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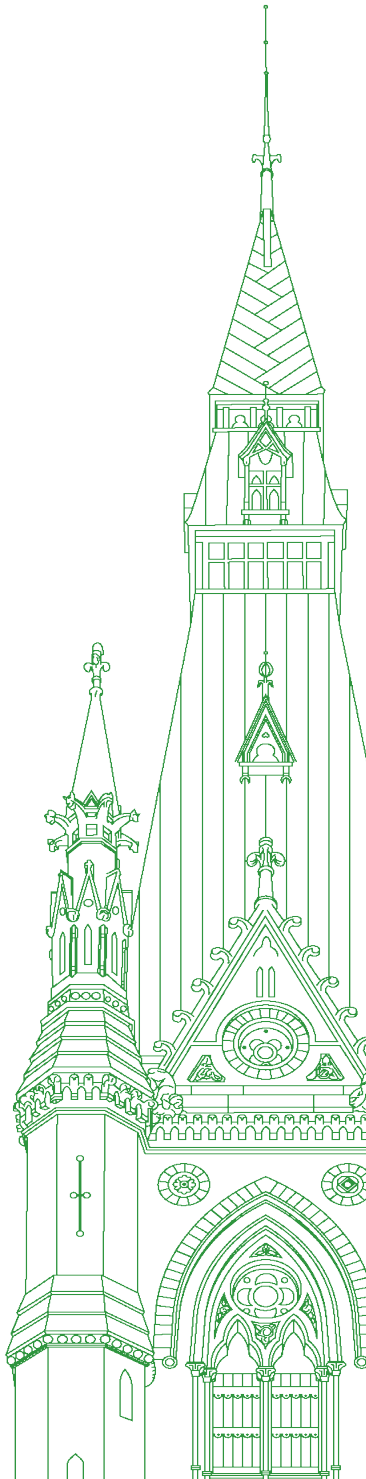

Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

Tuesday, April 25, 2023

● (1830)

[*Translation*]

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

Hello, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 66 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting this evening to continue its study on foreign election interference.

The Clerk and I will maintain a consolidated list of members wishing to speak.

[*English*]

Just as a reminder, on Thursday we will begin at 10 a.m. with the steering committee meeting, followed by Minister Mendicino on foreign election interference. Then, for the third hour for some of us and the second for others, we will proceed with the first panel of our colleagues concerning the federal electoral boundaries commission report for Ontario.

On Thursday, April 27, Tuesday, May 2, and Thursday, May 4, we will be meeting in room 225 West Block, just upstairs, so that our colleagues on another committee can have access to this room.

This evening, we have with us Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau, doctoral researcher; Steve Waterhouse, retired captain, former information system security officer, Department of National Defence, and cybersecurity specialist; and Laurence Grondin-Robillard, Ph.D. candidate, Groupe de recherche sur l'information et la surveillance au quotidien.

You will now have up to four minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to comments.

[*Translation*]

Welcome, Mr. Bordeleau.

The floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau (Doctoral Researcher, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to begin by thanking the members of this committee for inviting me to testify today. I hope that I can be helpful and provide insightful responses to your questions.

As was said, my name is Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau. I am a Ph.D. student with the Konrad Adenauer research chair in empirical democracy studies at the University of Ottawa. I previously completed a master's degree in political science at the Université de Montréal and a bachelor's degree in political science and psychology at the Royal Military College of Canada.

I have conducted research with the centre for international and defence policy at Queen's University, the electoral integrity project at the Royal Military College of Canada, the Canada research chair in electoral democracy at the Université de Montréal, and more recently with the centre for the study of democratic citizenship at McGill University.

I would like to highlight that I am a political scientist who studies human behaviour. My expertise is centred around the behaviour and attitudes of citizens in the face of threats to democracy and democratic institutions. Specifically, my research considers the impact of information, whether it's misinformation, disinformation or factual information, on citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity, their attitudes towards democracy, as well as their likelihood to participate in the democratic process.

In my time conducting research at the centre for international and defence policy at Queen's University, I had the opportunity to conduct in-depth research on the Government of Canada's response to foreign interference—specifically with regard to federal elections. My research involved a comparative assessment of the election security policies of the Five Eyes countries, including Canada. Therefore, I can confidently say that I have a thorough understanding of the policies and efforts that already exist to mitigate interference, such as the Elections Modernization Act, the security and intelligence threats to elections task force, as well as the critical election incident public protocol.

Based on the scope of my expertise, I can respond to any questions you may have regarding the impact of information and specific election security policies on Canadians. I am able to discuss the effects of foreign electoral interference on voters, as well as the role of misinformation regarding election interference on Canadians' confidence in democratic institutions and elections.

More precisely, I am able to engage in important discussions on a range of topics, including the potential effects of election interference on voter behaviour, the threshold for making information regarding foreign interference efforts public and the lessons we can draw from the election security policies of our Five Eyes partners.

With that being said, I am not in a position to comment on the nature of specific incidents of foreign interference that have been reported in recent media reports. I can, however, draw inference from broader research on foreign electoral interference and apply these findings to the Canadian case.

● (1835)

[*Translation*]

I would also like to mention that I am going to answer questions from committee members in French or English, in the language in which they are asked. As well, I have provided a copy of my opening statement to the clerk.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bordeleau.

Ms. Grondin-Robillard, the floor is now yours.

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard (PhD Candidate, Groupe de recherche sur la surveillance et l'information au quotidien (GRISQ)): Thank you for having me here, Madam Chair, on behalf of the Groupe de recherche sur l'information et la surveillance au quotidien, the GRISQ, at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

I am a lecturer in digital media and a PhD candidate in communications at UQAM. My doctoral research focuses on the circulation of information via TikTok. My master's thesis dealt with Instagram and Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election.

My presentation here will focus on the process of foreign interference using sociodigital media...

The Chair: Just a moment, please.

Mr. Calkins, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): The interpretation staff have indicated to us that they're unable to keep up with the pace. For those of us who don't speak French, we would need that translation.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We are going to start over. If you need a bit more time, I'll give you some. You have to speak slower, since it is transmitted in both official languages.

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: It's a bad habit of mine, sorry.

The Chair: We will start over with you, Ms. Grondin-Robillard.

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: Thank you for having me here, Madam Chair, on behalf of the Groupe de recherche sur l'information et la surveillance au quotidien, the GRISQ, at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

I am a lecturer in digital media and a PhD candidate in communications at UQAM. My doctoral research focuses on the circulation of information via TikTok. My master's thesis dealt with Instagram and Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election.

My presentation today will focus on the process of foreign interference using sociodigital media to communicate with Canadians, which interferes with the informed decision-making that is central to people's civic duty in connection with elections. It is difficult to identify the results of this kind of operation, using these media, since there are numerous actors responsible for it.

There are three factors to consider.

The first is how sociodigital media and their economic model, which allow for the free production, distribution and circulation of content and information, actually work. The important thing for sociodigital media is not that the content be truthful, but that it circulates as widely as possible. This modus operandi is integrated into a commercial circuit of megadata in which the user, the subject, leaves a trail, such as a "like", a comment or a click, which is collected and processed. This allows the user to be profiled. They can then be sent a personalized content offer, which will itself produce a new trail, and so on. The result is a surveillance mechanism that is used, among other things, for commercial purposes such as targeted online advertising.

In addition, there is our second factor to be taken into account: the algorithmic recommendation of personalized content. Recommendation algorithms are a trap, according to the scientific literature. They are now completely shaping and dictating our sociodigital media interfaces. Users are presented with a personalized content offer that catches their attention. For example, if it was determined by the algorithmic calculation that you were going to like a certain type of content, you are going to be exposed to it, regardless of its quality or truthfulness.

Our third and final factor to be taken into consideration is the user themself. Not only are they faced with a veritable overabundance of information, which some call an "infodemic", but with all content being equal, it becomes difficult for them to distinguish what is true from what is false. This difficulty is actually exacerbated by public figures with a voice and a platform who question certain institutional pillars of democracy, such as journalism. As well, users may like consuming content that confirms their opinion, even if they are caught in what is called an echo chamber. In fact, without intending to cause harm and relay disinformation, they may inadvertently or unknowingly share fake news. In that case, it is called misinformation. In spite of themselves, they are then participating in interference.

In conclusion, the GRISQ believes there is no doubt that the integrity of the electoral process has been and will again be threatened by the existing sociodigital media mechanisms. However, it is essential that we point out that it is not just individual or state entities that are responsible for this. It involves a vast network of contacts between these actors and sociotechnical elements that create an obstacle to people's civic duty to be well informed. It is therefore crucial to examine the situation in global, social and communications terms.

Present and future elected representatives need to continue expanding their knowledge of sociodigital media, to be better able to provide oversight and legislate on these issues so they do not produce disinformation that undermines confidence in our political and media institutions.

As a final point, this discussion could and should open the door to improved understanding of information problems on the part of the public. This is an especially glaring need when the boss at Twitter alters the process of circulating information at the expense of the quality and credibility of users and of the content they produce.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

● (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Grondin-Robillard. I have given you the seconds that Mr. Bordeleau didn't use.

Welcome, Mr. Waterhouse. You have the floor.

Mr. Steve Waterhouse (Captain (ret'd), Former Information Systems Security Officer, Department of National Defence and Cybersecurity Specialist, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Steve Waterhouse and I am a lecturer in the master's level microprogram in information security, prevention component, at the Université de Sherbrooke. I am a former information security officer at the Department of National Defence. I am also a former assistant deputy minister of information security and cyber security at Quebec's ministère de la Cybersécurité et du Numérique, and an expert witness in cyber security.

