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• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 88 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

The committee is meeting today to study the question of privilege related to the member for Wellington—Halton Hills and other members.

As a reminder to all members, because we've just returned, the earpiece and the microphone should not interact because they cause a feedback loop for interpreters. If you need the earpiece, keep it in your ear. If you don't want to use it, leave it to the side.

The clerk and I, as always, will maintain a consolidated speaking list for members wishing to speak.

Before I go to our guest, I see Ms. Blaney.

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

I wanted to have a quick moment to ask a question about what the schedule will be in committee for the next couple of weeks. I know we have a matter that we still need to discuss and finalize, and I'm just wondering whether there will be time in the next week or so to do that work.

The Chair: I appreciate that. Based on the comments we've been hearing and discussions that have been taking place, I think members have an appetite for what study we want to move on to after we conclude this one.

Today, as we know, we have two hours of witnesses.

On Thursday, we will have Rob Stewart, who's the former deputy minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, for the first hour. We do not have anyone for the second hour, so we could consider doing business to discuss where we're going after that for that second hour.

Next Tuesday, the first hour is vacant. In the second hour, we will have the Honourable Bill Blair, who is the minister we requested to appear. On Thursday, October 26, for two hours as members requested, we will have the Honourable Erin O'Toole appearing. That will exhaust our list of witnesses, so everyone who is supposed to come will come. It will then bring us to the end of that study, as per what the committee has decided.

I could offer, if you would like, that in the second hour on Thursday, we go into committee business and we can discuss where the committee wants to go. We would adjourn that meeting to ensure that on the Tuesday, the Honourable Bill Blair can appear, as he has confirmed his attendance, but we could use that first hour if it's not rectified on Thursday to continue committee business to figure out what we are doing while the report is being drafted.

As committee members have asked of us, the moment the draft is available, we'll have it circulated and give you enough time—at least a few days—to review it before we go into the draft consideration of it. We can then return to the study that we want to move to.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that, Chair. I hope we can take that time to figure out committee business, but of course, that's up to the committee as a whole. Hopefully we can do that, and I support that.

The other question I have is how long the analysts think it will take to get all the information together on the privilege motion.

The Chair: The analysts would like to get back to us. We have the summary of witnesses, so a lot of the work has been done, but it depends on what we hear over the next four meetings. That will determine what they need to add. We'll get that answer back to you.

I think Ms. Blaney is signalling an approach that she would like to see. If others are in agreement, perhaps you can have those conversations and we can find that way forward. I'm seeing support on one side, and others will consider. Thank you for that.

With us today, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we have Tara Denham, director general of the office of human rights, freedoms and inclusion.

Ms. Denham, you'll have up to five minutes for an opening statement, after which we'll proceed to questions from the committee members.

Thank you for making yourself available, and thank you for responding as quickly as you did. You're a frequent flyer here and it means a lot. We haven't started an official program, but we will consider it. We thank you, not only for your service but for your time and attention.

Welcome to PROC.

• (1105)

Ms. Tara Denham (Director General, Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you. It's always a pleasure to come and appear before the committee.

As you know, previously I have appeared with other members of the SITE task force, but I thought that today it would be helpful to just do a quick recap of some of the work we do at the rapid response mechanism Canada, and then particularly focus on some of the recent work we have been doing since your summer break.

As you know, in 2018, Canada championed the creation of the G7 rapid response mechanism, the RRM, to work with G7 and other partners to strengthen our collective understanding of foreign threats to democracy and our respective capacities to counter these threats. Canada leverages our leadership in the G7 RRM to share information, improve understanding of malign tactics in the information environment and learn from the experiences of our allies. The G7 RRM is led by Canada on a permanent basis and supported by a secretariat at Global Affairs Canada.

During the two previous elections, the RRM Canada team supported the critical election incident public protocol—the protocol—by monitoring the online information environment for signs of foreign information manipulation and interference and providing regular updates to the SITE task force.

To do this, the RRM uses open-source intelligence techniques, which means that only public information is used to support the analysis of the team. We also have an ethical and methodological framework, which is available online and outlines our key protocols and principles of the work and how it is undertaken with an approach that supports and upholds human rights. Of note, RRM-related work continues outside of the writ period of a general election.

To be clear, the role of the RRM Canada team is to identify potential tactics or campaigns, to identify information and to provide updates to the SITE task force during writ periods, and to the panel during writ periods, as part of the public protocol.

Moving on to our more recent work, in the summer of 2023, for the first time the SITE task force was stood up to monitor and report on potential issues of foreign interference and violent extremism related to by-elections. As a member of SITE, RRM Canada monitored the information environment and provided daily updates to the SITE task force. Following the June by-elections, the SITE task force issued an unclassified report on its work during the four by-elections as well as key observations related to foreign interference and violent extremism. As indicated in a publicly available report, there were no observations of foreign interference or violent extremism in those by-elections.

