I want to clarify. The member was asserting a number of things about what I do, and I want to go back to what I said in my opening statement about my role.

The Privy Council Office does not report to me. I manage the Prime Minister's Office. I do, however, work very closely with the Privy Council Office. There are some extraordinary public servants in there, including one who reports directly to the Prime Minister—the national security intelligence adviser.

I want to remind the room about what she said, which was that the connection that was being made between the 11 candidates and, essentially, much of what you're asserting there was inaccurate.

The Chair: Thank you.

I appreciate your keeping that brief, because I try to make sure the time for the question and for the answer is the same.

I will now proceed to Ms. Sahota.

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

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for coming here today.

I still hold the belief that staff should not be the ones who are held accountable, but I want to thank you for taking the time to come today, to make Parliament functional. It's important to see that you've done that many times during your time as chief of staff, and not many others have ever done that. I think that goes to show that you are a leader.

However, I think some of the things that have been implied... You've clarified that it is untrue that a chief of staff controls PCO. In your opening remarks you made it quite clear that many times, as the consumer of intelligence, you do your due diligence in terms of finding out what has been done, what can be done and whether, even within the Office of the Prime Minister, anyone has the authority to do so.

I think that is really important. Maybe we can get to some of what Mr. Brock is trying to get at. Perhaps what we need is a better understanding of how you get briefed on intelligence. Specifically, what type of intelligence is brought to your attention and by whom, and what happens exactly in specific circumstances when you receive that?

Ms. Katie Telford: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Intelligence comes to us in many different forms from many different parts of the government, though it all ultimately funnels through the Privy Council Office and the NSIA in terms of what comes directly to us.

They bring together so many different parts of government where intelligence can get collected, from the Global Affairs department to DND and CSE. There's a glorious number of acronyms that can sometimes, but not always, roll off the tongue easily. They produce all that information and then it comes into the PCO intelligence analysis unit, which will pull it together and determine what needs to make its way to the Prime Minister.

The NSIA, as I mentioned earlier, will flag some information that she will want read. Sometimes I will walk into the office and the CRO will be sitting there, and I know I need to clear my schedule to read something. Other times it will get scheduled. Sometimes it's formal briefings. Sometimes we just see something, sometimes in reporting, and we will need to just catch up quickly in a sort of "pull-aside", as they say in government, whenever we can find the time.

Also, of course, ahead of any international meetings, whether they're happening here in Canada or happening when we're traveling around the world, it's particularly important, because we work very closely with our allies on all matters to do with intelligence as well, particularly with our Five Eyes partners. There are a lot of different opportunities for us to talk about these things, which is why it gets complicated to try to pin down some of these briefings in the way I was being asked about.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Part of your role is making sure that the Prime Minister gets the best information. Through these briefings, I'm assuming that at times it seems, from your description, that it's just you getting briefed on some of the matters.

Given that you're not an intelligence official yourself but a consumer, you rely on the work of these officials that is given to you. How do you then determine on what, when and why the Prime Minister gets briefed? How do you make those decisions?

• (1225)

Ms. Katie Telford: As I mentioned in my opening statement, I am usually with the Prime Minister when he's briefed on these matters. It's actually pretty rare for me to have formal briefings alone. It doesn't never happen, but it's pretty rare. It's usually a question of scheduling when that happens, more than anything, because it's really based on the NSIA's advice.

Sometimes other staff who are in the office, other senior staff, will meet with officials or they'll read something in reporting and they'll say this is something that we should make sure the PM sees sooner rather than later. Ultimately, though, even those thoughts will go to the NSIA who will make the ultimate recommendation on what needs to be scheduled, who should be there and in what format he should get briefed.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Talking particularly about foreign election interference, I'm sure often these briefings that you're discussing are not particularly about election interference. They're about travel that you do and interactions, foreign relations with many countries. I imagine the scale and scope of intelligence that you receive on any given day is quite vast, given the international issues going on around the world, with Ukraine, the Chinese spy balloons and the many things that we're seeing even in the news down south in the last few days.

Given that it is so vast, can you help us understand a little bit better the volume of intelligence that is provided to your office?

Ms. Katie Telford: It varies, as you say, depending on events. Obviously a lot more started coming in around the time of the balloons, for example. Certainly, as has been publicly spoken about before, in the lead-up to and of course following the invasion of Ukraine, all kinds of intelligence came in much more increasing volumes.

It really does depend on the events, but there have been many events, as you said, in the last number of years. This is a significant part of the job.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We go over now to Ms. Gaudreau.

Let me just say that we have two official languages and that you may speak in the language of your choice.

Ms. Telford, I know that you understand French perfectly and that you speak it, but our time is limited. You may speak in the language of your choice.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

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

Thank you, Ms. Telford.

I don't have much time and my questions will be quick.

We have already gleaned some information. What we would like to know, actually, is how the protocol works within government. We want to understand how information is conveyed to the relevant ministers.

Can you tell us more about the protocol?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: This is why there's a question around whether I'm the right person to be appearing here. As I said, I'm going to do my best. I apologize for answering in English, but I just want to make sure that I'm getting it right and I can speak faster.

It's largely run through the NSIA. That is who governs all of the gathering of intelligence. It's actually why the Prime Minister changed the title. It was the NSA when we came into government and the Prime Minister inserted the word "intelligence" into it because that is such a huge part of that function. They will gather, working with all of the public servants who work for her and working with other security agencies across government, all the information on whatever the given issues are in any given week. There are weekly briefs, daily briefs, informal briefs and formal briefings. It really depends on what's going on in the world.

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much.

My next question will be even more targeted.

We know that Ms. Thomas, who is the senior national security advisor to the Prime Minister, is there to guide you and tell you what is important and urgent.

What are the criteria that you use to follow up on Ms. Thomas' recommendations? What are the factors that lead you to believe that something should be red flagged, as you said, and is worthy of concern?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: It's a question best asked to her. I can't remember now, having read her testimony here, whether she answered a question like that. It's usually, at least in terms of what makes its way to me.... There may be things that don't make their way to me that should make their way to me or to the Prime Minister, but I can't speak to what I don't see. What I do see is usually pretty self-evident in terms of what is of importance or of relevance. It's an interesting question, but it really is just pretty self-evident.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That leads me to my next question.

By asking you what the criteria are, I am seeking to know who is held accountable, when a process will be validated when it perhaps didn't work well in the past, and what circumstances call for urgent action.

When Ms. Thomas testified, she did indicate that information had been passed on. We would like to know who had that information and what happened. Why is it that at a certain point in time, the minister and the Prime Minister said that there was no foreign interference or that they weren't made aware of any, but now they are saying that there was indeed foreign interference?

What are the criteria? We want to be sure that the electoral process is as tight as a drum and be able to reassure Canadians on that score. Please reassure us.

Who is the guardian of this information? How does it work within cabinet between the Prime Minister and the ministers?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I will try to do it efficiently and give two parts to the answer. First, it is the national security and intelligence adviser who pulls all of that information together.

Second, there are legitimate questions. We had them when we were in opposition as a party and they continue to exist today. Even in government, you have questions about whether everything is working right, and it's actually why this government put in place NSIRA. NSIRA is there to oversee the security agencies and to make sure all of those parts are working and, specifically, working on this now.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I just want to state that today was the last possible day that you could testify, Ms. Telford. Thank you for being here.

We are holding this meeting today to try and understand what went on. This is an excellent opportunity for us to try to see if in-

formation was omitted. If information was omitted, perhaps corrective measures were taken and we would be able to reassure voters that our electoral system is sound. Right now, I can't claim to be convinced.

I will give you my last 30 seconds so that you can tell us more. Otherwise, there's no reason for our being here today, Ms. Telford.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: What I would say to reassure Canadians is that I know the incredible work that senior officials do day in and day out on this. I spend a lot of time with them, and they are constantly working to refine and improve processes, especially as new and different types of information come forward. I know that any time action can be taken, they take it, and I know that any time the Prime Minister can take action, he takes it. He certainly encourages that kind of action as well.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I think I have enough time remaining to ask another question.

Madam Chair, can the witness tell the committee if there is any information on foreign interference that is subject to cabinet confidentiality and is not disclosed to ministers or the Prime Minister?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: No. If I'm understanding you correctly, nothing is ever kept from the Prime Minister, certainly not by me.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

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

As always, everything I say goes through the chair.

I want to thank our witness for being here for this important issue.

The way I'll start is how I think I've started almost every question during this study. The fact is that this is very serious, and the most important part for me is that Canadians are losing faith in our systems. What I hope for around this table, and for all the people who are represented at this table, is that our commitment is, number one, to Canadians to make sure they have faith. What has happened around foreign interference in our elections is that we've seen Canadians lose more and more faith, and that's where I am concerned.

My question for Ms. Telford is simply this. We have seen the Liberal MPs in this committee repeatedly point out that the Maher Arar public inquiry was really effective at shedding light on intelligence leaks and providing Canadians with transparency, even when the government at the time was providing misleading information regarding Mr. Arar. Given that even your former colleague Gerald Butts has called for a public inquiry, do you think one is needed?

• (1235)

Ms. Katie Telford: As I mentioned in the opening statement, for the very reasons you set out in terms of the importance of this issue and the seriousness of what we're talking about, we need to take this out of the partisan arena. It's an extremely complex issue for some of the reasons I laid out and for a number of other reasons I'm sure you've touched on in committee over time. This is why the Prime Minister walked through a number of actions he took and a number of different follow-ups that are ongoing as we speak.

As I just mentioned in a previous answer, there's—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry to interrupt. I certainly don't want to hurt the interpreters, because they are very important to us and provide the ability for us to do our work.

It seems to me that you're not really interested in answering the question. What we're seeing is more and more distrust from the Canadian public. I think a public inquiry would make a difference because then people would see this come out of the partisan sphere. Right now, it's having to stay in the partisan sphere because action is not being taken.

Have you ever advised the Prime Minister against launching a public inquiry, and if so, why?

Ms. Katie Telford: Let me try again to answer your question. I was certainly trying to.

I think a lot of people looked at what's become known as POEC, the public inquiry that went on last fall in response to the Emergencies Act, and saw that it worked. As another example, you spoke about another inquiry and said, "Why not do this"? There have been many discussions on this front, as you know, at this committee and in many other forums, including in our office and with the Prime Minister.

Where we were able to come down as quickly as we could in our advice to him and in terms of the steps he then took was.... We needed someone—and this is the same thing, interestingly, that the previous government did when they appointed former governor general David Johnston to do a similar task—to figure out what was needed. Where were the gaps, as I was starting to mention to you, between NSIRA and NSICOP? What were they not able to cover? What does the public still need beyond that to ensure that we are instilling the confidence in them they deserve to have in our institutions? That is extraordinarily important to us. It's about ensuring that the right mandates are created, whether it's an inquiry or something else.