[*English*]

Thank you for the invitation to share insights on some of the problematics that are viewed, anticipated and perceived by fellow citizens on unwanted interference by foreign actors towards our democratic process.

[*Translation*]

The committee has had an opportunity in recent weeks to hear various witnesses to explain why the subject of this study is important in relation to our evolving society.

You will have understood that in these modern times, the use of digital tools and media is unavoidable, not to say indispensable, for conducting these influence operations.

In the 20th century, radio, newspapers, television, cinema, and even religious authorities, who once had a major presence in our societies, allowed for a form of validation of the message before it was disseminated, and this ensured that there was oversight.

As a result of the evolution of technologies and means of communication such has never before been seen in history, we have ways to get everywhere on the planet in a few milliseconds, with no filter and no oversight.

We are also facing fundamental, counterintuitive changes: that our society can be influenced using novel, subtle methods and strategies, and concepts like lawfare, media or public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and cognitive warfare, which itself is reflected in...

The Chair: Mr. Waterhouse, I just want to take a few seconds to ask you to speak a little slower.

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: Okay.

Do I need to start over?

The Chair: No, not this time.

You can continue.

Thank you.

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: Okay.

So I was defining cognitive warfare. It is the way to use knowledge in order to create conflict. In its broadest sense, cognitive warfare is not limited to the military or institutional worlds. With the use of this tactic of warfare, the various threat actors in cyberspace have evolved significantly since the advent of mass influence applications of all sorts, including Facebook, TikTok, WeChat and many others.

As a specialist with Defence Research and Development Canada, or DRDC, in the office of the Associate Deputy Minister of National Defence, said in November 2021, "Technologies and the profusion of data combined make human behaviour the main vulnerability. In its extreme form, cognitive warfare can exacerbate domestic divisions, making a society vulnerable to friction, polarization and radicalization."

[*English*]

What does that all mean?

Over the last 20 years, a technological evolution progressively inserted itself in our society, with the promise of making our lives easier with automation using smart devices. The notion of having a form of connectivity in every utility of our lives, like coffee makers, household appliances, TV, etc., seems to be very practical and convenient. Without embedding good cybersecurity in the designs of these devices, there is the potential for those to become vectors of influence by applying some sort of control, like software features that are enabled or disabled at will, complemented by applications on smart phones that are communicating towards the rest of the world.

As one other cognitive warfare expert, François du Cluzel, stated:

> Any user of modern information technologies is a potential target. It targets the whole of a nation's human capital.
>
> ...This battlefield is global via the internet. With no beginning and no end, this conquest knows no respite, punctuated by notifications from our smartphones, anywhere, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

● (1845)

[*Translation*]

What can be done?

Strong leadership is required in order to address these problems. Education and awareness raising regarding subtle new approaches used by outside agents are essential if we are to prevent the erosion of our democracy. Governments at all levels must be aware of this so they can strengthen their governance and be in a position to reassure the public. Better cyber hygiene in the use of technology has to be stressed at all levels of our society so that it becomes second nature, in order to benefit from the technology.

[*English*]

I am now available to answer any questions you might have in both official languages. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Waterhouse.

We are now going to start questions with six-minute turns.

We will start with Mr. Cooper, who will be followed by Ms. Sahota, Ms. Normandin and Ms. Blaney.

The floor is yours, Mr. Cooper.

[*English*]

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

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Bordeleau.

In a July 2021 paper that you wrote for the centre for international and defence policy, entitled "Securing Elections: A Comparative Assessment of Canada's Response to Foreign Interference", you rightly note that "the Canadian government has the full liberty to decide whether or not to disclose an interference".

That is precisely what our other allies have done, including as you note, with the foreign influence transparency scheme public register, established by Australia, which I will ask you about shortly. We also saw this with the United Kingdom. For example, last summer the U.K. government, along with the MI5, when they became aware of a Beijing agent working within the U.K. Parliament, wrote a letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons. That individual agent, Christine Lee, was named, as well as the members of Parliament who were influenced by her.

CSIS has advised this government that, when it comes to foreign interference, the policy of government be grounded in sunlight and transparency, yet we have seen absolutely no sunlight and no transparency. Indeed, all of the troubling revelations about a vast campaign of interference by Beijing in the 2019 and 2021 elections have only come to light as a result of whistle-blowers and reputable journalists.

Do you find it troubling that the government kept Canadians in the dark over what clearly were some very concerning issues relating to interference by Beijing? Contrast that to how some of our allies have approached this.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: Thank you for the question.

I would say that it shows a weakness in the current policies regarding the critical election incident public protocol. They need to perhaps improve and clarify the threshold under which information regarding active attempts of foreign interference in Canadian elections needs to be made public.

I think something that is important to highlight from our Five Eyes partners, notably Australia, is that they exercise something called controlled transparency, which is transparency when it comes to information that is unambiguous, that is verifiable and that has been verified by intelligence agencies—and in the case of Australia, by the electoral integrity assurance task force.

The information that is made public in those countries does not concern active investigations or any potential threats to elections. They concern active threats that have been verified and that are being made public because they're unambiguous.

I think that's something that perhaps needs to be incorporated within the Canadian election security policy and within this threshold of information that currently is somewhat unknown and up to a select few individuals to decide upon. I think there is certainly work that can be done in this policy area.

● (1850)

Mr. Michael Cooper: In the case of Australia, that is made public through the public register of the foreign influence transparency scheme. Is that correct?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: Yes, it is a website that you can actively consult. Even as a Canadian you can go on the website and see events of foreign interference listed on there.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Building upon what you said with respect to the critical election incident public protocol, in the same paper that I referenced from July 2021, you said that there is just "too much discretion to the government when it comes to" reporting interference.

When I and other members posed questions to members of the elections task force about what the threshold is, they had a real challenge explaining what that is.

Do you think the threshold is too vague? Is it too high? How could it be fixed?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I think there certainly needs to be a clarification as to what the threshold is, and it also needs to be made a bit stricter, in my opinion. It needs to be clear that once information reaches certain elements, which we can certainly discuss.... I think the unambiguity aspect is certainly an important factor that would be on that threshold. It needs to have been a foreign interference event.

Once this threshold is met, I think it should be automatic that any information be made available on a sort of registry like Australia has, on a website, or through a press release of some sort.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Pursuant to the cabinet directive, the threshold that is described is that there are incidents, or an incident, that threaten Canada's ability to have a free and fair election. That seems like a very high threshold.

Would you think it would be appropriate, for example, that the public be told when there's interference happening in one riding, perhaps? That might not threaten Canada's ability to have a free and fair election, but it certainly is a major concern, especially if you happen to live in that riding.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: Certainly, but I think there also needs to be parameters. The vague mandate comes with its downsides. In the event that information is shared, there needs to be controls and it needs to be controlled with transparency. I think that's important.

Unverified information in the hands of the general public can be extremely damaging. I think this is why Australia adopted a very neat model in saying the information needs to be verified by a series of agencies, and once everyone signs off and it meets the threshold, they can publish it online.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota.

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

Through you to the witnesses, thank you. I think that was a very valuable exchange that we just had. We're really trying to figure out where the gaps are and how we can improve them through legislation. That's what we've been hearing through several meetings.

However, there is some confusion as to how we even properly identify whether it is a foreign state actor or it's misinformation or disinformation coming from some unknown source. That was brought up in an earlier meeting today as well.

We had examples, let's say in the last election, of information shared on WeChat. It was stated that the Trudeau government would legalize all hard drugs and things like that, which was trying to sway Chinese Canadian voters away from voting for a Liberal government.

There's an exchange of all of this information going on at election time, which is not from verifiable journalistic sources but is being shared. We don't know where the sources of this information are coming from, and the environment is becoming more and more dangerous because we don't have a strong media ecosystem. We have a lot of media outlets that are shutting down in this country.

We also have what you mentioned, Ms. Robillard, about Twitter now. The users are no longer able to identify a source versus bots and other perhaps state actors that may be trying to influence our elections or the thought process of Canadians in general.

What should we do to improve our media ecosystem to make sure that there is reliable information? You touched a little bit on that just now, Mr. Bordeleau.

How do we improve our system of receiving information?

Go ahead, Ms. Robillard.

● (1855)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: One thing that has been proved in recent weeks, and I am thinking of the new owner of Twitter, is that it is easy to stick labels on forms of content or accounts.

We could legislate or make rules concerning online content. For example, regarding sharing an article on Facebook, it would be possible to show that it comes from a verified or approved source. Artificial intelligence is capable of creating categories of content. That is something to develop with the owners of sociodigital media. It would be one of the solutions.

I'm going to yield the floor to my colleagues so they can make other suggestions.

[*English*]

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: In light of managing the information that goes to the public, yes, it's very hard to pinpoint the origin of the sources, as obfuscation is omnipresent whatever information is produced from anywhere in the world. It could be from here inside Canada, as well as from other countries across the planet.

I cannot agree with Laurence here on the fact that you can mark the data according to the source of information, as, again, false information can also be justified as being as valid as real information, so the bottom line remains the education and awareness made to the public by various means, just like the cybersecurity centre of Canada put on various programs to educate people, but that has to be put down to a level that is accessible to everyone. It cannot be a thesis of five pages with small characters that let people know what the threat is, how to address it and how to live with it.