However, while monitoring for the June 2023 by-elections, the RRM Canada team discovered activity that was not related to the by-elections but had some indications of potential information manipulation targeted at a Canadian member of Parliament, Mr. Michael Chong, representing Wellington—Halton Hills.

Within the mandate of RRM Canada, the team investigated the activity in order to validate initial indications of suspicious activity

and alerted our colleagues within Canada's security and intelligence community. These efforts culminated in the August 9 Global Affairs Canada statement: "Rapid Response Mechanism...detects information operation targeting member of Parliament".

As described in the statement, the activity sought to spread "false or misleading narratives about Mr. Chong" and "displayed several indicators of foreign information manipulation and interference, including: coordinated content and timing, highly suspicious and abnormal shifts in the volume and scope of engagement [and] the concealment of state involvement".

The department assessed that it was highly likely that the Government of China played a role in the information operation. The statement and the key details of the analysis done by the RRM team are available online.

While the publication of the GAC statement about the WeChat activity was a key component of our response, our strategy included a number of other elements. We conducted a briefing on the activity with Mr. Chong. We raised concerns about the activity with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Canada. We engaged with Tencent, which is the parent company of WeChat, about the activity. These steps are an illustration of some of the tools available to Global Affairs Canada to address malign behaviour in the information environment.

• (1110)

Our efforts to call out this behaviour are not conducted in a vacuum. Canada's allies are also increasingly reporting publicly on these threats to democracy. I would like to specifically recommend the work of our colleagues at the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center and their recent report, "How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment." We're pleased to see that the report also included a case study about the GAC statement on WeChat activity.

In conclusion, as you have heard, the RRM Canada continues to contribute to the broader efforts of the Government of Canada to bring information to light in the public sphere through the SITE by-election reports and the GAC statement about WeChat activity. When it is appropriate and when we are able to do so, we will continue to report publicly on issues related to foreign interference to contribute to widespread awareness of these threats amongst Canadians.

I'd like to close by noting that the Government of Canada is paying close attention to the outcomes and recommendations of multiple reviews, including that of your committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now enter into six-minute rounds starting with Mr. Cooper followed by Mrs. Romanado.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Mr. Cooper, go ahead, through the chair.

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

Thank you, Ms. Denham, for appearing once again before our committee. With regard to the disinformation campaign that the RRM detected concerning MP Chong, which involved a coordinated network of WeChat news accounts, including Beijing state media outlets and accounts, that took place between May 4 and May 13, 2023. RRM detected it in June, MP Chong was briefed about it and it was made public on August 9, 2023.

That was two months after this information was detected and three months after it took place. For a rapid response mechanism, that doesn't sound like a very rapid response, I would submit respectfully. Can you explain why it took three months before this disinformation campaign was made known to MP Chong and made public to Canadians?

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you for the question.

Madam Chair, as I noted, we were actually instructed as part of SITE to monitor the by-elections. RRM Canada doesn't monitor the information environment on an ongoing basis. We were instructed, for the by-elections specifically, to look for foreign interference. Again, that was taking place in June, in advance of the by-elections. We weren't monitoring the space in May. When we put the tools in place, we were actually using certain keywords. In this case, we were seeking "member of Parliament in Canada". When we did that and we started bringing in the information while we were looking at the by-elections, other information actually did come up.

In terms of timing, while the activity took place during a very specific time, from May 4 to May 13, we did not actually start to see it until June.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I appreciate that, and that partially answers my question as to why you didn't see it in May, but it doesn't answer the second part of my question, which is why it took, in this case, two months before MP Chong became aware of this and was briefed about it and it was made public to Canadians.

Ms. Tara Denham: Again, our primary focus was the by-elections. Once those were completed, we were actually able to focus our energies on trying to understand the activity, and because WeChat is not an open platform—it does not proactively share information as some other platforms do—really looking into the breadth of it is actually a very time-consuming activity. It involves looking at the different accounts.

In terms of timeline, just to answer the question, once it was identified in June, it took approximately the month of July to do that work, to do the research, because we had to really understand the network and scope it out. Once that was completed in July, we shared our research through the intelligence community and different security organizations. By the end of July and the start of August, we were able to brief up and then organize the call with Mr. Chong on August 9 when he was available.

• (1115)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that, but, again, the by-elections were in mid-June. That means it really took about two months, so, to my point, that was hardly a rapid response. In order to counter disinformation, particularly in the context of elections, it's important that information be shared as close to real time as possible.

Would you concur with that?

Ms. Tara Denham: Actually, our objective isn't to counter disinformation. Our objective is to understand the information environment and the tactics that are being used, and to then shed light on those tactics and amplify understanding.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Certainly part of your mandate is to make that information known—is it not?