As I said in my opening statement, the Prime Minister committed to following through on whatever recommendations come out of the special rapporteur on this. It's not clear what the questions should be. It's not clear what body is best to look at this given the sensitive nature of the information. Yes, POEC looked at some se-

curity information. This is almost entirely national security information. Figuring out how to do that is a task that he's going to be reporting back on within a few weeks. I hope you can wait for that so we can take those responsible next steps.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Ms. Telford.

Through the chair, as always, could you just clarify whether you were informed last year about the Chinese government funding at least 11 Liberal and Conservative candidates in the 2019 federal election?

Ms. Katie Telford: I will repeat again what I've said a couple of times to members from the opposition, which is what the NSIA said when they were previously here at committee. I don't have information beyond being able to say—and I thought this was pretty definitive—that the connection being made between these candidates and the funds was inaccurate.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry to be upsetting you with these questions, but the Prime Minister said, "Let me be clear, I do not have any information, nor have I been briefed on any federal candidates receiving any money from China." It feels like we got a clear answer and I'm not getting that clear answer from you. I'm just trying to understand this. It doesn't seem to make sense.

I am not one to bring in staff members lightly. I take the role of people who are in charge really seriously. However, every time we turn around it feels like there's another article, there's something else coming out, and this slippery slope of information coming in and out and not being clear is leading people to distrust.

Can you be as clear as the Prime Minister seems to be? Canadians are not having faith in the Prime Minister or in these roles. It worries me, so can you make sense of that?

• (1240)

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, it sounds like the member thinks the Prime Minister was clear on this. I think the Prime Minister was clear on this. I agree with what the Prime Minister said, so I'm not really sure how to add to that. It sounds like if I'm adding to that, I'm actually confusing matters, so I agree with what you're saying or what's being said.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's my time. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

We will now enter the second round of questions, and we will start with Mr. Cooper, followed by Ms. O'Connell.

[*Translation*]

We will now go over to Ms. Normandin, who will be followed by Ms. Blaney, Mr. Berthold and Ms. Romanado.

[*English*]

Please go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for appearing.

Ms. Telford, through you, Madam Chair, Mr. Brock provided the context of the special report date-stamped January 2022. Now that he has provided that context, can you confirm that the Prime Minister received that document and that he read it?

Ms. Katie Telford: In terms of the specific document you're referencing that was mentioned in reporting and that the previous member was mentioning, I can't speak to whether or not we've been briefed on any specific documents or any specific subjects.

Taking a step back from that and to the second part of the member's question, of course the Prime Minister reads any documents he receives.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Telford, when was the Prime Minister first briefed about Beijing's election interference in the 2019 election?

Ms. Katie Telford: The committee has received from the NSIA the list of formal briefings that was put together as best as everybody could. They're formal briefings on subjects to do with election foreign interference—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Telford, respectfully, through you, Madam Chair, I'm not just asking about formal briefings. I'm asking when the Prime Minister became aware of Beijing's election interference in the 2019 election. Just give the date, please. It's been five months. It's been repeatedly asked. You're the top official in the Prime Minister's Office. Canadians deserve to know when he first learned about it. Could you please answer?

Ms. Katie Telford: I would take a step back and just say that there has been an ongoing conversation over many months and years as to what the prospects of potential foreign interference were. It's why these different organizations were in place. It's why a report came out of the 2019 campaign, or election.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Yes. Again, Ms. Telford, I want to be clear that Canadians deserve dates, so maybe I'll provide further clarity. The intelligence assessment secretariat of PCO prepared a daily foreign intelligence brief dated February 21, 2020, and that document has been produced to this committee, a heavily redacted version of that document. It speaks of "Subtle but Effective Interference Networks" in the context of Beijing and its interference in the 2019 election. It says, "Investigations into activities linked to the Canadian federal election in 2019, reveal an active foreign interference (FI) network".

On what date did the Prime Minister receive this document?

Ms. Katie Telford: I could not tell you on what date he did or didn't receive a document. It's—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Did the Prime Minister receive that document?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't have that information in front of me in terms of the specific document you're holding.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You don't have any information about that document. It was a daily foreign intelligence brief, and Ms. Thomas

said that it would have been in the Prime Minister's daily reading material. Would she be wrong?

Ms. Katie Telford: It may have been. I am not suggesting she's wrong; it's that I can't speak to where he was that day.

Briefs come in a whole bunch of different formats. Those kinds of pieces of information are not just floating around. I don't know whether he got a verbal brief that day, whether he got a weekly wrap-up that week or whether this was a daily one that he had on his desk.

• (1245)

Mr. Michael Cooper: This document has been widely reported. It's one of the very few documents produced to this committee, and it's highly relevant to the question of what the Prime Minister knew, and when he knew, about Beijing's election interference.

Your inability or refusal to answer whether the Prime Minister had, in fact, read this document or been briefed about it is troubling. It doesn't inspire confidence. In fact, it invites suspicion.

Perhaps your unwillingness to confirm that is because, as Global News has reported, that document spoke of "foreign interference networks in the Greater Toronto Area [that] implicate at least 11 candidates in the 2019 election", Beijing's Toronto consulate was involved and it involved the "clandestine transfer of funds". In other words, the Prime Minister seemingly knew as early as February 2020 about candidates.

Why has he misled Canadians for the past five months?

Ms. Katie Telford: There are a couple of things.

First, everything the Prime Minister receives, he spends a lot of time with and most definitely reads. I can confirm that if they are documents that he received, he absolutely read them.

Second, he's briefed on matters of foreign interference and matters of election foreign interference, as per the documents you have received, on a regular and ongoing basis.

Third, on the specifics of what you were referencing, I can't, unfortunately, in this public setting, get into what was or wasn't briefed on at the level of specificity you'd like.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. O'Connell.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Telford, for being here.

I want to start off by following up where the Conservatives left off. The Conservatives would have Canadians believe that foreign interference just began in 2019 and that this is a relatively new phenomenon. They would like to find some smoking gun date.

In fact, in your answer, Ms. Telford, you talked about the fact that foreign interference is ongoing, and that's why there are several briefings on the topic. In addition to that, members of the House would have received the 2019 NSICOP annual report, which talks about foreign interference, so they can look at their own dates in terms of when they were notified.

I want to get to the issues around foreign interference and the fact that it's not new.

You mentioned in your opening statement that Canada is a net importer of intelligence. We can look at the situation and what's happening in the U.S. right now. They're having very similar debates about foreign interference and national security information being in the public realm. Some of the comments being made in the U.S. right now are questioning that. If national security information is not held with the care and sensitivity it deserves, in the U.S. context, will allies want to share information with countries that don't treat national security information securely?

As Canada is a net importer of intelligence, the request from the Conservatives to have unredacted documents, to share details of national security information and details of briefings.... Would it not pose a significant risk if Canada no longer took the strong and firm approach of handling national security with the utmost care and sensitivity, as it deserves? Would that put us at risk of not receiving intelligence from, for example, our Five Eyes allies?

Ms. Katie Telford: That is why I raised in the opening statement that that is something we always have to be guarding against and careful about. We have to treat this material with care because it can put lives at risk, most importantly because it's in Canada's national interest to keep this information protected, but also because of the impact it could have in terms of relationships with allies we share intelligence with and receive intelligence from.

It's one of the reasons the government put into place NSICOP. We looked at our allies, many of whom already had organizations like that. It was something the government before the current government did not put in place. It did not take any steps on this front, despite having been embroiled in the Afghan detainee issue, which I spoke to in my opening statement as well. They continued to refuse to provide information to the House when the House was looking for it then. Having lived through that experience, the Prime Minister made the commitment in the 2015 platform that we needed a body like NSICOP. Then some time was spent working with allies and learning from allies how to put that together properly and in a way that could even be improved on from their own experiences before it was launched, I think, midway through the first mandate.

• (1250)

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

Madam Chair, through you, the leader of the Conservative Party, Mr. Poilievre, has said he refuses to get briefed on national security matters because he doesn't want to then be restricted to speak. Former leader Mr. O'Toole removed members from NSICOP. When the now leader of the Conservatives was the Minister of Democratic Institutions, there were statements that he didn't take action on strengthening our democracy because he felt it wasn't among his partisan issues, yet the Conservatives continually remove their

members from learning the facts of the national security situation going on in this country in a secure way.

When you appear today and reasonably say there are going to be limitations on some of the information you can share in an open setting, the Conservatives say, "What are you hiding?" Mr. Cooper used the word "collusion" in the past. Could you speak to the reasonableness? Mr. Poilievre doesn't want to be briefed so that he is no longer constrained to keep national security matters confidential. Can you speak to why there is sensitivity around your testimony today?

Ms. Katie Telford: Very briefly, I do sign documents that are declarations of indoctrination in order to become cleared, and I take those things very seriously. I think as was mentioned, even the leader of the official opposition takes them so seriously that he did not want to be briefed or cleared. It sounds like people understand why I can't speak to these things.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Telford, I would like to go back to an answer that you gave to my colleague, Ms. Gaudreau.

As to the criteria used to determine if information that you receive should be relayed to the Prime Minister, you stated that that was self-evident, which means that it is patently clear when the Prime Minister should be briefed.

For example, is it self-evident that information indicating that 11 ridings received indirect or direct funding from the Chinese consulate in Toronto should be conveyed to the Prime Minister?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I will go back again, either to, as one of the other members of the opposition said, the Prime Minister's words or to the NSIA's words. In the NSIA's case, it was to this committee, or it was the Prime Minister's words in the House or publicly. The connection being drawn between those candidates and those funds is something that hadn't been briefed on and wasn't accurate in terms of how the reporting was. The reporting evolved over time as well, I would note.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: In any case, this information is important enough to be conveyed to the Prime Minister. Am I correct?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

A little earlier, you mentioned that you were always or nearly always present when the Prime Minister is briefed. Do you remember being present in this particular instance when the information was conveyed to him, whether by means of a document or an informal briefing meeting? Indeed, if it was in February 2020, it would have been an informal briefing, because there's no mention of it in the list of official briefings.

Do you remember being present when the Prime Minister was briefed?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: If we're talking about the information that I just talked about being inaccurate, then there wasn't such a meeting to be present at. As I said in my opening statement, although I am usually there when he's being briefed, there are times I'm not. When he's travelling and I'm not on that trip, and he's getting briefed directly, then I'm not getting briefed at the same time. Those would be some of the rare occasions when I would be getting briefed separately.