It's also not necessarily during election time that the information has to be filtered, because, before an electoral process, people get influenced by all sorts of discussions and matters. Then, when it comes to the election period, they are already preprogrammed, if I can use that term, to cast their votes according to the influence they received throughout the two, three or four years before that election.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I want to highlight Mr. Waterhouse's point in saying that education is a key factor here. It's going to be extremely difficult to attack the attackers in this sense. Even if we do create policy, pass new bills or modernize the Elections Act in a way that prevents attackers from engaging in foreign interference, I think they're going to find other ways to do so. The best way we can counter foreign interference is through citizen preparedness and through educating Canadian citizens and showing them how to consume information appropriately.

As was said, I don't think this is going to be achievable by 21-page CSIS reports that probably only a handful of Canadian citizens have the time to read or the desire to read. I think there's a need to bring it to a level that is going to be of interest to Canadian citizens and that there is going to be a desire to learn about.

I'd also like to mention that we talk a lot about misinformation, but I think it can also come from factual information. It's pretty easy to twist facts and to frame information, even real information, in a way that is going to hinder trust and undermine trust in the Canadian democratic process.

A study I conducted recently uses the same sorts of information, which are basically factual news media reports and CSIS reports that have been published, but frames the information slightly differently, one in a more positive “we're combatting foreign interference” tone, and the other one in a more negative “foreign interference is happening” tone. We see drastically different levels of trust among citizens between the two treatments.

● (1900)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I wish I had more time. There are so many follow-ups to that.

The Chair: We always wish for more time.

Madam Normandin, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

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

The witnesses' remarks are fascinating.

Ms. Grondin-Robillard, to echo what Mr. Waterhouse said, can someone be a foreign state actor and generate interference out of whole cloth, or do people really have to be a bit more vulnerable because of echo chambers?

Is it possible to stage an operation without the public already being receptive?

I would like to have your comments on that.

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: It really does involve connecting. There may be an interference operation that relies on creating content out of whole cloth, but if the content doesn't circulate, there will be no effect. People, the public, really have to be reached, whether by polarizing content or, on the other hand, by content that will confirm their opinion and incentivize them to share the content.

It can also be misleading content, whether using clickbait or by decontextualizing a situation in a way that does not correspond to the publication as such.

So there are several strategies for getting content to circulate. The people engaging in foreign interference still have to have a better understanding than we do of how the sociodigital media they are going to use, and those media's codes, work.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Mr. Waterhouse, you talked about digital hygiene and the fact that human beings are, in a way, the weak link in cyber security. Can people be categorized by age group or education level, when it comes to their vulnerability, or is this relatively homogeneous? If people can be categorized, could a foreign actor exploit that weakness by targeting a particular segment of the population?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: In the population in general, I would say that people tend to use technology intuitively. There is no formal teaching about how the new model of iPod or Android phone works, for example. People learn by using them intuitively, or by osmosis, with contacts.

We might think that new young voters are more susceptible to disinformation because they may be more exposed and consume information from social media rather than the traditional media, which they very rarely look at. However, if we consider the oldest segment of the population, our seniors, they are more likely to look at the traditional media. In the intermediate age groups, it is less divided. Some people will choose one type of media over another, based on their beliefs. As a result, I consider them to be just as vulnerable.

We have to practise cyber hygiene: keeping our devices up to date and protecting access to our social media. Otherwise, if threat actors, whether in Canada or outside, are able to make off with the social media contacts list of a person who has a lot of them and take control of the person's account, they can then influence the people in the person's circle, because the information will seem credible since it is coming from a known person: a family member, a friend, or someone else. That is why I say that everyone, without exception, needs to review their security practices and apply them diligently, to deal with it.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Mr. Bordeleau, we have addressed the question of the threshold beyond which information about attempted interference must be made public. What we are hearing about this gives us the impression that it is a binary thing: either the threshold has been crossed or it hasn't.

Could there not instead be a kind of gradation, or different levels? For example, for a more limited attack or interference, we would give the public somewhat more generic information. However, if something very concrete happened and involved a very high risk, we would give the public much more specific information about the type of interference in issue. Should this threshold have different levels?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: That is certainly an idea. I think there are some restrictions that come with a gradation process. According to the study I mentioned earlier, if we give out information that is not verifiable or clear, it is easy to misrepresent the spirit of it, to use it negatively or wield it as a weapon against the public and to undermine their confidence in the democratic system. So we have to be careful how a gradation system is used. Using a binary system certainly has its disadvantages, in that it can be difficult to set a threshold that is clear and precise. However, I believe that gradation is possible, and that it is a direction that should be considered.

● (1905)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Bordeleau. I don't have a lot of time. If I can continue this discussion in the next round, remember this question.

My next question is for all of the witnesses. If we reach this threshold, what is the risk that the public will dig their heels in if we tell people they are being duped? Could that exacerbate the polarization? What can we do to mitigate that risk?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: As I said, the best way to eliminate that risk is to provide clear information. It is always preferable that information about foreign interference be conveyed to the public by the authorities responsible for security rather than via TikTok or by Mr. Musk, on Twitter. When there is verifiable, usable information and it is the authorities responsible for security that control it and communicate it, I think the risk is reduced.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next is Ms. Blaney.

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

Thank you to the witnesses who are here with us today to talk about this issue, which is incredibly challenging. What we've heard again and again in testimony is how rapidly this changes. It's like we're trying to find ways to block misinformation, to prevent any interference, but the target is moving all the time.

I thought I would ask all of you a question.

I'll start with you, Ms. Grondin-Robillard, and then we'll go from there.

All of you talked in some capacity about education and how to inform and keep Canadians aware of what's happening. We know that's challenging, because how people take information in is different. I represent a more rural and remote riding, so there are parts of my riding where there is no accessibility to the Internet. There are also parts of my riding where there is no media that is local that can inform you and that is a trusted source. It's an interesting dynamic.

When we look at how to educate Canadians, what would be the best advice you could provide in terms of this constantly moving threat in a huge country in which we have different ways of communicating with one another and with Canadians?

It's a small question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: Thank you for that excellent question.

Where my opinion differs from my colleagues' who are here this evening is that I don't believe the responsibility for being better educated falls solely on the individual. That is important, but I think everyone has to get involved.

Since the interference in the 2016 American presidential election, Facebook has compiled a library of advertising so people can consult the archives, particularly in relation to political issues. For example, you can go there and see political parties' advertising that is currently circulating, along with the pages of elected representatives on Facebook and Instagram, two networks owned by Meta. So it is Meta's library.

When you go and see the advertising, you realize that there are politicians and parties that use codes that may resemble disinformation and misinformation. They put paid content on line that will circulate and will confirm people's opinions or further polarize them. So there is housecleaning and education to be done, but also on the part of the government. That is where the strategy has to start, to reach the public, who would better understand how social media work, in general, and how disinformation and misinformation can circulate.

[*English*]

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: It's a great question the member put.

I have to put in, as Ms. Grondin-Robillard said, that, yes, it is a team effort. The message has to be formatted at the top and then pushed down through the educational system. I'm one who believes firmly—education is a provincial responsibility, and we all know that—in a program that will then be prepared at the federal level for the citizenship of everyone. It could then be driven to all these provinces at a very low cost of integration and put into the school systems.

You said it well: In rural areas—I'm from one of them—the preoccupation is not to be spending 24-7 in front of a TV set or other technological device. Sometimes in very remote areas of the country it takes so many minutes—and I'm saying minutes—from the satellite downlink to the consumer getting that information. I relate to that. Then again, if it is embedded into the communities maybe not by religious leaders but through the school system, the educational system, it will be much more worthwhile to push it down and make everybody aware of it and make it especially known. In the same way economics is taught, the political system also has to be taught to everyone.

● (1910)

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I think this is a great question. I agree with the other witnesses here that this needs to be not just a citizen-level effort but also a government-level effort. One of the ways that can be achieved is through having greater co-operation between security agencies, the SITE task force, political parties and members of the House, as well as understanding the threat landscape and understanding how information you are consuming and you are sharing will be used and will be consumed by citizens. I think there are certainly briefings that can be done and educational material that can be put together to provide political parties and political campaigns and members of Parliament with better tools and an overall better tool box to understand the effect of the information they will be sharing with the citizens in their ridings.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now go with our second round of questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Berthold, the floor is now yours for five minutes.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Waterhouse, my questions are primarily for you, but if someone else wants to say something, give me a signal.

You testified before the Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship in 2021, where you talked about the threat from the Beijing regime. Can you confirm that the present-day threat is completely different from the one we were looking at eight or 12 years ago?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: Thank you for the question, and I would say that the threat has been amplified.

I refer to the strategies taken from a book published in China in 1999 whose English title is *Unrestricted Warfare*. That book emphasized how China should position itself, given that it was less well equipped, technologically and militarily, than the Americans or the influential western countries. It also suggested mounting an all-out attack, regardless of any regulations there might be, to get information and lay the groundwork everywhere in the world.

From 1999 to today, we can see the influence that China has had in Africa and South America. We necessarily see the ramifications here in Canada.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Would you say that artificial intelligence is exponentially increasing the threat of countries intervening in our elections?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: The use of artificial intelligence is certainly going to have a multiplier effect, but at this stage, the technology is in the embryonic stage. The use of that technology will raise the danger of fake messages being generated, but with such verbal and visual authenticity that it will be very difficult to distinguish the real from the fake.

We should perhaps consider a way of authenticating the source of the message, to confirm its official provenance. The Government of Canada is already doing this with the use of public key infrastructure, in which the stamp on an electronic certificate proves the authenticity of the message. So there are technical methods that could help.

● (1915)

Mr. Luc Berthold: You have answered my question.

I sound a bit rude, and I apologize, but I have a lot of questions to ask you.