In terms of the specifics you're referencing, there's nothing more I think I can say on that.

• (1255)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: When you receive information and you consider that it is incorrect, it remains that the information has been received. Do you remember having received information that was deemed incorrect afterwards?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: No. I think some of that we learned through reporting, as I think both have said. Yes, then there were conversations to try to figure out what some of these things were. You can see that in some of the timeline here too.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I believe that people speak a bit more quickly in French, just like in Punjabi. I know that you do not have a lot of speaking time, only two and a half minutes, which isn't much. I didn't want to interrupt and ask you to slow down.

This comment is for Ms. Gaudreau and the other committee members who use French. I do understand that sometimes this language requires you to use more words, so I will give you a little more speaking time. That said, I will ask you to speak a bit more slowly for the sake of the interpreters. Next time, you will have my support, agreed?

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Madam Blaney, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

My question, again, returns to the lack of trust we see Canadians having for our institutions. It's really been shaken by these allegations.

Should the current rapporteur, David Johnston, recommend against moving forward with a public inquiry in May, do you think, Ms. Telford, that Canadians will accept that? Do you see any scenario where not moving forward with a public inquiry will help?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't want to presume what the special rapporteur is going to recommend, and the government and the Prime Minister have committed to following through on the recommendations when they come forward. It's not very long from now.

I think we need to make sure that we follow through on that as expeditiously as possible so that we can all together, across all parties, build trust and continue to build trust in what is a troubling issue for everyone. We all should be working on this together.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think you mentioned earlier in your testimony, through the chair, of course, a past example where there was a rapporteur set up and in place before an inquiry. I just want to be clear that in that case, the terms of the inquiry were the focus of the rapporteur, who looked at what those terms would be and how they would be followed.

Right now, the process in Canada is that we are giving a broad brush to a rapporteur to sort of tell us what to do next. It seems like that's the take of the government, instead of saying what is going to be transparent and clear for Canadians. We know that a lot of things have been said, it's become very partisan and there's a lot of distrust in our institutions, which concerns me greatly.

I understand that you were trying to say there have been rapporteurs before inquiries, but I think it's clear that we also know those rapporteurs were set up to create the spectrum of what the inquiry would look like. This is very different.

I'm going to go back to the original question. Do you think Canadians will stand for it? In the sense of the role that you play with the Prime Minister, is there any concern there that the voice of Canadians is not being heard and what they need isn't being delivered?

Ms. Katie Telford: First off, I agree with the concern. I think we should all be working to figure out paths forward that can be constructive and can be communicating as clearly to Canadians as possible that their institutions are strong and that they can have faith in their electoral systems. Yes, there is this threat we have been talking about for years, but that obviously has received some more attention of late. Being able to explain clearly and concisely what that is and how the systems work to combat it I think is extremely important.

I'm not sure my understanding of the history of the previous rapporteur is the same as yours, but we'll figure that out later.

Answering your final point, I think it's extremely important that we all figure out the answer to that. I don't know that we're disagreeing that much, other than I don't want to presume where the special rapporteur goes, whether it's to set up an inquiry or come up with some other way of assuring Canadians that all the bases are being covered here.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

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

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

Thank you, Ms. Telford.

I have before me an article from *The Globe and Mail* dated February 17 about CSIS documents detailing a Chinese strategy to influence the Canadian election in 2021. Canadians were able to read this article. *The Globe and Mail* journalists saw the CSIS documents.

Did the Prime Minister see the CSIS documents mentioned in *The Globe and Mail* article?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't, unfortunately, speak to the specifics of what the Prime Minister has or has not been briefed on in all of this.

As I said before, and taking a step back from the specifics of your question, the Prime Minister has been briefed regularly and gets information in a variety of different ways on what was happening around election interference in the last two elections.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you. You've already said that.

Did you yourself see these documents?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: The answer would be the same for me.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: These documents were sent to Five Eyes allies, including the French and German governments. *The Globe and Mail* mentions these documents. Every Canadian could have learned about this information through the press. The Prime Minister must have seen these documents, Ms. Telford.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said, I can't get into what the Prime Minister has or has not been briefed on in terms of specific intelligence. It's frustrating, I know. It is for me as well, but it's for the very important reasons that I laid out in my opening statement.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I will try to help you, Ms. Telford.

In the days that followed the publication of the article in *The Globe and Mail* on February 17, the Prime Minister replied to journalists' questions about these documents as follows: "We are very concerned with the leaks, particularly because there are so many inaccuracies in those leaks." This means that the Prime Minister himself commented on the contents of the article.

Which revelations made in the article published on February 17 are inaccurate, as the Prime Minister has claimed?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I've already referenced, over the course of the committee meeting today, at least one inaccuracy the NSIA has

spoken to from reporting more broadly. I can't, unfortunately, go further than where the NSIA or the director of CSIS went when they were speaking before the committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Let's go over the facts reported by *The Globe and Mail*, Ms. Telford.

These reports came from a series of intelligence-gathering operations by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

The first thing that was reported is that one of Beijing's objectives was to help the Liberals form a minority government after the 2021 election. Is that part of the facts that were reported which were inaccurate, according to the Prime Minister?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: There have been a number of things we've been following up on from the reporting throughout the last number of months. There have been a number of things that don't add up in the way that we know them or that the officials are able to tell us about.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you.

Let's go to another fact that was reported: one of the objectives of the Beijing regime was to ensure the failure of Conservative candidates that were considered hostile to the regime's interests. Was that deemed inaccurate by the Prime Minister?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I would take a step back to where Canada was in its relations with China going into the 2019 and 2021 elections. They were probably at their lowest point—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Ms. Telford, the question was simple...

The Chair: I did not want to have to intervene, but I have to tell you that the time needed for interpretation will not be included in your speaking time. You will get that time back.

If we can just go a little more slowly and continue as we are doing, all will be well. I do hope that you will support me on this. I understand very well that we have two official languages. My mother tongue is Punjabi and that means it takes me a bit more time to say something in that language. I know that you do not speak Punjabi, but you speak French and the problem is the same. I will give you the necessary time.

It would be better if people didn't interrupt one another, agreed?

Mr. Luc Berthold: All right.

Ms. Telford, Beijing's tactic was to have proxies make undeclared cash donations to political campaigns. Is this one of the facts the Prime Minister finds inaccurate?

• (1305)

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Well, as it relates to the stories around the 11 candidates, I think you've already heard me repeatedly talk about how both the NSIA and the Prime Minister have spoken to that and to where they saw a gap and an inaccuracy in the reporting.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Beijing asks business owners to hire international students and assign them to election campaigns on a full-time basis. Is this one of the facts the Prime Minister finds inaccurate?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't get into going further than they did in terms of the NSIA, the director of CSIS and the many other experts who have come before you on these issues.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: I have two final questions.

Apparently, certain political campaigns illegally returned to donors the difference between the original donation and the refund they received. Is this one of the facts the Prime Minister finds inaccurate?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I would just say on matters related to fundraising and donations, I think all members here are very familiar with this. I certainly am from my past days as a campaign director. There are very robust election finance laws in this country, and they were made even more robust and transparent under this government. If there were concerns there, there are methods to investigate any fundraising anomalies that are seen or alleged to have happened.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much.

Ms. Telford, the Prime Minister is very quick to deny facts when they are false.

I'm going to ask you one last question about another fact mentioned in the article.

Chinese consulate officials, including former consuls-general Tong Xiaoling and Wang Jin, were allegedly involved in this interference operation. Is this one of the parts Mr. Trudeau considered inaccurate when he stated that there were "many inaccuracies" in these articles?

He himself commented on the CSIS reports, the same ones you refuse to comment on.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I appreciate that we are now quick to respond to things, when we have been told many times we have not been quick to respond to things in the past. Part of the reason we haven't always been able to be as quick as we wish we all could be in responding to questions on this is that this information and subject matter are just so very important.

It's so important, as I said in the opening statement, when you're getting fragments of information, not only to figure out what those fragments are and where they situate, but to put them into a broader context. Being able to figure out what you can and can't say publicly is not something that I should be sitting here doing. That's why I set out in the beginning that I have to respect the boundaries that were set by the national security and intelligence adviser and the director of CSIS when they were here before me.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Telford.

Mrs. Romanado, you have the floor.

[English]

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Through you, I would like to thank Ms. Telford for being with us today.

I want to highlight a couple of things I've heard today, and I want to reiterate that there's a big difference between a willingness to share information and a capability to share information.

Ms. Telford, you've explained multiple times that it's not from a lack of willingness but due to national security issues that we cannot share this information. You also, in your opening statement, explained a little about the impact of that—my colleague, Ms. O'Connell, referred to that—with respect to our relationship with our Five Eyes partners. The issue of foreign interference in elections is not something new. This is something that New Zealand is looking at right now in terms of its elections. This is something that's happening around the world. We saw this in the presidential election in 2015, with questions about that.

You mentioned the importance of being able to share that information and receive that information from our Five Eyes partners, but you also said something that was really important to me. As you know, my son is an intelligence officer in the Canadian Armed Forces, so I know full well the importance of maintaining information that does not belong in the public sphere. To do so—and I will put in quotes exactly what you said—can "put...lives in danger".

We've created NSICOP, a committee of parliamentarians, and I've looked at those who sit on this committee. I have full confidence in the members of NSICOP, who are from all our parties, including a retired colonel with over 25 years of service, who sits on this committee. I have full trust in his ability to look at something like this.

Given the measures the Prime Minister has taken through various tactics, whether it be through the naming of a special rapporteur... We have SITE, we have the panel, we have the national security intelligence adviser, we have NSICOP, and we have PROC looking at this. I believe that this has also come up in the ethics committee.

Do you believe that the question of foreign interference and how to detect, deter and counter it will take a multipronged approach, given the complexity of this issue and the evolving threats of foreign interference?

• (1310)

Ms. Katie Telford: There are a couple of quick things.... Just on your first point of how this is not a new problem, I believe it was in the CSIS documents that were tabled sometime ahead of my appearance, in the last number of days. They talk about how CSIS briefed us in 2015, when we first got into government. This is not new to our government, but as I said in the opening statement, it has been evolving, and this government has taken more steps than anyone has before.

Actually, one of the steps—you mentioned a number of them there—that involves our allies is the rapid response mechanism. Canada played a leadership role there, because it was at the G7 meeting in Charlevoix that it came about, and some additional countries have joined, beyond the G7, to be part of that work. Canada has been leading on this in the world.

To your point of the multipronged nature of this, it's why, in 2019—I mentioned this in my opening statement as well—there was a kind of pan-governmental, whole-of-government plan that was introduced to protect democracy, because it has to take into account misinformation and disinformation as well, so the Department of Canadian Heritage is involved. Many different departments and agencies throughout government have to be thinking about these things. They are and have been for a number of years now, so there's obviously still more work to do.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

I brought this up in a previous PROC meeting. Would you say that perhaps one of the recommendations that PROC can make coming out of this study would be to make sure that members of Parliament are adequately briefed on how to recognize, mitigate and prevent foreign interference?

Would you recommend that this committee suggest that members of Parliament and perhaps even their staff be briefed on what to look for not only in an election period but in terms of our day-to-day actions? Would you recommend that members of Parliament and their staff receive some training in this regard?

The Chair: Ms. Telford, I will provide you time to answer, but before you answer, I want members in the room to know, as you are recognizing, that the camera might not be switching at all times to the person who is speaking. I know that Mrs. Romanado has not noticed that the camera was not on her in the room. We understand that for public broadcasting on ParLVu, it is switching, and for the purposes of this room, we will get that issue sorted out.

For the public, Mrs. Romanado, not only did they hear you, but they saw you, and that is something that is very important to us here.

Ms. Telford, we go to you.

Ms. Katie Telford: I have just two quick thoughts on that. One is that certainly there is training for... I received it when when I first came into government, and it's one of the more eye-opening

briefings you can get. Then, in terms of members of Parliament and whether more should happen on that front, I believe there were recommendations about that. I'm not recalling now in which of the reports, but I think it was coming out of NSICOP.

That has subsequently been followed up by Minister LeBlanc and Clerk Charette in the report they just produced showing all the different actions, where they went through all the different reports that have been put out in the last not that many years and identified what all the different next steps still are to be taken, by whom and by when. I believe that is in there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Continuing on with our third round, we will be starting with Mr. Barrett.

• (1315)

[*Translation*]

Then we will go to Mr. Fergus, Ms. Normandin, Ms. Blaney, Mrs. Thomas, and Mr. Turnbull.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Ms. Telford, for being here today.

The document received from the Privy Council Office, the Prime Minister's department, which was requested on March 2 and received by this committee this morning, states that on September 28, cleared Liberal Party of Canada representatives were given a security briefing. Who were the senior Liberal Party officials who were part of that briefing?

Ms. Katie Telford: I was not, and I believe you have invited to this committee the national campaign directors of the 2019 and 2021 campaigns, so they can speak to that in more detail.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you know who the cleared representatives were for the Liberal Party?

Ms. Katie Telford: I know that Azam Ishmael, whom you have invited to the committee, was one of those cleared representatives.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Was Zita Astravas one of those cleared individuals?

Ms. Katie Telford: I don't believe so.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't say that with absolute certainty, but I don't believe so.

Mr. Michael Barrett: To your knowledge or has it been brought to your attention since that time that the then candidate for Don Valley North was made aware of the contents of any of the briefings given to cleared officials with the Liberal Party?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm sorry. I'm not sure I'm following. Was he...?

Mr. Michael Barrett: The candidate for Don Valley North: To your knowledge, was he given a readout or made aware of the contents of the briefing that was given to the cleared officials with the Liberal Party?

Ms. Katie Telford: Not to my knowledge, but I was not involved in that at all during the campaigns. I was on full-time leave for both campaigns, on the road with the Prime Minister for the whole campaign, so these things were managed by headquarters.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

For the 25 ridings in the GTA, who would have been responsible for them, to the best of your knowledge, during the campaign, on behalf of the party?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm not sure I'm understanding again. Do you mean in terms of who was the campaign coordinator for the GTA?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, a regional organizer.

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm not even sure. I'm not the best person to speak to that.

If you wanted to ask me about 2015, I could help you out, but you're going to need to talk to the 2019 or 2021 campaign directors. I'm not even sure how it was carved up within the GTA.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. That's not something that you would have known in your capacity on that campaign.

Ms. Katie Telford: No. I'm sure I know the person, but I'm not sure which person it was or even if it was done in the way you're describing.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay, and your role on the campaign was...?

Ms. Katie Telford: I was on the bus, as they say, or on the plane, throughout the entirety of the campaigns in 2019 and 2021.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Would you have access to those names now if you asked?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, I'm sure I could follow up. Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Would you undertake to provide those names, the names of the individuals responsible for the GTA during the 2019 election campaign? Can you provide those to the committee?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I can follow up on the government side, though I would encourage the parliamentary committee.... Since you have the national campaign directors from those campaigns coming, it's probably more appropriate to be coming from the party side.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, but just to be clear, you're going to—

Ms. Katie Telford: I'll undertake. I will take it back and see what I can do.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you very much.

There were media reports that there was an urgent briefing given to the cleared Liberal Party officials, and it would be helpful to know. Again, in that same context, we will ask the Liberal Party officials when they come what their list of cleared officials was. If you could make the same inquiry and provide that information to us.... You've indicated in the affirmative.

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. Thank you very much.

That would be incredibly helpful, because of course this speaks to the concern that information was made available to these officials, who would then, it would be reasonably expected, have provided it to the Prime Minister, which is what you said. If you receive information, you share that information with the Prime Minister.

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, and you know, Madam Chair, I have every confidence that they would talk to the Prime Minister about anything they found out.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you recommend to the Prime Minister against removing the candidate from Don Valley North as a candidate for election?

Ms. Katie Telford: The member who is being discussed stepped outside of caucus quite recently, so I'm not sure what is being referred to.

● (1320)

Mr. Michael Barrett: The question is exactly as stated. It's whether you recommended, when the candidate for Don Valley North was a candidate for election, against his removal from the slate of candidates running for the Liberal Party.

Ms. Katie Telford: I was never involved in a conversation on the subject.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. Conversations did occur.

Ms. Katie Telford: No, I'm saying that I was not privy to a conversation. I don't have an answer for you on this because there was no conversation that I was part of on this subject.

The Chair: Excellent. That's time. Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

I would just like to confirm that among the witnesses we have asked to appear, campaign managers have been invited to a future meeting, and we anticipate that meeting taking place in the month of April. Invitations have been sent out to the four names that we were provided. One has confirmed, and responses from the other three are pending. We hope to have those soon, and we'll share that information with all members as it becomes available.

[Translation]

Mr. Fergus, you have the floor.

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

I'd like to thank Ms. Telford for her presentation today. It was very clear and genuine. I'm grateful to her for trying to answer our questions related to national security.

Ms. Telford, you mentioned in your statement something that I don't feel has been fully considered in a lot of the extremely partisan discussions about this. When it comes to dealing with foreign interference, much of the work that needs to be done and the action that needs to be taken is not being directed by politicians. In fact, it would be completely inappropriate for politicians to be involved.

For example, CSIS gives information to the RCMP or the Commissioner of Canada Elections so that they can launch investigations. It's not up to politicians to direct those investigations. Again, that would be completely inappropriate.

In your experience, have these agencies ever required permission from the Prime Minister's Office to act and use the powers and tools at their disposal?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I certainly believe so, and this would be the kind of thing, again, that NSIRA, for example, or NSICOP, under their different purviews, could be making recommendations on if they did see any gaps. Law enforcement and security agencies have a number of different authorities under which they do not need, nor should they have, the Prime Minister's or cabinet authorities in order to proceed.

Hon. Greg Fergus: To confirm, it's not up to the Prime Minister's office to direct the activities of the RCMP or CSIS.

Ms. Katie Telford: It's absolutely not.

Hon. Greg Fergus: It's not at all. Thank you.

The director of CSIS also told this committee that the CSIS Act provides a number of tools to enable CSIS to investigate foreign interference activities, adding, "We investigate these allegations, and we use all the tools at our disposal to try to better understand and characterize these activities and reduce the threat where possible." Are you at all familiar with these tools?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are these tools, as far as you know, satisfactory?

Ms. Katie Telford: We're learning quite literally every day more and more information that is going to teach us and teach different parts of government how they can improve and what other tools they may or may not need to have. You know, these last number of months, even in terms of trying to figure out how to communicate to the public on some of this has been an exercise for everybody—in some cases in new and different ways, though less so, perhaps, for the political side.

My understanding is that the tools have been used more than they ever have before, and I think you heard that from David Vigneault, the CSIS director, when he was here. As well, agencies are talking to each other regularly, and they brief up regularly to ministers, to the Prime Minister and to each other. That's because, as I said, while this is not a new threat, it is an evolving one, and obviously, as one of the other members here said, there have been a lot of events in the last number of years, whether we're talking about misinformation and disinformation being spread during COVID—which I think was talked about in one of the NSICOP reports—or about attempts at election interference by foreign actors, or whether we're looking at businesses, as I mentioned in my opening state-

ment, and the minister from Innovation actually made changes within the last number of years on that front. The government has to continue to evolve and adapt as we learn about these threats.

• (1325)

Hon. Greg Fergus: I appreciate that.

If I can sneak in one last question, the foreign affairs deputy minister, David Morrison, told this committee, "The cabinet directive on the protocol states very clearly that whenever national security agencies become aware of interference they must consider all options to effectively address the interference." The panel is in place to ensure there is communication with the public if there is an incident that threatens the integrity of our elections, but before that, the protocol ensures in the first instance that there's consideration of what could be done to actually address the threat. I think that's quite important.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, can you ask the question, so I can give a bit of time to answer? The beeper has gone off.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Oh, I'm sorry.

Do you have anything to add? Could you provide any colour to what the government was thinking when the protocol was first introduced back in 2019?

Ms. Katie Telford: It was a new thing going into 2019, and there was a review done of it. The review was made public. It was also studied by NSICOP, and NSICOP determined that the SITE task force and the protocol had fulfilled their mandate. However, there were some lessons learned that came out of those reviews, and they were followed up on heading into the 2021 campaign.

Now there are some further lessons learned, which we've all seen in the review coming out of the 2021 protocol and panel experience. One of those areas is communications and figuring out how... To an earlier member's comments around instilling trust in Canadians and ensuring we're always building trust for Canadians in institutions, that's one of the areas that it talks about needing to be worked on. I think it's a great area for parliamentarians to give some advice on as well.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thanks, Ms. Telford.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Telford, you mentioned a little earlier that no information was withheld from the Prime Minister. Is that correct?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: That is correct.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Two weeks ago, the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics heard testimony that CSIS had attempted on several occasions over the past 40 years or so to sound the alarm and warn government of both parties of certain foreign interference situations.