We talk a lot about foreign influence. We presume it is carried out from other countries, but we see that there are numerous diplomats from a certain communist regime posted to Canada. If foreign agents are operating out of Canada using their computer systems, is it possible to identify them as foreign agents?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: There is no way, because it can also be an agent operating from their country of birth, but who pretends that they are in Canada or the United States. This could make it very difficult to geoblock the source of the information if it is in an allied country but the message is fake. So technology complicates management of the message source.

Mr. Luc Berthold: In its departmental plans, Elections Canada announces that the organization will be making increasing use of cloud computing, in particular for lists of electors and polling stations. Do you think Canada is ready? Is this an additional threat to the impermeability and protection of our democratic system?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: To verify that the use of cloud computing complies with Government of Canada standards, regardless of the company hired, Elections Canada had to do a threat and risk assessment, with the assistance of the Communications Security Establishment, which is Canada's technical authority in the area of information security. Having witnessed the security measures adopted in each case, I can say that the necessary level of security has been met, particularly when it comes to management of lists of electors.

Once the information is in the cloud, I believe it is secure. However, the way the people who have to handle it work is another matter.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Assume that 200 polling stations are going to have access to this cloud: the risk arises once the information leaves the cloud and is transmitted to all those people, is that right?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: The risk is higher, yes. Remember the good old days when people received voters' lists in their mailbox. Not much could be done to control what they did with that information, at the time. Today, a lot of crime, even fraud, can be committed with that information, which is easier to access.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Why do we have to be more suspicious of applications owned by hostile regimes?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: The foreign states that certain applications come from and that own them can use them in several ways as vectors of influence, particularly by using messages for their own benefit that they send to all kinds of people, going as far as to target very specific diasporas. For example, TikTok and Douyin in China generate educational information intended for North America and the west in general, and for the rest of the world.

TikTok is used for entertainment, which means that people get this information via the vector used: 15- to 20-second messages. People will stay connected to this medium and stay permanently connected to the application. No matter what is served up to them, people will consume the information, which means they don't change. A psychologist could perhaps confirm the point I am making. So there is a danger that a message might be used to influence a person negatively.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Waterhouse.

Mr. Fergus, the floor is yours.

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today. Their testimony was fascinating and I think they have given us a lot of invaluable information.

Ms. Grondin-Robillard and Mr. Bordeleau, I am mainly going to address you, but don't hesitate to add your two cents, Mr. Waterhouse.

In your studies on Russian influence in the 2016 American elections, what lessons should we learn from that interference in the era of social media?

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: Thank you for the question.

I think there are a lot of lessons to be learned in general. In my master's thesis, I mainly observed the extent to which no housecleaning had been done. There are huge numbers of publications from the Internet Research Agency, from Russia, still circulating. So there are still traces of that interference, and visual content from those publications was still being reposted on Instagram. In spite of the fact that the election was over, it lived on in the discourse. That is still the case today, since we can find these arguments or discussions when we talk about American politics or issues.

● (1920)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Is this information still having an influence on subsequent elections?

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: It influences American politics, in general, since it contains disinformation and misinformation that directly affects how we perceive, for example, Trump, the American army, or certain rights like abortion. So the housecleaning has not been done. It should have been done by Meta, but that has not been the case.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Bordeleau, can you briefly give us your views on that?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I think it's a lesson about oversight and politicization of information in connection with foreign interference.

This was the first time that information about foreign interference in the American electoral process was really brought to light in the public sphere. However, that information was used for political purposes inside the country itself. So the damage was twofold: first because of the Russian interference, and second because of the American political actors themselves, who used that information about foreign interference as a political weapon, attacking the public's confidence in the democratic process.

Hon. Greg Fergus: What you're saying is very interesting. Is that happening at present in Canada?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: Since November, I would say that is the case.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Ms. Grondin-Robillard, what is your opinion about this?

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: I'm going to side with my colleague. I have no exact answer to give you about this.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Mr. Waterhouse, you have a lot of experience inside the government apparatus. What are your comments about the observations by your colleagues who are testifying at the committee?

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: The agencies that handle how elections are managed are independent. They have access to a lot of information, which they are able to obtain from the technical authority in place, or from intelligence agencies. However, they disseminate very little information, overall. So it is very difficult to countercheck the information and assess whether it is truthful or not, or determine whether there has been improvement or not.

However, from what we can observe among our allies in the world and when it comes to all the elections we can see on the planet, there is undue influence coming from domestic actors everywhere. They are not going to shy away from continuing to do what they do, to promote their interests.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I have only 40 seconds left, so I would ask you to answer my next question briefly.

Are the institutions that Canada has created and the tools available to us adequate? If not, what other weapons should we acquire?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: For the moment, I would say the tools are not adequate. However, we have taken a step in the right direction, with the Elections Modernization Act.

However, as I often say, there are gaps when it comes to interagency cooperation. At present, the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force involves four organizations working in partnership. Its equivalent in Australia involves more than ten government departments and organizations. In Canada, at present, there are no financial experts in the task force or in the election integrity cooperation circle and this is certainly a weakness.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Madam Chair, I just want to note that Mr. Waterhouse nodded his head. He didn't have a chance to answer, but I think he agrees with what Mr. Bordeleau said.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Normandin, the floor is yours.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Gentlemen, I would like to get your comments on the risk of the public digging their heels in if an alert about an interference activity is issued publicly by a source that is not necessarily regarded as credible, such as a partisan organization. Can you talk about that danger?

I would also like to know what you think about the idea that Michel Juneau-Katsuya brought to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics: to create a kind of permanent independent bureau of investigation into foreign interference that would have to report to the House, a bit like the Office of the Auditor General, and would be non-partisan.

Could that body eventually be the one to alert the public when there is interference, to give the impression of neutrality and non-partisanship? Might that work to strengthen confidence in that tool?

● (1925)

Mr. Steve Waterhouse: The suggestion of having a guarantee of transparency and independence by creating a body like that is a good one. It will have to be determined whether it needs to be completely independent and separate from Elections Canada.

We should not be multiplying the number of voices that are giving answers to a worried public. On the other hand, having a guarantee that is parallel and completely independent of any influence from the judicial process, to prove that there has been any sort of interference, would certainly be welcome.

However, the question we have to keep in mind is: who is going to be assigned to do this kind of work? Obviously, the person will have to be absolutely apolitical in relation to it all.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I agree entirely.

I would say that in an ideal world, it would be a sort of auditor general who would work with analysts from various federal organizations, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Communications Security Establishment and Elections Canada. With the help of analysts from these various organizations, the person would, in my opinion, be able to do a better job of determining what information should be disclosed and how it should be disclosed.

Ms. Christine Normandin: So would it be a good idea for that entity to report to the House of Commons rather than to the government?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: That would be an entirely good idea, as is the case for the chief electoral officer of Canada, who reports to the House of Commons. It would be the same style.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Excellent, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I'll go to you first, Mr. Bordeleau. I think one of the challenges is this: How do you inform Canadians? How do you keep the information clear? How do you not disrupt national security so that we continue to get the information that we rightfully need?

I hear what you're saying, that it needs to be arm's length. You mentioned in your presentation the fact that we need a legislative response to that. I don't expect you to write the legislation right now in front of us—although that would be very helpful—but what are the key things that we need to have in that legislation? I know that other countries are doing that work.

What are the key things that will help Canadians have faith in the system but also protect our ability to collect information so that we can protect the dignity of our democracy?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: That's an excellent question.

There are different techniques. Foreign interference comes from a wide range of different fields. It comes from finance, from information, as we've talked about, and there are plenty of other potential techniques. That's why, when it comes to what information needs to be made available to the public, I don't think I can answer that question fully. I think only experts in those specific techniques and those specific fields would be able to do that.

In terms of information, which is something I can speak about, I will say this and I've said it before: It needs to be clear. In the case of Australia, for instance, when they make information regarding foreign interference in elections public, they talk very specifically about investigations that have concluded and are not ongoing. Right here, we are addressing the fact that this isn't going to compromise national security because these are investigations that have been terminated.

The information is also very clear in saying that X did Y with the objective of achieving “this”. The information and the objectives of the agent are made very clear. This is the best way to approach the topic.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I don't have a lot of time left.

You talked about having, on that site, multiple people signing off on the information. We also just talked about having an independent branch that maybe gives the information.

I'm a little confused about which direction would be wisest.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: It is an independent task force, but there are members within that task force that come from a wide variety of expertise and departments, like the department of finance in Australia, the treasury board and the security services. It's a wide range of individuals with a wide range of expertise.

● (1930)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to suggest, because you have such a wealth of information, that maybe you can send an extended answer to the clerk and we could circulate that. That way we'll get the details. Thank you so much.

We'll have Mr. Nater for two minutes, followed by Ms. Sahota. Then we'll be on our way.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, thank you to our witnesses for joining us.

It's been a fruitful conversation. I honestly wish we could have a little more time with these witnesses, but that's always the challenge with these types of meetings.

I want to begin with Monsieur Bordeleau and follow up on some of his expertise comparing the Five Eyes countries. The idea of a foreign influence registry has been mentioned a little bit. Here in Canada, consultations are ongoing. Earlier today, a Liberal-appointed senator sent out an open letter with some quite interesting observations, frankly, in opposition to such a registry. Obviously, there have been suggestions that this should exist in Canada. One of our former colleagues went so far as to table legislation on such a matter.

From your experience in looking at our Five Eye colleagues, what is the significance of such a registry? Why have some of our international colleagues gone down that road? What benefit does that hold for Canada as we undertake these consultations?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: That's an excellent question.