Am I to understand that if CSIS sounds the alarm saying that it has important intelligence, a meeting will routinely be set up with the Prime Minister's Office to share that intelligence?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, and if there is an alarm being sounded, the meeting could happen with the Prime Minister extremely quickly as well. Sometimes these things happen the same day, and one of the frustrations with some of the commentary on all of this has been the feeling that there aren't channels to do that. I know that if it had ever been brought to my attention, or if it had ever been brought to the Prime Minister's attention that something was being missed, we would have acted on it. I would have ensured he knew about it, and I know he would have acted on it.

That hasn't been the experience. Anything that has come forward, as I said earlier, he has acted on.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Now that we are assured that the intelligence goes to the Prime Minister when CSIS raises the alarm, could you tell us who is responsible for assessing whether the information is accurate or not? Is it CSIS, is it Ms. Thomas, is it you in tandem with the Prime Minister or is it the Prime Minister alone? Who is ultimately responsible for judging the quality of the intelligence received?

• (1330)

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said in my opening statement, when we'll go off into a SCIF, it's usually a group of people. As the NSIA wrote in her memo, she is almost always there, and sometimes there will be other senior officials there, as she deems appropriate, depending upon what we're talking about. The Prime Minister, of course.... I am usually there, as I said at the outset, and sometimes there will be some other senior staff there as well.

It's really important that we take the intelligence and we talk it through. If we need other experts to come in to answer other questions, that will get scheduled immediately.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: At that point, once intelligence is received, who makes the decision whether or not to investigate further?

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: Largely I would defer to the experts through our peppering them with questions, which we do a lot of, as I said earlier. That can sometimes lead to even more of a need to have them.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: If I may, I'd like to ask you who you are referring to when you say experts.

[English]

Ms. Katie Telford: I consider them to be the heads of our security agencies and the experts they will sometimes bring with them, like an expert who specializes in a particular region in the world, for example, or who specializes in a certain form of intelligence collection, or that kind of thing. Those would be experts, in my view.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to clarify that it is my responsibility to allow more speaking time. I signalled to you that your time was up, but you kept talking. In my opinion, that does not work. We know we have a limited amount of time and we need to use it properly. I gave you a little more time to speak. Having said that, it's my place to speak up and that is what I did.

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

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

As always with everything, through the chair, I hear very clearly, Ms. Telford, that you trust in the Right Honourable David Johnston in his role as rapporteur, and that's fine. What I am saying is that I trust Canadians. I trust their need to have trust in our electoral institutions, to be able to have these serious allegations addressed in a way that honours our national security, and the need of Canadians to understand what has happened. How is Canada protecting itself? Is there any corruption that we should be concerned about? How can Canadians have faith in the election process in the future?

In my opinion, those things can be addressed only through a public inquiry.

I guess what I am trying to understand is why there is resistance from the Prime Minister and the PMO to giving Canadians a process that they can quantify, that they can see and that takes it out of the political sphere.

You and I do definitely agree on that issue. I find it frustrating to hear from some of the Conservative members that if you don't say this, then it means big problems over here.

I also don't like what I think Canadians are hearing, which is these big concerns being minimized: "Look at all the things we've created. Don't worry. There's no problem to see here." I don't believe that Canadians agree with that. It, therefore, feels as though we're having this tug of war and what we're forgetting in that tug of war is that Canadians require accountability in order to have faith in our institutions.

I ask again, why is there resistance? Why can we not move forward in this way so that Canadians have assurances that their institutions are working and responding to the changing reality we're in and so we can have faith in those systems?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I would just like to start by saying that it was suggested perhaps that the member trusts Canadians and that this is somehow different from my own point of view on things. I just want to say that it is exactly because I trust Canadians that I do what I do and that I believe in elections so much and that I believe in the protection of our elections. That's also why the government has taken the many steps that I've already outlined, and many more that I didn't have time to get to, over the course of our time in government.

It's not so much resistance as it is actually making sure we are setting up the right things and that the right environment is being chosen so that the matters you're talking about can be dug into and so that exactly those questions you're talking about can get proper answers.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Thomas, go ahead.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): Ms. Telford, on February 13 the Globe and Mail reported that, in 2019, a CSIS briefing to the Prime Minister's Office and the Prime Minister's chief of staff—which, of course, is you—warned about the connection that the former Liberal MPP from Markham—Unionville had to the Beijing consulate. The nation's spy agency, CSIS, told the Prime Minister's Office and you that the MPP should be on “your radar” and that “someone should reach out to Mary [Ng] to be extra careful”.

As he was her campaign co-chair, of course, in 2017 and was lined up to do the same job in 2019, did the Prime Minister's Office advise the current minister of trade to distance herself from the former Liberal MPP for Markham—Unionville?

Ms. Katie Telford: There are a couple of things on that.

I believe the minister has already spoken to the fact that the individual you're talking about was not a co-chair of her campaign. I can't get into, as I've said before, the specifics of what you're describing, whether or not it happened and whether or not we were briefed on it.

What I can do is just take a quick step back and try to give you a little more than that—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: It's okay. Thank you. I'll move on to the next question.

Ms. Katie Telford: Memos usually don't make those recommendations. That might be helpful for you to know.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Just for clarity, he was in fact her campaign co-chair in 2017, so you cannot deny that. He was lined up for 2019 but was then promptly dropped within a matter of time of this report being released. That's just an interesting fact for the public to consider.

I would also remind you, Ms. Telford, that you do have the ability to talk about the extent and the timing of briefings. The reason I say that is actually that intelligence and security expert Wesley Wark, who served for two terms as an intelligence and security adviser to the Prime Minister, has said so. If he says you can provide those details, I'll take his word over yours.

Let's just start on that platform, shall we?

The Chair: No. I'm going to pause your time.

I'm not sure what's happening here. I feel like we've been doing a really good job. I was actually saying that because the line of questioning has been so fruitful, perhaps we should try to get in a bit of extra time past two o'clock, just to make sure that we get the information we are requesting.

As I said at the top of the meeting and as I have repeated, this is not a courtroom. It's a procedure and House affairs committee, where members of Parliament sit, and we do important work. Comments are made through the chair.

Mrs. Thomas, as someone who has chaired committees very well, you know very well the important work we do as chairs, so I'll ask that comments be made through the chair.

The floor is yours.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Through the chair, did anybody from the Prime Minister's Office or the Liberal Party headquarters relay any information to the current minister of trade regarding CSIS warnings about the former Liberal MPP for Markham—Unionville?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I would encourage the members, if they have questions on Minister Ng and her local campaigns, to raise them with her. I believe she's on the public record already on these questions.

I'm not sure things were laid out the way I understand them by the member in terms of those experiences. The thing I was starting to try to say earlier, which I think might be useful for the member to know, is that recommendations don't tend to come to us saying, “You should go and do the threat reduction measure”—if there's ever one that's recommended.

That's something to consider in terms of how the member is presenting things as facts that are certainly not the way that I have experienced things.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Chair, I wonder if Ms. Telford considers the Minister of Small Business a close friend.

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, yes, I do.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: I'm wondering then why the individual testifying would not have informed Ms. Ng about the troubling information that CSIS provided.

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I would take you and the members back to what I said in my opening statement. Even what we share between other cleared individuals within government is something that we have to be incredibly sensitive and careful about. Threat reduction measures, if they are deemed to be something that is necessary, are something that security officials do—not political staff.

• (1340)

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: In June 2017, at Ms. Telford's request, the national security adviser prepared a document entitled "Memorandum for the Prime Minister". A draft of this memo was viewed by Global News, and it states that Beijing agents were "assisting Canadian candidates running for political offices".

I'm wondering what prompted Ms. Telford to request this memo.

Ms. Katie Telford: As I said in my opening statement, I ask a lot of questions in a lot of meetings. Sometimes my name also gets attached to things even when they're not coming directly from me. I have learned that over time.

While I can't speak to the specifics of this memo for the reasons I've said previously, my understanding through the reporting is that this was an unsigned memo. It's particularly strange and not my experience to receive unsigned memos in the PMO.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Through you, Chair, did the Prime Minister receive the memo? It was requested.

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, my previous answer stands for that question as well.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: The previous answer was that the Prime Minister receives—

The Chair: I don't even know what's happening. We were doing so well.

We set a timer. The timer beeps at the end of the round. I've shown leniency so that we can get you an answer beyond that time, and then we continue. I can ask to see if the timer needs to be louder, but it's been working so far, so I feel like we're in a good spot.

Mr. Turnbull, the floor is yours.

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

Thanks to Ms. Telford for being here today.

We've had lots of good testimony at our committee, including yours today, Ms. Telford. One thing in particular that I would like to quote is from CSIS director David Vigneault, who stated:

What I can say, and what we have said publicly many times over the last number of years, is that the actors who are engaged in foreign interference against Canadians do so at all levels of government—at the federal, provincial and municipal levels—and they are doing it across party lines.

I believe you made a similar comment in your opening remarks that foreign interference affects all levels of government and all political parties. Unfortunately, I think in our proceedings and throughout many months now, we've seen a highly politicized environment. It is unfortunate. We've seen some members of this committee try to use this issue to score cheap political points at the expense of our democracy, I feel.

Ms. Telford, do you think that Canadians are well served by those trying to make this into a partisan issue?

Ms. Katie Telford: No, I don't. I think there's a lot of... I've seen this, obviously, at times, but not as much as I think we would all like, which is to bring this into a non-partisan arena or even a multi-partisan arena.

That's the interesting thing in terms of some of the mechanisms that are in place that this government created because there was nothing before this government, certainly nothing anywhere close to the things that this government has put into place. One of the mechanisms, NSICOP, is multipartisan, so I almost think of it as non-partisan, because the work that comes out of it and the way in which they operate feels that way, in contrast to sometimes what we see in other places. It is actually a multipartisan place, which is all parliamentarians with full access. They are cleared and get full access on the subjects they are studying.

Meanwhile, there are a whole number of other organizations, as I've already gone through. Then, as I said, there are a number of other things. If you were to talk to the minister of heritage, if you were to talk to Minister LeBlanc, there are a number of other ministers.... Much of government has to consider the possibilities of foreign interference these days, so that's why there's a whole-of-government approach on this as well.

As you said, it's beyond government—it's far beyond government—so there have been organizations set up, coordination bodies set up between provincial and federal bodies. There have been new communication channels set up between security services, financial sectors and businesses, and all kinds of things that have been going on in the last number of years that would be really worthwhile—for everybody who hasn't already—learning even more about. I think these are things that could give comfort to Canadians—to know that all these steps are being taken and that it is being taken this seriously, not just by this government but by the whole country, because holding our institutions strong and being comfortable that our democracy is working, there's nothing more important than that, I don't think, for Canadians.

• (1345)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I concur wholeheartedly with that statement and that very strong sentiment that you've just sent.

One of the things that struck me in our proceedings time and time again as slightly unjust is the constant accusations we've heard that this government hasn't taken action to combat foreign interference, but the facts really simply do not back that up.

As you mentioned in your opening remarks, David Morrison said before this committee that the tools to address foreign interference are increasing. NSICOP, NSIRA and the panel did not exist before this government took office. We set up the critical election incident public protocol, which is the panel, or the panel is part of. We took the lead on setting up with the G7 countries the rapid response mechanism. The protocol, the panel and the RRM were all part of our four-pillar plan to protect Canadian democracy.

We've continued, in my view, based on all the evidence that's out there, to adapt and evolve our response. The protocol was independently reviewed after both of the last two elections and updates were made to really strengthen it.

These are just a few examples. You've cited some of them, and I think we could all list many others.

There's always more to do. I think we've acknowledged that and you've acknowledged that in your remarks, but would you agree that this government has taken strong action on this, that we take it seriously and that in fact we've taken more action, really, than any previous government?

Ms. Katie Telford: Yes, I believe that to be factually correct. As well, this government has also committed to taking even more actions—and very soon—and is in the midst of doing that.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great.

We've heard—

The Chair: No, I'm sorry, Mr. Turnbull. I know that possibly you couldn't hear it, but you wrapped up right as a beep happened.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I couldn't hear it. I'm sorry, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Telford has provided you an answer, so thank you for that.

We will enter into our fourth round. We're going to start with Mr. Cooper, who will be followed by Mr. Zuberi, Madam Normandin and Ms. Blaney. Then I'll give you two more names and that will bring us to an end.

Mr. Cooper will start.

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

Ms. Telford, through you, Madam Chair, 10 weeks before the 2021 election, Bob Saroya, the then member of Parliament for Markham—Unionville, received a cryptic and threatening text message from Beijing's consul general in Toronto suggesting that he would no longer be a member of Parliament after the 2021 election.

Were you, the Prime Minister or anyone in the PMO briefed or do you otherwise have knowledge about that text message?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to this information. I'm sorry.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You can't speak to the information. Is it because you don't know? Why can't you speak to this information?

Ms. Katie Telford: No. It's because, as I said before, as frustrating as it is for all of us, I can't get into confirming, let alone denying, information and going beyond the bounds of the security heads who were here before me.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I find it very interesting that you will not confirm whether you have knowledge of that text message.

I'll ask an even broader question. Do you have any knowledge of interference by Beijing in the 2021 election in the riding of Markham—Unionville?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to specific pieces of information. As you know, I was not the cleared representative during the campaign. I'm sorry—that's through the chair. The member knows I was not the cleared representative during the campaign, but in terms of what I have been briefed on subsequent to the campaign, you will have seen a lot of this come out of the review of the panel's work during the 2021 campaign. Broadly speaking, yes, I have been briefed on attempted interference and influence during the last elections.

• (1350)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Did that occur in the riding of Markham—Unionville—yes or no?

Ms. Katie Telford: I can't speak to that in terms of the specifics.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's another convenient non-answer.

Ms. Telford, through you, Madam Chair, when I asked you in my previous round about when the Prime Minister first learned about Beijing's interference in the 2019 election, you didn't answer. You said it's part of an “ongoing conversation”. You conveniently refused to even acknowledge your knowledge of or familiarity with one of the very few documents that have been produced by the Prime Minister's own department, the PCO. It is dated February 21, 2020. It spoke about a subtle but effective interference network in the 2019 election.

In the interests of transparency, Canadians deserve to know: When did those conversations begin?

Ms. Katie Telford: In the same efforts of transparency, conversations about potential election interference attempts began long before the 2019 campaign. That's why steps were taken to protect the 2019 campaign and more steps were taken to protect the 2021 campaign. I think it's really important that it be said in this committee—because it should be said as many times as possible—that experts, very senior trusted public servants, have come out saying that those elections were fair.

Mr. Michael Cooper: No one is disputing that the overall outcomes of the elections in 2019 and 2021 were not affected by Beijing's interference, but if even one riding was impacted, that is a problem.

You acknowledge that there was interference by Beijing in the 2019 and 2021 elections. I hope you at least acknowledge that much, Ms. Telford, through you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I assume that when the member talks about Beijing all the time, he's speaking about China's foreign interference. I acknowledged right in the opening statement that there was foreign interference by a number of states, and that's written into the reports as well.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Very good.

Ms. Telford, through you, Madam Chair, the advice of CSIS to the Prime Minister was that the policy of the government in response to foreign interference should be grounded in sunlight and transparency, and that such interference be made known to the public. That was provided in a briefing to him on January 21, 2021, another one of the few documents produced to this committee.

Why is it that, in the face of your acknowledgement of Beijing's election interference and the advice that CSIS provided to make such foreign interference known, the Prime Minister instead kept Canadians in the dark?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I will be quick on that and just say that it's rare for the member and I to agree on anything, but what we can agree on is the importance of transparency, sunlight and growing confidence for Canadians in our institutions. It's for that reason that our government took steps to protect elections that had never been taken before.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Telford.

Go ahead, Mr. Zuberi.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here with us today, Ms. Telford.

[*English*]

I'm going to quote from testimony that was given at this committee before by Mr. David Morrison, deputy minister of foreign affairs. He spoke about the limitations and caveats around intelligence. He said to this committee:

...let me simply say that intelligence rarely paints a full, concrete or actionable picture. Intelligence almost always comes heavily caveated and qualified in ways designed to caution consumers such as me—

He was referring to himself, the deputy minister.

—from jumping to conclusions, while at the same time helping us at least to gain a little more awareness.

He continued:

Now I, for one, am very glad we live in a country where even information of unknown reliability is passed up the chain, because that allows people like me—

Again, it's the DM.

—daily consumers of intelligence, to begin to form a picture of what might be going on and the steps that might need to be taken if the information turns out to be accurate or part of a larger pattern. However, let me say that it is extremely rare to come across an intel report that is concrete enough to constitute a smoking gun. Intelligence is much more a game of disparate pieces of information, many of which don't seem to fit together, at least initially.

He continued:

In this context, I would make one final point. Intel that gets leaked and is then taken out of context—for example, a report from a single uncorroborated source.... If that report instantly becomes taken as fact, this can actually be prejudicial to Canada's national security.... There is nothing our adversaries would like more than to divide Canadians and have us call into question the very institutions that keep [Canada] safe...

I know you spoke about this in your opening statement. Would you like to elaborate a bit further on the DM's comments in relation to this and his previous testimony?

• (1355)

Ms. Katie Telford: Thank you for that.

I think it's worth pausing a bit more on something I said in my opening, which is that sometimes the intelligence is wrong. In whatever form you're looking at it, there is something that you are.... Whether it's because you're talking it through with others, you're looking at it in a different context or you're comparing it with other things, because of your own knowledge or because of somebody else's knowledge in the room, you know it to be wrong, yet you still look at it because it paints a broader picture. You still

leave it in there, because it's even useful to know that information's being spread out there or being stated somewhere for some reason.

If that is taken completely out of context, no one has the opportunity to put it into that wider context to know what is true and what isn't true.

Also, some of it you need to take time with to be able to figure out its veracity. That is why we have people who specialize in analyzing this information and who get to know whether it's from a region or a community, and whether it's domestic or foreign. Where they're looking at it and able to become an expert in it over time—or come into the job being an expert—they're giving us that best advice that, unfortunately, Canadians aren't able to get in the way that some of this has been coming out of late. I'm really hoping that through the good work of NSICOP and NSIRA, and potentially other things, the special rapporteur will give us advice so that Canadians will be able to get a better sense of the picture.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I have another question I'd like to touch upon. Last month, the Minister of Public Safety launched a consultation on having a foreign influence registry. This consultation and potential action on that are critical steps that we should be taking.

We know the diaspora communities are particular.... They face the challenges of foreign interference. Diaspora communities are impacted by this. The CSIS director came before the committee and said:

[CSIS has] been clear that the principal threat to Canada comes from the People's Republic of China but, to be clear, the threat comes not from the Chinese people but rather from the Chinese Communist Party and the Government of China. Indeed, we are keenly aware that Chinese communities are often the primary victims of PRC foreign interference efforts in Canada.

This distinction that he's making between the government and the Chinese people is critical. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm really glad you raised that. I mentioned very briefly in my opening statement the impact on communities. This isn't something that is only an election-focused issue. Foreign interference is much broader than that, and it has been going on for some time in all of the different parts of our communities, but particularly in diaspora communities.

We need to take extra care that, when we are creating any of these mechanisms, they are taking into account how to protect, specifically, our diaspora communities in whatever steps are being taken.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Telford, I'm sure you've noticed—or maybe not—that we're approaching two o'clock. Just because there are a few more questions that need to be posed, we would like to complete this round and then we will do just a quick one-off to each of the parties. Then we will end shortly, by 2:30.

I'm sorry to impose upon you, but I appreciate your leniency. I know it's awkward for you to say otherwise right now, so I'm going to proceed as chair and just thank you in advance for your latitude.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Telford, I have a question that is also a comment of sorts.

It's often said here that, because of its role, the NSICOP should be responsible for administering the interference issue. However, in the fall, the chair of that committee, David McGuinty, wrote to the Prime Minister to let him know that it was sometimes very difficult to obtain documents from cabinet to enable the committee to do its job properly. We know that the parliamentarians on the NSICOP must advise Mr. Johnston, who will have to decide whether or not to recommend an independent public inquiry.

We have a situation where Canadian universities received funding from foreign interests. There is growing evidence that the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation had ongoing ties with the Prime Minister's cabinet and that interference took place in at least 11 ridings, possibly more.

Hasn't this matter become too big to be handled within the government? Shouldn't it instead be the subject of an independent public inquiry, as your former colleague Mr. Butts recommends?

• (1400)

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: There was a lot in there.

On the provision of information to NSICOP and the special rapporteur, the Prime Minister has committed to providing and giving access to as much as possible. He provided unprecedented amounts of information and access to information during the public inquiry in the fall, so if there are concerns on that front, I'm happy to take those back.

In terms of ties to the PMO and so on, there's a lot of assertion and innuendo there that I'd be happy to answer questions on if there are questions on that, because there's not a lot there.