In order not to waste time, I will be really brief in saying that I'm not an expert on foreign agent registries. I have done a bit of research on it, but I think the reports that will come from those consultations, which I am a part of, will do a much better job of explaining what should and shouldn't be done in that regard.

However, I think it is a good idea that we are considering it, if I may.

Mr. John Nater: I appreciate that and look forward to any information that comes out of that.

In response to one of our questions, you talked a little bit about the idea of “controlled transparency”. What safeguards would you like to see put in place to safeguard some of that controlled transparency?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: Could you clarify the question?

Mr. John Nater: You talked about how some of our international counterparts have a controlled transparency in terms of information that is released. There are certain controls in terms of what gets released and how. You mentioned that it wasn't quite verifiable information.

I would like you to clarify that a little bit, in terms of what safeguards ought to be in place when that information is being released.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: First of all, the information needs to be clear, of course. It needs to not be a concern for national security, as was discussed. I think it also needs to come from a strong, reliable and independent source that isn't affiliated and potentially could report to the House of Commons. That would be an ideal situation, for sure.

Having this independent organization or group have a clear threshold of what is made public to the House of Commons would be beneficial.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sahota, you have two minutes and 45 seconds.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

Going off that a little bit, the Australian model is recommended highly by you, Mr. Bordeleau and other witnesses who have come before the committee, but the feedback that we've been reading in some articles isn't all positive. We want to make sure that we learn from the lessons of Australia as well.

In a recent article published last month about Australia's foreign registry, it outlined that the Confucius Institute at 13 colleges was not included on the registry but the Canadian pension plan is. To quote the article, “An 'agnostic' law that applies the same to democracies like Canada as autocracies like Russia—plus lax enforcement—have made the scheme largely ineffective, argues lawyer, [Mr.] Ward, who was a senior advisor to two former Australian prime ministers on the initiative.”

Do you have any comments on the Australian registry? What are some of the lessons we can learn about that?

I have one other follow-up.

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: I want to be clear. There's a difference between the transparency scheme in Australia and the foreign registry in Australia. This is just to make sure, because I've talked about both. I want to make sure that this is about the registry.

I think there certainly have been some failures and weaknesses with the registry in Australia, which you've mentioned, and also in preventing international organizations from working within Australia because of their work in other countries such as China.

I do think that those negative points need to be taken into consideration when considering a registry here in Canada, for sure. It's not all positive.

● (1935)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have another quick question. Based off a question I asked before about our media ecosystem, the government's been putting in place measures, like the online news act and other things, to try to make sure that we have public broadcasting as well as other news outlets for Canadians.

Do you think the closures that we're seeing globally are contributing to the rise in disinformation and misinformation? Should the government be doing more to protect our media sources?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: Can you clarify the question?

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Should the government be involved—just like you're saying that the government should have a website to clarify—or it should be an arm's-length agency?

We've been doing things like that, but then it's often criticized as a government-funded news source or that there's support that the government gives. The news agency's independence is automatically questioned at that point.

Similar to that, Mr. David Johnston, who has great integrity, is also being questioned as the special rapporteur assigned this new task.

How does the government implement things? Obviously the government would be paying for these agencies to run a system like this. How do we do that yet keep the integrity and independence of those people, systems and journalists?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurence Grondin-Robillard: I think the important thing is to continue to be transparent. As well, when there are accusations or criticisms, as was recently the case regarding the CBC, it might be good to remind people of the other funds that exist and the ways the other networks in the country are funded. It might be useful to point out the role the CRTC plays in distributing funds. That might remind certain entities of how the funding of certain networks functions.

As a final point, being more transparent and giving more information about the process would be a good start.

The Chair: Thank you all very much for your comments.

If you have anything else to...

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Mr. Bordeleau wanted to say something, but since there's no time left, as you've indicated, would he be able to provide the answer to that question in a written response?

Mr. Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau: That's what I was going to say, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Interestingly enough, that's what I was going to say, but who am I?

I do this at the end of every single panel. I know it's our first meeting on foreign election interference, so people might not know. If you have anything to add to your comments or something else comes up later on at night, please do send it to the clerk. The clerk will make sure that it is distributed to all members.

With that, it was a very insightful conversation. We're really grateful for the work that you do and the time that you've taken to be here. It really does mean a lot to our committee. On behalf of all PROC committee members, thank you so much and have a good night.

We will suspend for two minutes. We have to do a sound check for one of our witnesses who will be online, and we have one in person. We have a two-minute suspension, and we will continue.

Thank you.

● (1935)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1940)

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. We will continue with our next panel.

We have with us Ms. Sophie Marineau, Ph.D. doctorate, international relations, who is joining us by video conference. We also have with us Ms. Lori Turnbull, associate professor, and director of the school of public administration, Dalhousie University.

I would like to thank both of you for being with us here this evening.

You will each have four minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions from committee members.

[*Translation*]

We will start with you, Ms. Marineau. Welcome.

Ms. Sophie Marineau (PhD Doctorate, International Relations, As an Individual): Hello, Madam Chair.

My name is Sophie Marineau. I am a doctoral candidate in the history of international relations at the Université catholique de Louvain, in Belgium, and I specialize in Russian foreign policy. In recent years, my work has focused primarily on the use of disinformation as a tool of foreign policy, more specifically in the 2016 and 2020 American elections. I have also done a lot of work on the war in Ukraine and the effectiveness of western sanctions.

The study of Russian interference in the American elections is particularly relevant in that we must not look at interference in Canada as an isolated phenomenon, and must rather see it from a more global perspective. Russian interference in the recent American elections was so extensive, including through the use of social networks, that platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit were held to account and had to explain how the Russians had infiltrated their platforms to carry on massive disinformation campaigns and undermine Americans' confidence in their electoral system and government institutions. In the reports produced by Twitter and Facebook, in particular, the methods used and the results achieved are reported in sufficient detail to become a method or process to follow for other actors, potentially China, who might use them against Canada.

In the United States, the investigations revealed that the disinformation campaigns and attacks were not limited to social media and had also resulted in violence in real life. The FBI was able to show that there had been interference in the organization of the rally in Charlottesville in 2017 where members of the alt right and Black Lives Matter supporters faced off, ending with three dead and nearly 50 injured.

In a parallel move, Russians were also involved in organizing a gathering in Houston, Texas, where adherents of the nationalist Heart of Texas movement and of United Muslims of America ended up in the same place at the same time. Once again, it led to violent incidents.

Based on Russia's current approach, the disinformation and interference has several parallel objectives, including sowing chaos, undermining Americans' confidence in their electoral system and their institutions, and trying to influence the election in order that the party in power would be more sympathetic to Russia.

Foreign interference in all its forms often has the effect of blurring the traditional lines of a conflict or an attack by another country, which makes the effort to combat the phenomenon of interference that much more complicated.

As we have seen in the United States, the work done by the government alone is not sufficient to eradicate the phenomenon. The government cannot be the only rampart protecting us against these all-out attacks. The interference has to be exposed. Media platforms, social networks, institutions, political parties and the general public have to be made aware of these phenomena, and a collective effort is what will make Canada better able to protect itself against foreign interference.

Thank you.

● (1945)

The Chair: Thank you.

It is now your turn, Ms. Turnbull. Welcome.

[*English*]

Dr. Lori Turnbull (Associate Professor, Director, School of Public Administration, Dalhousie University, As an Individual): Thank you.

Thank you very much for having me. I'll make just a few opening comments.

The issue of foreign interference in elections has gained prominence in Canadian politics as of late, due largely to concerns about the possibility of such interference in certain ridings in the 2019 and 2021 elections. Moreover, recent leaks of classified intelligence that decry a failure to act on the threat of foreign interference have contributed to a sense of urgency around the issue.

We all know that foreign interference in elections is not new. That said, it is taking new forms, because foreign actors have an increased capacity to interfere, particularly through the use of digital technologies and social media.

According to a Government of Canada publication entitled “Foreign Interference Threats to Canada's Democratic Process”, foreign interference “includes attempts to covertly influence, intimidate, manipulate, interfere, corrupt or discredit individuals, organizations and governments to further the interests of a foreign country”. Simply put, foreign interference comes down to attempts to clandestinely influence political decisions and outcomes.

You have testimony from others who are far more qualified to tell you about the nature and specifics of foreign threats. I am a political scientist who studies parliaments, elections, political attitudes and behaviour, and public and political institutions broadly, so my comments will be focused on the health of democracy inside Canada and our ability, or lack thereof, to fend off threats, whether foreign or domestic.

I'll start with an obvious point, and I don't have to convince you of this point: Elections are important—really important. They are the primary mechanisms by which, as a sovereign country, we decide for ourselves. The legitimacy of governments and their decisions rests with the fairness, both real and perceived, of the processes that elect people to office. As elected members, you don't need me to explain this to you, but I raise this point because we need to bear in mind how any threat to the perception or reality of the proper administration of elections, whether from a foreign or domestic source, undermines our capacity to decide for ourselves. We can't take this matter lightly.

The report I referenced earlier describes our democratic institutions and electoral system as “strong”. Sadly, I think this statement requires qualification. I don't want to overemphasize the problems. We have much to be proud of, including a long history of free and fair elections as administered by independent elections offices in Canada and in the provinces and territories. We have many examples to point to of how governments are held to account in meaningful ways and subject to regulations and political processes based on transparency, including the recent inquiry into the federal government's use of the Emergencies Act. This was a time when the Prime Minister of Canada and the people who are the most powerful around him were held to account and had to answer questions in public. This doesn't happen in the absence of democratic values and institutions.

That said, our democracy needs a shot in the arm. We need to have a hard look at what works and what doesn't. Voter turnout is a clear indicator of a hollowness in our electoral democracy. Only 43.5% of voters participated in the last provincial election in Ontario. With such a low level of participation, the relative threat of foreign interference is greater. Our democracy is increasingly lacking the centre of gravity that comes only with widespread participation and engagement. Without this stabilizing factor, we are less able to fend off threats and attempts to mislead and intimidate.

It is shocking how many Canadians feel politically orphaned. In a functioning democracy, this shouldn't happen. Democracies are supposed to work like markets. There is an incentive for politicians and parties to give people what they want. When most people switch off and aren't engaged, those who are selling political products have an incentive to play on the margins and to court opinions that would not survive in a robust political marketplace but are firmly held by a motivated few. This is democracy gone bad.

We need a proper filtering process for ideas. This can only happen when a strong majority of people participate. Don't get me wrong. I don't advocate for the tyranny of the majority. That can have and has had disastrous results. However, democracies can handle only so much apathy before they stop functioning, and I think we're there now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will start our first round of six minutes with Mr. Cooper, followed by Mr. Turnbull.

● (1950)

[*Translation*]

It will then be Ms. Normandin's turn, and she will be followed by Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

I will ask everyone who will be speaking to remember that we have two official languages. If we could all be mindful of the speed at which we speak, that would be excellent.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my questions to Professor Turnbull.

Although there has been a lot of focus as of late on Beijing's election interference in the 2019 and 2021 elections, during the 2015 election there was also foreign interference and foreign money that was directed to third party organizations that were registered.

For example, in 2017, I wrote to the commissioner of Elections Canada with a complaint in which I had identified that a total of $693,023.50 had been transferred from the Tides Foundation, which is based in California, to eight different third party groups: The Council of Canadians, the Dogwood Initiative, Ecology Ottawa, Équiterre, Greenpeace Canada, Toronto350, the West Coast Environmental Law Association and the West Coast Environmental Law Research Foundation. None of that was reported by any of those eight third party groups. They did spend a total of $317,426.80 in the 2015 election.

In short, when Elections Canada responded, they said effectively that there was nothing they could do because of certain loopholes that existed in the legislation at that time. The government did move forward to amend the Canada Elections Act, with really significant amendments in Bill C-76. I know that you appeared—I think at this committee—on Bill C-76.

The Chief Electoral Officer, in his report on the 43rd and 44th elections, does in a section speak about some of the issues around third parties, in which he notes that some of these loopholes still exist—at least two.

One is that there's a melding issue. That was an issue with respect to my 2017 complaint, in which funds donated to a third party, even from a foreign source, can be treated as melded and as part of the general revenue of the third party. A second loophole is that a third party can accept contributions from another entity and report having received those funds from that entity, even though those funds may have come from another source.

That's a long preamble, but I think it's important to provide some context in terms of loopholes or gaps that exist within the Canada Elections Act.

I know that you have studied the act and you've appeared as a witness. Do you have any recommendations on how we can strengthen the Canada Elections Act to stop the flow of foreign money?

Dr. Lori Turnbull: I appreciate the question. Thank you.

I think that when it comes to third parties it's particularly difficult, because they tend to function as multi-purpose kinds of organizations, where they might be getting all kinds of money from all kinds of people and organizations from different places, depending on what their primary function is.

Then, when they switch specifically to a campaign period and they become engaged in the electoral process, I think the melding issue you identify is the important one. If they have a general revenue supply and they start to shift towards campaign spending, how do you then start to pay very close attention to the activities of a third party and how much money and what kind of money is being flowed toward campaign activities and which of it is preserved for their organizational purpose, which happens and exists all the time? At the same time, I think you don't want to get to the point where you're auditing to the point of granularity that you deter the activities of the organization and they don't want to function at all.

I think educational aspects are important. It's important to talk to third parties about being compliant. It's about trying to make sure that people are aware of what the rules are and what they require. Apart from that, again, it's difficult when you start to look at some of these third parties that are not that: Some of them are working primarily as political entities and don't necessarily have big purposes outside.

As for what's there, sometimes I get concerned because there seems to be a bit of a lack of concern around the activities. You can see in some jurisdictions—for example, in Ontario—that there can be court cases that remove the rules around third parties or that create the possibility of not having a level playing field. I think that would be very bad, so I'm thinking that it's important to keep the rules we have.

Again, I think we're always catching up. There's always the activity that's going on, and the law and the regulations are always a bit of a step behind in trying to figure out how to be compliant. In-kind contributions are another challenge, because that's much harder to trace than the flow of money.

● (1955)

Mr. Michael Cooper: I take it from your answer that you don't have any suggestions for amendments to the act to deal with the melding issue, or is there something you have in mind?

When we're talking about $317,000 spent, and nearly $700,000 that went into just eight groups.... There were other groups, but those were eight where money went directly from Tides into the eight. That was all in 2015, in months leading up to an election in which all of those organizations took, to one degree or another, a fairly active role and position in the 2015 campaign.

Dr. Lori Turnbull: That was 2015, so the rules have changed since then.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Yes, but the issue was still.... The loophole in the melding issue remains.

Dr. Lori Turnbull: Apart from transparency, I'm not sure what you can do, apart from making it so miserable for a third party to contribute to political conversations that they don't want to do it at all, and I don't think that's a better thing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

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

Thanks to Professor Turnbull and Ms. Marineau for being here today. We appreciate your testimony.

Professor Turnbull, in your opening remarks, I think I agreed with everything you said, although I was a little shocked by the last statement and the apathy comment you made that we're sort of there and, from your perspective, it sounds like things are getting pretty bad.

From all of our work in this committee on this topic, our government has been making strides all along the way to address the evolving threat environment. That's not to say that we can't do a lot more, which I think is the very legitimate and authentic concern we all bring to this work in taking every threat to our democracy seriously. I think you shared that sentiment in your opening remarks, so I definitely relate to that.

In terms of how this committee and some of these conversations have become overly heated, I know that you made some comments about some of the things that the leader of the official opposition said. You called it “overheated rhetoric and making unfounded allegations”, I believe, at the time.

I'm wondering if you can expand on that in the sense that I think we really need to tone this down and focus on what measures would enhance our democracy. Would you not agree?

Dr. Lori Turnbull: I would agree with that, and I think that's what's really important.

At this point, I think we are in the middle of a process whereby Mr. Johnston will make some recommendations about how to deal with this issue. They could include a public inquiry or not. I would be really sad if he didn't make a recommendation for a public inquiry that is broad and not just about foreign interference. I don't think it's the right place to deal with foreign interference issues as a kind of fact-finding mission, because you can't say everything in public. I think it's more important to have a much broader conversation at this point about the health of democracy as measured by a number of indicators.

For me, to try to be quick in answering your question, if we thought about things like whether we should bring back the per-vote subsidy for political parties so that they have stable funding they can count on year over year, would that bring some kind of stability? Are we seeing some inflamed rhetoric because parties are very heavily dependent on private donations, for example? Maybe some of that would have the tone-down effect you talked about.

Would it be a good idea to lower the voting age to 16 and recognize that 16-year-olds are actually quite capable of making these sorts of decisions and having conversations about things that affect all of us, and that this type of inclusion in conversation, matched with robust civics classes across the country, would maybe then change the dialogue? I think we're more responsible when we have conversations with teenagers and younger people. We're not as nasty—I hope we're not—so sometimes that can have a really good effect.

I think we need to be talking about things like how to recruit and retain people in public office, and how to make it less of a miserable experience for a lot of people. I think we have to talk about how we can build our own civic self-defence so that we can tell the difference between truth and lies, no matter who is throwing them out there.

When you build those things, you don't necessarily have to say things like, “We are going to censor divisive rhetoric.” We can't do that. We have to make other things different so that they become much less marketable and much less common.

● (2000)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Those are interesting ideas, and I appreciate those sentiments and comments.

Based on the last panel, which I found really interesting—I noticed you happened to be in the back of the room, listening in—I am struck by how much the tools we use to consume information have changed our democracy fundamentally. It's not even a slow drip of information that we're consuming. It's a fast drip. We're sucking on the firehose of information, and it's interesting how that changes the discourse.

I find it troubling to think and to hear from multiple witnesses that we're not able to determine what is true from what is false in that online information space and that we're consuming it in the way we do.

Do you have any ideas about how we can address that? It seems to me that it is really at the forefront of the threat environment that we haven't yet responded to. We've heard about it in terms of the CSIS Act.

I wonder whether you have any ideas.

Dr. Lori Turnbull: To try to identify what is truth and what is not truth.... You'd think that would be an easy process. You'd think that people would agree on the difference between truth and falsehood, but we don't anymore. I think that things like education are really important. However, that's not an easy fix. That's something that happens over time.

I think that doing what we can to try to increase the voter turnout and the sense of engagement in politics more broadly is really important. What's happening is that, when you get so few people participating.... So many people think that they're political orphans. They want to vote. They want to engage. They're looking around, and they think nobody is matching what they want. That's a problem. That is a system malfunction. We shouldn't have that. We shouldn't have parties that do not see why it's important to appeal to that kind of sense of consensus—because we don't see the consensus anymore.

I have the long-game kind of answers around making sure that, for example, people are getting exposure to what our democratic values are at a very young age and then going forward so that they're ready for this kind of thing and can handle it.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Normandin, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will have questions for both witnesses, but I am going to start with you, Ms. Turnbull.