In terms of the broad question of whether it is too vast, well, it's for that exact reason that there are a number of different organizations looking at things. It's why the Prime Minister took the additional step of putting in place an independent special rapporteur to identify exactly what might be getting missed in all of this and what more needed to be done to ensure we are getting as much of the best work possible done in all these different parts and are effectively answering Canadians' questions, most importantly perhaps.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Regarding Mr. Johnston's role, there is growing evidence that the foundation had a relationship with

Mr. Trudeau and that Mr. Johnston was aware of the donation that was made. Mr. Johnston will have to decide whether or not to recommend a public inquiry, in which this donation that was made will likely be examined.

Notwithstanding Mr. Johnston's qualifications, doesn't this cast a shadow over his ability to make a good decision about whether or not an independent public inquiry should be held?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: I'm glad you asked that, because I think it's really important—and I know it's been said in other public forums—to make it clear here, given the subject matter. The Prime Minister has had no contact and no relationship with this organization for over a decade. When we insinuate that there are some other ties there, there aren't. The tie is in the name.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Everything is always through the chair, so I appreciate that.

I just would like to say to Ms. Telford that we had a little bit of discussion earlier about a previous inquiry, and I've done a little bit of research on it. I would like to quote from a Toronto Star article that says, “Harper last month asked academic and lawyer David Johnston to craft the terms of reference for the inquiry and Harper says he'll take whatever advice Johnston gives.”

I'm just clarifying that a bit. I'm happy to share that with you if it helps you understand the point of view I'm coming from, but I do want to go back to this issue of having a public inquiry, having a transparent process that Canadians can have faith in.

I'm just curious. There were some questions earlier about what we're seeing across this country, which is an increase of anti-Asian hate. That's very concerning, because it puts people who are in this country, many Chinese people in this country who have been fighting for an extremely long time to get acknowledgement from this government about interference from China into this country, people who were willing to take that step to draw attention to that issue....

If the rapporteur comes forward and recommends a public inquiry, I'm wondering if the PMO, if the Prime Minister and if Ms. Telford would admit that it was wrong to allow these issues to fester in the public mind for such a long period of time that it has created a distress that is just not necessary, and that the longer we ask Canadians to wait, the more we are actually harming other populations by not seeing that action.

I'm just wondering if that would be the case and if there would be a willingness to say: "You're right. We should have just done this in the first place."

• (1405)

Ms. Katie Telford: I feel like we're going to have to take the discussion on what happened in the past off-line, because I totally know the article you're talking about and I can point you to another one, but I think we're actually dancing on the head of a pin there.

In terms of the actual substance of the rest of your question, I believe—and I suspect we will agree to disagree on this, Madam Chair—that what is a bigger problem in terms of things festering at the moment is the partisanship and hyperbole that has been brought to this so often in the discussion in the last while. That's why we needed to get it out of those hands and into hands like the agencies and the committee of parliamentarians that do seem to be able to work in a way that doesn't do that, and it's why the special rapporteur was necessary. Somebody had to be able to put their mind to it who was out of this space to figure out what those other appropriate next steps might be.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go to Mr. Brock for four minutes, who will be followed by Ms. Sahota for four minutes.

Mr. Brock, go ahead.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Telford, earlier today, my colleague Mr. Berthold asked you about the Globe and Mail story of February 17, 2023, regarding Beijing's objectives in the 2021 election. The Prime Minister is on record as saying that the report was full of "inaccuracies", without denying the existence of the report and not identifying what in the report was inaccurate.

My colleague asked you the question: In your opinion, what was inaccurate about that report? You couldn't confirm. My belief is, if the report was full of inaccuracies, you would identify those inaccuracies or, if the report was completely false, you would say so. I'm giving you the opportunity now: Is the report truthful or not?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, maybe I'll just take a crack at explaining why it is that whether or not it's inaccurate I can't answer, because if I started to answer the things that were either missing or inaccurate in some of the specific questions that you're getting into, it is as much as confirming, then, some of the other things that you might be raising.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

I believe the most damning fact in that report is that Beijing's objectives in the 2021 election were to help the Liberals secure a minority government and to defeat certain Conservative candidates. Do you accept that? Do you believe that to be the case?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, my experience going into both of the last two elections was that our relations with China were at their lowest point. I was working day and night, alongside many other incredible Canadians, to try to bring home the two Michaels, who it was just amazing to see in Parliament when President Biden was here—

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Ms. Telford.

CSIS tracked specifically the surrounding circumstances involving the former consul general in Vancouver—her name is Tong Xiaoling—who held the post during the 2021 election. In fact, CSIS reported that she was doing victory laps, bragging about how her role was to defeat certain Conservative candidates.

You are aware of that. Is that inaccurate?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I'm aware of the reporting on this matter. I can't speak to what different countries' ambassadors and consuls general have said—

Mr. Larry Brock: The Prime Minister was aware of this information.

Ms. Katie Telford: The Prime Minister is also aware—

Mr. Larry Brock: If you are aware of it, the Prime Minister is aware of it.

Ms. Katie Telford: —of the reporting.

The Chair: We're pausing. Pause.

You know, friends, colleagues, this takes away from our time. That's all we lose. We all lose time. No one here is new. One person is going to speak at a time.

It was not a courtroom at the beginning of this meeting. It still has not become one. It is the procedure and House affairs committee, which I know has really high ratings. I'm sure there are many people watching, and they want to see the important work we do here in the House of Commons.

Go ahead, Mr. Brock.

• (1410)

Mr. Larry Brock: The victory lap she was bragging about, is that false?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair—

Mr. Larry Brock: Answer yes or no. Is it false? It's a simple question.

Ms. Katie Telford: I can only speak to how I am aware of this through—

The Chair: Mr. Brock, it's very simple. We have someone coming to appear today to provide us with information.

What might be simple to you might not be simple to somebody else. I don't know. I've never been the chief of staff to the Prime Minister. I'm not sure if you have, so I'm going to ask, Mr. Brock—

Mr. Larry Brock: Yes.

The Chair: —that we permit Ms. Telford to answer, and when she gives a quick answer....

Ms. Telford, I have to commend you. Your answers have been quite short compared to most witnesses, and I appreciate that.

I'm going to give the floor to Ms. Telford, and it will be returned to you, Mr. Brock. If I have to come—

Mr. Larry Brock: Just for clarification, Madam Chair, the question was premised with a “yes or no”. I didn't get a yes or a no, and that's why I referred to it as a simple question.

The Chair: Within the House of Commons, Mr. Brock, as you know, there are unwritten rules. Oftentimes, the amount of time that is consumed by the question or comment is provided to the person to answer. I think it's only fair that the witness be able to answer.

I recognize what the premise was. If you look at my premise, it's been, “Let's have a functional meeting and one person will speak at a time.” I've been doing this for many meetings. I've not yet achieved that. I will keep trying.

Mr. Larry Brock: Madam Chair, how much time...?

The Chair: Right now, Mr. Brock, you will have one minute left, starting with Ms. Telford.

Mr. Larry Brock: CSIS reported a month after the 2021 election that it was well known within the Chinese Canadian community of British Columbia that Ms. Tong wanted the Liberal Party to win the 2021 election.

Is that false?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think, Madam Chair, you'll know my answer on this, which is that I can't speak to the specifics of that.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

CSIS reports reveal that Ms. Tong and former consul Wang Jin made “discreet and subtle efforts” to encourage members of Chinese Canadian organizations to rally votes for the Liberals and defeat Conservatives.

Is that false?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I would just remind the members of something I said in the opening that's come up throughout this committee, which is that interference in elections has an impact on all political parties.

Mr. Larry Brock: In November 2021, CSIS reported that Ms. Tong described former MP Kenny Chiu as a “vocal distractor” when discussing his defeat in the 2021 election. She is also reported to have said that Mr. Chiu's loss proved that “their strategy and tactics were good, and contributed to achieving their goals”.

Is that false? Is that inaccurate?

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, I'm going to have to give a similar answer, but I would say it's important to remind people, because of the insinuations coming from the member, that the election has been examined by experts and they have deemed it as one that was free and fair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

That was a very confusing line of questioning. I don't think there is a yes-or-no answer to be given when you're asked for someone else's state of mind or someone else's belief, by another witness who's present here today. That's kind of like the hyperpartisan and political attacks we've been seeing by many members today about why the PM is keeping people in the dark and why we don't want sunlight and transparency.

Through you, Madam Chair, to the witness, I believe that, with respect to many points, Ms. Telford has mentioned that a protocol unit has been set up, that protocol is in place and that it is their job if something rises past a certain threshold to bring it to the public's attention, even if it is in one riding, let alone at a national level. Mr. Ian Shugart even said in a CBC news interview that they were prepared to do so.

I'm wondering if I could get some more comments from Ms. Telford regarding what she or the PM is responsible for doing based on the impartial parts of information they receive versus what agencies like the RCMP can do if CSIS presents information to them. What could the protocol unit do? Who is responsible for creating more sunlight or transparency with respect to foreign interference happening in our electoral process, which has been happening for some time?

• (1415)

Ms. Katie Telford: I think one of the challenges, which even comes out in your question, in which you named a number of the different bodies, is that there is no one person. Even though at least one of the members, I know, would have liked to have an inquiry already, one of the challenges is determining into which part exactly that would be. What exactly does that look like?

With POEC, there was something built into the legislation such that there was a clearly mandated, time-framed, clear question that had to be answered. However, in this case, this is something very diffuse and across very many different parts of government—let alone other levels of government, because it involves law enforcement, which obviously works very independently and separately, certainly from the political side but also from all other parts of government oftentimes, even if they coordinate with other parts. The security agencies are obviously incredibly sensitive organizations.

How all of that can come together and be better reported on, I think, is an excellent question. It's one on which I think NSICOP has made great strides and has done different things, such as providing training to members of Parliament and having better communication and ongoing communication with members of Parliament. As well, there is a whole series of other things and other next steps that can be taken, which are in the report that Clerk Charette and Minister LeBlanc just put out.

There are so many different things, and I think we're seeing that fact through all the reporting. There are so many different things, and there's not just one answer to be given here. This is an ongoing body of work that is totally multidisciplinary, which doesn't even quite cover it.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Ms. Telford.

I know it's inconvenient, as some members have pointed out, for you to even be here today and to be walking this fine line, which you have to do. It's quite the balance. It's very convenient for the leader of the Conservatives not to take briefings so that he can say whatever he would like to say.

In conclusion, I just want to thank you for being here today and for shedding some more light, as much as you can in this forum. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will do a quick last round, not exactly as planned, but I understand it's going to be Mrs. Thomas sharing time with Mr. Berthold for four minutes. Then it will be Ms. O'Connell for four minutes and then Madam Gaudreau and Mrs. Blaney for two and a half minutes each.