You have already answered some questions...

Do you have access to the interpretation? I would like to be sure before continuing.

[*English*]

The Chair: Are you on the right channel?

You just want to make sure you can see the English when you go to it.

Dr. Lori Turnbull: Yes.

The Chair: Perfect.

[*Translation*]

You can start again, Ms. Normandin.

As always, I will take the time needed for interpretation into account. That time will be added to the speaking time, so everyone may speak slowly and there will still be time to ask all the questions you like.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I said I was going to ask the two witnesses questions in turn, starting with you, Ms. Turnbull.

You have already answered some of my questions, particularly regarding public funding of parties. I would like you to talk to us a little more about that. I understand it would be a way of making parties more independent of private funding, and so of foreign interference, possibly.

Should we also consider lowering the maximum amount of contributions? Is that something being considered?

[*English*]

Dr. Lori Turnbull: I think this is a fascinating topic.

I'm going to take the last part first. I do not think that we should lower the contribution limit, because it's already quite low. If we lower that, I don't see what it would accomplish. For example, it's around $1,650 or $1,700, and if you went lower than that, you wouldn't be achieving anything. I really don't think there's an issue by way of any negative outcome that's going to happen at the $1,700 level that would be different if we were to allow $1,400. I just don't see it. Most political contributions are nowhere near in that ballpark. The last time I saw the statistics, they were less than $200. I really have no idea what we would accomplish by doing that.

I think there is, perhaps, an optimal balance—maybe this is a conceptual thing—between the amount of money that political parties get from private sources and the amount of money that they get from public sources. You want political parties to want to compete for donations. That is a test of whether they're resonating with the public. That is accountability for political parties. If you're raising money, it should be because your ideas resonate. That's not always the way it works.

On the other hand, the public funding is not.... I don't see that as an investment, really, in a particular party. It's an investment in a party system. It's an investment in a competition. We need to make sure, I think, that even though you don't want to make parties entirely reliant on that—because we shouldn't have taxpayers or the consolidated revenue fund paying entirely for political parties' contributions and competitions—I think there's value in investing in a democracy to make sure, again, that you can see parties go, over time, and be able to count on a certain amount of funding. Otherwise, how you did in the last election is too much of a determinant for how you do going forward. Then we get a self-fulfilling situation, which I don't think is valuable.

● (2005)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I will now turn to you, Ms. Marineau.

You talked about the fact that various platforms, such as Google, had had to account for how they were infiltrated. Their reports have become a kind of process for state actors who would like to engage in interference to follow. I would like you to tell us a little more about this.

In spite of everything, we may have to strike a balance between the costs and benefits. On the one hand, by making this information public, we are informing the public about how interference works, so they can be better prepared to counteract it. On the other hand, however, if we talk about it in public too much, there is a risk that it will be used for evil purposes.

I would like you to tell us about this generally.

Ms. Sophie Marineau: Since 2016, there have been a lot of reports published and the effect has been to improve the methods used. Previously, they created a lot of web robots. Armies of bots engaged in massive information sharing. The bots were quickly deactivated by platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

They then came up with more sophisticated methods, to make the bots less easily detectable. For example, previously, bots that posted no photographs or profile information were easier to detect. Now, accounts are created in Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram and the accounts are then connected, to make it look like they really are a person.

Certainly, a lot of these bots can be banned. However, the more the methods are exposed, the more sophisticated they become.

Nonetheless, people are increasingly aware of the phenomenon. For example, when they notice that people on Instagram or comments on Facebook are often repeating the same things, they become a bit more critical.

Of course, that takes time. We become familiar with it and we learn, and the same goes for the platforms.

Ms. Christine Normandin: You also said that the work the government does was not sufficient, in itself, to counteract interference, and there should be other actors.

You may have heard me talk a little earlier about the idea of creating a permanent independent entity to combat foreign interference. That entity would resemble the Office of the Auditor General and would report to the House.

In your opinion, could that be a tool worth considering for combatting interference?

Ms. Sophie Marineau: It could be a tool worth considering.

If people lose confidence in their electoral system and their institutions, the best way of remedying the situation, in an ideal world, obviously, would be for everyone to have the same information. In principle, the more different sources that information comes from, including from parties, from a non-partisan organization and from the government, the more the credibility of the organizations will rise and the more people will trust that information. Conversely, the more people lose confidence in the system, the more difficult it will be to reach them and convey information to them through the platforms or media, or by other means of communication.

● (2010)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I thank both the witnesses for being here today to participate in this study and for their interesting testimony.

I'm going to start with Ms. Marineau first.

One of the challenges as we address the issue of foreign interference in elections is how it's constantly changing. It's hard to figure out the best way to respond when every response has to mitigate the challenges that we're faced with.

When you were testifying before us, you talked about foreign interference needing to be addressed collectively, not just by the government but by all areas that are impacted. I have a two-piece question.

One is that we are hearing from multiple people that legislation is really the tool that we need to be looking at. When you look at foreign interference and disinformation, what are the holes in our legislation that we need to fill?

The second part of that question is that I've also heard, and I think this is an interesting idea, that the focus is tending to be right on the election as opposed to looking at elections and then in between elections and how we address information so that we're not not addressing misinformation and then suddenly right before and during the election we're panicking about it without a real resolution.

I'm just wondering if you could answer that very simple question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sophie Marineau: Thank you for the question.

First, I would actually like to be clear that I am not an expert in Canadian legislation. Certainly the government in power can contribute by enacting legislation. When I talk about a collective effort, I mean that the government is not the only bulwark. The attacks and disinformation are happening continuously, every day.

With respect to Russia, the group of researchers at the RAND Corporation compared the Russian disinformation technique to a fire hose that sprays people with propaganda. It's constant, and the disinformation spreads much faster than any measure that the institutions or organizations trying to protect themselves against that information could take. It is done rapidly using bots. One technique that is often used is to send out an enormous amount of information, see what is going to hook people surfing the net, eliminate the information that is reaching the fewest people, and redirect how the information is transmitted. They adapt extremely rapidly.

When I talk about a collective effort, I mean that everyone has to be made aware of the phenomenon. People have to inform themselves and ask themselves, every time they read a piece of information, whether it is true or not. People have to ask themselves whether they have the right tools for validating or verifying the information.

Where the government can be a bulwark is when it comes to legislation. Institutions and media platforms have to verify the information being disseminated. And members of the public have to protect themselves against disinformation.

Could you repeat the second part of your question, please?

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's about addressing some of these issues in between elections. The focus right now is really election-specific, but we've heard other testimony where even parties have said, if there were more check-ins during the election....

I also think about just educating people because, again, for the public it must feel like there's always some information about disinformation, but it intensifies around elections. How do we build that capacity in between elections? I think that's what I'm asking.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sophie Marineau: Generally speaking, studies show that Russia often tried to inflame debates that were already in the news. It tried to polarize debates about religion, particularly in the United States, about ethnic groups, and about the government. It tried to sow division.

I think we have to think about places where information might slip in. That would be one way of identifying it and then being able to combat it. We have to ask ourselves what debates can inflame a situation and divide people, and what type of debate foreign powers can interfere in.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

If I can come to you, Professor Turnbull, I really appreciated what you had to say about the health of democracy. I know, when I was last in the riding, I spent about a little over an hour with a bunch of teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17, and they had really hard questions. It was really fantastic to see the engagement. I'm a big supporter of getting younger people to engage with the system, because all the evidence tells us that the sooner a person engages with the system, the more they continue to vote. If they don't engage very quickly, they don't participate.

I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about why this is a good idea and how you think it will increase election connections.

I'll leave it at that.

● (2015)

Dr. Lori Turnbull: I think there are a number of things that we could do to increase turnout but also just to increase how inclusive the conversation is. I really think that 20 years ago, when people were doing research on why the turnout had tanked in the early 2000s, a lot of these issues came up. If you voted in your first eligible election, you were more likely to vote the rest of your life. If you felt the election wasn't a foregone conclusion, that it was competitive, you were more likely to vote. The more informed you were, the more likely you were to vote. All of these things.

They all seem to me to point to letting people vote when they're 16 and tying that in with some sort of civics—she's telling me I have to stop now, but you know where I'm going with this—to try to increase their information and their opportunity to participate at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you.

I was trying to tell you by not telling you but then you told everybody anyway, because, you know, there are hundreds of thousands of people watching.

However, we appreciate that.

Our next round will be five minutes for Mr. Nater.

[*Translation*]

Then Mr. Fergus will also have five minutes.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate those hundreds of thousands of Canadians who are tuning in at 8:16 on a Tuesday evening.

Through you, Madam Chair, to our witnesses, I want to begin with Dr. Turnbull in the room here.

Certainly, you have a unique background in the sense that you've spent several years in academia, but you also had the window into the public service side of things through your time at Privy Council Office and the non-partisan public service. You've been on record—and you mentioned again tonight—how you think it's worthwhile to have a public inquiry. I think you said you'd be sad if that recommendation didn't come out of David Johnston's review.

I am hoping you can put your PCO hat back on for just a minute.

One of the responses we had from Ms. Telford was that one of the challenges would be to create these terms of reference. If you were at PCO, what terms of reference would you encourage the government to have for such an inquiry?

Dr. Lori Turnbull: I am going to be very clear and say that I am not at PCO. I am not going to put that hat on. I will, with the hat that I do wear, say that it is hard to determine exactly how you're going to draw parameters around an exercise like this.

I think there are kind of two general ways you can go. One way is that you can be very specific: We are going to have an inquiry that answers these specific questions. You don't get a lot of veering off. That has the upshot of being clear. It might be easier, especially given that the timeline is not very long, to be very focused on the questions you want answered so that you're achieving that clear objective.

On the other hand, you may want to have a broader process wherein you're defining parameters around how we can measure the health of democracy, what sorts of factors we are looking at and what we can do to improve that. The value of an inquiry like this is really going to be in the recommendations. People will literally flip to the back to see what you think we should do.

I think, to get to the point, especially given that there's not going to be very much time, be solutions-oriented. What is it that you want to recommend to make things better, and based on what research and evidence?

Mr. John Nater: I thank you for that.

Maybe just to follow up on that briefly, in terms of timelines and potentially short timelines and how broad or how targeted an inquiry should be or might be, is there the benefit, if a broader inquiry is recommended, that there might be interim reports, with those recommendations that everyone flips to, specifically focused on this smaller but important aspect of foreign interference, which could be the first part of a broader inquiry with an interim report with interim recommendations sooner, seeing as we're almost two years into a hung Parliament, and there could be an election at any point, in theory at least?

● (2020)

Dr. Lori Turnbull: Yes, that will be interesting if, for whatever reason, the timelines end up crashing and an election happens before this thing is over.

Interim reports make a lot of sense, particularly if there's going to be public engagement in this. I think it's important especially if it does go the way of having a really broad conversation around democracy, what's wrong with it and what we can do. That will have much less value if people aren't engaged in it. You need the interim reporting so you can actually have moments at which you're reaching out to people, but not necessarily for interim recommendations. I think probably the recommendations will come at the end, after you've talked to people.

If you have an interim report, you're checking in. Check in with people. Have a public engagement side of it so people are actually contributing and they know it's happening. That's going to be really hard given that this is going on over the summer.

Mr. John Nater: Thanks for that.

I have about a minute left so I want now to focus on some of the governance issues and what we've heard from different witnesses, especially in the last few meetings.

CEIPP is the critical election incident public protocol, and one of the challenges we've heard about is that there's this threshold in terms of when the public ought to be notified. We've heard witnesses say that in a lot of cases it should be never, in the sense that there's such a high threshold. We know there's a panel. It's made up of five senior public servants.

In a short 30 seconds, my question is this: Is this the right structure or should we look at something else? What ought to be done in terms of when and how the public is notified on such an issue?

Dr. Lori Turnbull: This is hard because, as soon as you alert the public that there's an issue, then there are going to be questions about whether or not the results of the election will be accepted no matter what, because you've already flagged that there's a problem. Then what do you do about it?

It doesn't matter who it is. Well, it matters a little, but as soon as you say it, then the results of the election, I think, are not going to be accepted as they would have been.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fergus, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I would like to thank the two witnesses.

My question is for Ms. Marineau.

You have talked about Russia. The witnesses we heard just before you also talked about Russia and the effects...

The Chair: Just a moment. They are telling me there is no interpretation.

It's working now.

You can start over, Mr. Fergus.

Hon. Greg Fergus: You're very kind, Madam Chair. That also gives me a chance to start my timer.

First, I would like to thank the two witnesses for being with us today.

My questions will be for Ms. Marineau.

The witnesses in the previous panel raised the question of Russia and talked about the ongoing consequences of its activities, interfering with the intent of stirring the pot in the democracies, in particular the United States in 2016, or in the United Kingdom or, we need to reiterate, in Canada.

You have studied the issue of Russian interference or influence. Can you talk a bit about what you consider to be its modus operandi for interfering in elections in the west?

Ms. Sophie Marineau: Thank you for the question.

The method used by Russia in 2016 and in 2020 was to disseminate information constantly, massively and rapidly, much more rapidly than a human being or a media platform would be capable of doing. As I said earlier, the method consists of sending out enormous amounts of information, some of which will be contradictory, and the truth is not important. The information that will be retained and disseminated is the information that hooks people. So they will observe what information is reposted the fastest on Twitter or Facebook. If they see that a trend is developing, or information is taking hold, they will continue to disseminate it. If there is information that people are not agreeing with, it will be discarded or modified. They adapt extremely well. So the Russian method is based on speed and quantity.

Yes, we are still seeing the effects of these activities, because once the division is created and the doubt is sown, it is hard to rebuild trust. In the United States, a significant fringe of the population no longer trusts its institutions. Both Russia and political parties have repeated that the election was stolen and the result was not valid. Once a significant fringe of the population completely loses confidence in its institutions, it is very difficult to regain its trust and recreate unity.

We definitely still see divisions. Of course, the situation may be different in Canada, but once a political party gets hold of the information, politicizes it and associates it with its party line, as we saw in the United States, that creates divisions and it is then extremely difficult to reconcile that information.

● (2025)

Hon. Greg Fergus: Can a parallel be drawn between that situation and the situation in Canada?

Ms. Sophie Marineau: I don't think I am equipped to answer that question. I have worked mainly on the American case and on Russia.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Are there other state actors that have played a role similar to Russia's, in the United States? Have China and Iran also played a role? Other witnesses whom we have heard have said that these three countries were kind of the troika of political interference.

Ms. Sophie Marineau: Yes, in my research, China and Iran came up often.

However, China and Russia were not necessarily disseminating the same information and did not necessarily have the same objectives. With Russia, we saw a tendency to favour the Republican Party, while China tended to favour the Democratic Party a little more. Each of those countries favoured the party that was most likely to be sympathetic to its government and create partnerships or sign agreements with it. Russia believed that the Democratic establishment was very anti-Russia, while China believed that it was a bit more sympathetic to its cause than the Republican Party.

Russia, China and Iran do engage in state disinformation, so those countries have organizations that are funded and sponsored by the state. They are permanent organizations whose main objective is to spread disinformation. They work at it full-time, while pursuing other objectives at the same time, obviously.

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you, Ms. Marineau.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Normandin, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to turn to you again, Professor Turnbull.

In your opening statement, you said that the issue of interference was not new, but had taken new forms over time. We can imagine that between elections, when a term is ordinarily four years, it is highly likely that it will evolve considerably.

I would like to hear your opinion about the importance of having a body that would be responsible for combatting interference outside election periods.

In addition, another witness recommended that we establish an independent bureau of investigation, separate from CSIS and the RCMP, that would be impartial and would report directly to the House, somewhat like the Office of the Auditor General.

What do you think about that kind of tool?

[*English*]

Dr. Lori Turnbull: Thank you for that.

I can see the logic to it, because as elected members, you are in a bit of a tough spot to deal with this without the help of an independent body. There is a sense that, you know, because you're the participants in the very elections you're talking about, it's possible that....

People want a totally non-partisan treatment of a thing like this. You can imagine such a thing where people who have expertise in security issues, in cybersecurity, in democratic health or in all kinds of things would come together to build an organization that would be able to take a very cross-disciplinary approach to figuring out how to deal with these sorts of things. Reporting to Parliament would be important, because you would want everything to be open and transparent.

That said, I'm always a little nervous when we take decisions away from Parliament. It's not that you'd be taking decisions away from Parliament, but sometimes there can be a whole bunch of voices and the sense from the public is that, "Oh, we're going to appoint one more person who can't really make decisions but can talk about things and give advice and do reports and so on."

Honestly, I have a sense of urgency about this. I wouldn't be entirely satisfied if that sort of thing happened, but I can see why it would have value.

● (2030)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

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

Professor Turnbull, I'll come back to you so that we can follow up on the discussion of lowering the voting age to 16. It reminds me of knocking on a door and having a 17-year-old drag his mother down. She did not want to talk to me at all. He asked all the questions. She just listened in. I think they can be very engaged, so perhaps you would comment on that.

Second, I feel like you were recommending an inquiry on democracy that would focus on not just foreign interference in elections but also the state of democracy. What kinds of things do you think should be studied or publicly inquired through that process?

Dr. Lori Turnbull: On the first point, yes, I think if we considered lowering the voting age at the same time as there was a vigorous civics education process, you'd be getting people when they are still in school and when they have the day to learn. My daughter is nine. She told me how much she wishes she was doing more civics in school. Of course, I was so excited to hear that.

I think there is a lot of value and opportunity there. I understand that education is a provincial jurisdiction and that there would be all kinds of issues, but I honestly think we could pull that off.

The other thing is that, from a teenager's perspective, you have a different view in terms of being forward-looking. You have a different idea about the long term and about trying to make decisions that will make sure that the planet is a good place for you. You're thinking long-term about things. You actually do have, in many ways, a very different type of vantage point on the sorts of questions we are asking ourselves.

It doesn't mean that people who are younger have different priorities. When it comes to climate change and the cost of living, I think we see a lot of overlap across ages, depending on who we ask. However, I think it would be a different perspective sometimes, because there's this sense that you're in this for the long haul. It's very much a perspective that's worth gathering and that's very important to gather.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I don't have enough time for you to answer on the public inquiry and democracy, so if you want send something, I'm sure the chair will tell you all about how to do it.

Thank you.

The Chair: That was another very fruitful panel.

As I like to remind all of our guests, if there is anything you would like to elaborate on or add or something else comes to mind, please share it with the clerk, and the clerk will make sure it is circulated around in both official languages.

Ms. Marineau and Ms. Turnbull, I want to thank you both for the time you've taken with us and the insights you've provided. It really does mean a lot to us for the purpose of this study and beyond. On behalf of all PROC committee members, I would like to thank you both for your time and attention and for being with us here today and for all the important work you do.

Please keep well and safe. With that, have a good night.

The meeting is adjourned.