Mrs. Thomas, go ahead.

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: Through you, Chair, I believe what we heard today, then, from Ms. Telford and the testimony she provided was the following.

Today, she was asked a series of very simple questions. They were questions that did not require top security clearance, and yet there was a failure to give proper answers. We asked questions with regard to the Prime Minister's knowledge. We asked questions about the briefings he received. We asked questions with regard to whether or not he was informed concerning Beijing's interference in our elections.

Ms. Telford refused to provide simple answers to these very simple questions. We know that numerous intelligence documents were made available to the media and have been reported to the public. We referenced those documents throughout our questions today, and again the questions we put forward were skirted or altogether shot down.

Now, what's quite convenient is that Ms. Telford cannot confirm the existence of documents that contain, of course, the most damning information concerning the Prime Minister. With that, I'm talking about documents that reveal Beijing's interference in our elections and Beijing's motivation to elect Liberals to the House of Commons by providing paid staff members to these campaigns, as well as funnelling hidden, secret and illegal money to them. Ms. Telford was not able to discuss these documents, conveniently. What's interesting, however, is that Ms. Telford had no problem whatsoever in denying the existence of some documents, but when it came to this document, the document that shows Beijing's interference in order to elect Liberals, Ms. Telford did not deny the existence of that one, so I'll allow her silence to speak for itself.

However, Ms. Telford also told us that the Prime Minister is briefed regularly. Ms. Telford also told us that she is the Prime Minister's right-hand individual, constantly with him, and that—

and I'll quote directly—the Prime Minister reads “everything” and there is “nothing [that] is ever kept from the Prime Minister”.

Given the fact that the Prime Minister reads everything and that nothing is ever kept from him, the committee must then assume that the Prime Minister was aware and that the Prime Minister chose to actively ignore and avoid the information, the briefings and the warnings that were given to him by our top security and intelligence agencies in this country when it came to Beijing's interference. One must conclude that the only reason to turn a blind eye to such information is certainly not in the best interests of the Canadian electorate, and therefore only in the best interests of the Liberal Party of Canada, which of course benefited from this interference by getting both money and paid staff in order to secure their ridings.

I'll leave it there.

• (1420)

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, it—

Mrs. Rachael Thomas: There was no question, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Telford.

Ms. Katie Telford: Madam Chair, it's interesting that I was accused of silence, then told that I wasn't asked a question when I was trying to answer and, further, was then being quoted in the statement that was just made, so apparently I did say something.

Madam Chair, I would say that what was being alleged or at least part of what was being alleged there were infractions of Elections Canada law, and there are mechanisms for those things to be investigated, so I would suggest that you be speaking to the appropriate agencies about what, if anything, should be happening on those fronts if those things are the case.

I think the member probably could have written this beforehand, Madam Chair, and that was one of the reasons that I was concerned about—and I think many were concerned about—whether or not it was the appropriate thing for me to be coming to this committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will just note that the comment that was made by the member took over two minutes, and you were able to respond in less than a minute, so the time to the member was way greater than it was for you to respond.

Ms. O'Connell, four minutes go to you.

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

Ms. Telford, thank you for being here today.

I think what we just witnessed is exactly what Canadians don't want out of this process. The Conservatives have not been getting the allegations and clips they want throughout the day, so they have resorted to just making a statement. After weeks of asking for you to appear, they decided to use their last minutes to try to not ask you any questions and just summarize a series of conspiracy theories, frankly, that testimony here today does not corroborate.

In the last moments that I have left, I'd like to ask you about the process. Ms. Harder talked about how you conveniently gave non-answers, even though you could have answered. I won't make any assumptions, but I would presume that Ms. Harder doesn't have the process that goes into classifying documents or determining classifications on documents and information. Perhaps you could speak to the process of why you can or cannot speak to a matter of national security, and who actually makes that determination, because it's certainly not just the Conservative members who feel they didn't get the responses they were hoping for.

Ms. Katie Telford: One of the reasons I said in my opening statement that I would respect the bounds the CSIS director and the NSIA put in place, or had around themselves when they came to committee in a public setting, is that they are in a far better position to be able to make those determinations than I am. That's because the classification of material happens within their purview and within their departments. Obviously it's different if it's material coming out of CSE, for example—and there are a number of different places within government—but the ultimate adviser on this kind of information to the PM, who reports directly to him, is the national security and intelligence adviser.

All of us who get cleared, as I mentioned briefly earlier, have to sign documentation where we make a number of undertakings. Written right into those undertakings are not only the consequences from a legal standpoint of revealing some of this information, but also the potential consequences of it, as I mentioned in my opening statement as well. They can be very severe for the country, and that's why we should all really respect them.

• (1425)

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you. As someone who used to sit on NSICOP, I went through a similar process and understand that. However, part of that is also remembering what is classified and not classified, and you have to be extremely careful. That's why the national security community determines an entire process when speaking in a public forum.

Is this precisely why the critical election incident public protocol is in place? Is it to have the knowledge of that national security community, which can take the full picture of intelligence and provide it to the incident public protocol, which is non-partisan? Then they can properly make a determination on what constitutes the threshold to speak to Canadians during an election, knowing that they don't want to tip the scales in any fashion or even allude to that. Is having a non-partisan body with access to that full picture of intelligence why that's so important during the election process?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think all of that is exactly right. The only thing I would add is that the senior officials who are part of that panel have spent their lives, in most cases, serving Canadians as public servants. I think there's reason for all of us to have a lot of faith in the work they do.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair. I only have two and a half minutes, so it's quite an effort.

Once again, I'd like to thank the witness, Ms. Telford.

I have two questions.

We've been given a lot of information today. For several years now, measures have been in place to counter foreign interference. As far back as 2015, efforts have been made in this regard; we agree.

However, what can we say to Canadians to reassure them? We see today that defending our democracy is not working. What do you have to say to the people watching? Obviously, there have been alerts, but unfortunately, interference is still happening.

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: I would disagree a little bit with the thought that it's not working, because I think the fact that we're all having these conversations speaks to the fact that this is in the public domain in perhaps a new and different way. It doesn't mean the institutions themselves have not been working.

I think there are questions to be asked. I think those questions are being asked by a number of the bodies that we're talking about, by the appropriate ones. There are ones that do oversight of the security agencies themselves. There's the NSICOP multipartisan parliamentary group, which is able to look at other parts.

There are a lot of different pieces to this. I appreciate that it's complex, but it's complex for a reason. This is a moment in the world. This is where I think we have to take that step back from saying we have some specific challenge here that is unique to Canada and that Canada has to just snap its fingers and solve this problem overnight. I don't think this is something that gets solved overnight. I think this is something that's been worked on for years, and I think it's something that our allies are dealing with too. That's why it was so predominant as a discussion point when the G7 was hosted here in Quebec.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Given all of that and the fact that we're constantly adapting to what's going on, how is it that between 2019 and 2021, Canadians were not made aware that interference was happening and that it would continue to happen? Why was this withheld when we've been discussing it here for six months?

[*English*]

Ms. Katie Telford: I would offer two things quickly.

One is that the review of the panel's work that spoke to interference.... NSICOP also continued that between 2019 and 2021.

What I'll say quickly—because I can tell I'm getting the look—is that I think there was a lot of other news between 2019 and 2021, and perhaps that's why some of the reports coming out on this subject were not in the same kind of spotlight they might have been in if there hadn't been a pandemic, amongst many other things, at the time. A lot of this work was ongoing between 2019 and 2021 and was being reported on publicly.

• (1430)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

Through you, Chair, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] I agree that this work needs to be taken out of the partisan environment of Parliament. I [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] why did the PM not instruct Mr. Johnston to set the terms of a public inquiry [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] than to decide whether or not to even have an inquiry? Is it not true that a public inquiry is the best way to take this out of partisanship?

Ms. Katie Telford: I think that's the first question.... I don't know that it is his first question, but probably the first question the special rapporteur needs to answer before he is able to answer what a mandate should look like is what the mechanism should look like. What is the question we're trying to answer? What are we trying to satisfy here? What is the moment at which we're trying to meet with Canadians here that can give them the satisfaction we all want them to have in their democratic institutions? What's the best way to do that?

First we have to figure that out, and then we figure out a mandate. If those things can already be happening or are already happening through other means and the spotlight just hasn't been shone on them, then perhaps, to my previous answer to a different question, that's something we need to think about.

I think there's a lot more to think about here than a binary choice—inquiry or no inquiry. That's hopefully what is now happening. Actually, I'm certain it is.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: If a public inquiry had started three months ago, I don't think we'd be sitting here in this room today, but I'll leave that to you.

My last question [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] presidents do have the ability to declassify information at will. In a [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] situation, where the government has classified information to clear the air, it would be helpful if it were declassified without necessarily disclosing sources and methods [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] that would concern national security. Does Canada have a similar process?

The Chair: I've heard the question. I understand that the interpreters are not able to hear the question and that the Internet connection might be unstable, so I'm not sure if something else is running on your computer. Did something change, Ms. Blaney?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Nothing changed.

The Chair: Interpreters, can you confirm that you hear me now?

Ms. Blaney, can you briefly summarize your question again?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay. I'll try. I'm hard-wired, so I don't know what could have happened.

Presidents do have the ability to declassify information at will. If there were a hypothetical situation where the government had classified information, and it [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] would clear the air and would be helpful if it were declassified without [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] sources and methods. I'm just wondering if Canada has a similar process.

Ms. Katie Telford: It's a very good question and one that I have been asking many questions about myself for the last while. It's not as straightforward an answer, unfortunately, as what you just described from south of the border. Having said that, I would encourage you to speak to officials on that further. I don't feel expert enough yet, but I can tell you that I've been asking a lot of questions on this in the last little while.

The Chair: Thank you.

There are some connectivity issues taking place, and I would say, actually, in this room, because there is even a delay on the screen. I hear the comments being made in regard to the interpretation at the end having an issue. I empathize with that, and we'll get to the bottom of it, but seeing that we have come past 2:30, I am adjourning the meeting and am thanking Ms. Telford for coming to appear today.

Just for members, I have good news. On Tuesday, we will be doing B.C. redistribution during our normal slot. On Tuesday evening, we have the slot from 6:30 to 8:30, with Mr. Michael Wernick and Mr. Daniel Jean appearing for one hour each. We have not confirmed the hour. That's why the notice has not come out, but it will be there.

With that, I wish everyone a great day.

Ms. Telford, thank you for your time and attention.

Everyone keep well and safe. Thank you.

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