Ms. Tara Denham: Yes, it is, which we did do in August.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It is.

If it takes two months to detect and make public disinformation, as was the case in this instance, then how can Canadians have any confidence in the RRM in the context of an election or in the lead-up to the issuance of a writ?

Ms. Tara Denham: I think, actually, this was an illustration of the ability of the RRM to bring information forward, to do the thorough research that's required to understand the tactics at play, and to then share them with Canadians and make the MP aware. I understand some of the nuancing of needing to make sure that any research done is thorough because you actually want to make sure that what you're putting in public has been thoroughly researched. In our perspective, it was actually a positive story. The RRM was able to map it, was able to bring that forward, was able to put it in the Canadian public and was also able to talk to the parent company of WeChat.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, I would submit that a two-month window is too long and that the RRM has some work to do to actually deliver a rapid response to disinformation.

The Chair: I'll give you 30 seconds because you have three seconds.

I just want to say—I'll pause really quickly—that, when we are actually having an opportunity to ask questions and answer questions and are on a good pathway, I will then not be as tight. It's when we are interrupting each other that I just want it to be over. As I think that was quite civil and informative, I will then be generous with time.

Mr. Calkins, if you want to take the 30 seconds, go ahead.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Yes.

On a follow-up to your response to Mr. Cooper's question, you said that no action was taken and that you waited until the by-elections were over. If the purpose is to interdict activities that are going to change the outcome of an election, why would the protocol be to wait until the election is over before advising anybody? Is it because Michael Chong wasn't directly involved in the by-election process? I'm confused about the priority.

Ms. Tara Denham: I'll just clarify. The activity itself, the information campaign, was in no way related to the by-election. We were mandated to look at the by-election and to find out if there were any indications of foreign interference. We did not find any. However, in the information environment as we were looking at the by-election.... That is when we actually discovered this campaign that had already been completed. It was time-bound between May 4 and May 13, but of course, in the information environment, you can still find information *post facto*.

We did find it at that time, but it was not related to the by-election at all. At that point, our objective was to understand that tactic, to understand the environment and to make that public if we could.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Romanado, you have six minutes.

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

To the witness, thank you again for joining us. It's a pleasure to hear from you again.

This has actually been very helpful because you've identified how it actually worked. I think it's an improvement from what saw in the 2021 election.

Just to clarify.... Four by-elections were happening June. Mr. Chong was not a candidate in any of those by-elections. Once the mechanism went into place and information of misinformation was coming forth, because there was not an immediate threat to a current election happening, that was worked on in parallel. It was being monitored but being looked at in parallel while you were continuing to monitor the four active by-elections. You're confirming that there was no inference in those four by-elections. After the by-elections, the RRM was able to collate that information and analyze it properly to find out where it was from and so on and so forth. Then, once that was properly done, the RRM notified the person—in this case, MP Chong—as well as the necessary authorities.

Based on that information, would you say that it might be a good recommendation that constant monitoring—and I don't know if it would be by the RRM—occur outside of election periods? The reason I'm saying that is that we never know when an election will happen. We're in a minority Parliament. In the event that an election is called whenever, only then would the mechanism be triggered, but should we be looking outside the writ period and be actively monitoring for misinformation campaigns about sitting members of Parliament? Do you have any suggestions for us on that? If so, what would that look like, and what resources would be required?

• (1120)

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you. Your summary was perfect of how the mechanism worked, so I'm glad that came through.

In terms of recommendations.... Again, I work at Global Affairs Canada. I am mandated to look for foreign interference. We don't look at the domestic environment, except when triggered for election periods.

In terms of what a mechanism could look like in Canada, I would leave others to reflect upon that, but this committee has heard from a lot of witnesses. I think there is a combination of.... You've heard from academics, researchers and others who have capabilities to monitor. A lot of countries are asking the questions, "What are all of the layers of research that are required?" and "Is there a role for government?", and are considering those roles and what they should be.

However, as it is defined for foreign affairs, that is not the information environment that we should or would be looking at on a constant basis.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: You also mentioned that analyzing WeChat was very time-consuming, and you were only able to finish the analysis at the end of July. Using other channels of communication is perhaps the reason why the PRC is using WeChat. It's because it knows full well that it is actually much more difficult to do the analysis versus other means of communication.

Could that be a tactic? If so, could we be working more closely with WeChat to make sure that any analysis we need to do can be done and done much more quickly?

Ms. Tara Denham: I can't speak to the intents or the strategies of the PRC, but what I would say and why I mentioned that we reached out to Tencent was that it is part of the tools that we use. It's not only Tencent but other platforms. We engage with them so that, when there are instances, we can engage with the company.

What that looks like is us typically indicating that we've seen this type of behaviour and asking if they've seen this type of behaviour. More often than not, this type of behaviour violates their terms of service and their terms and conditions. What we want to do is to make sure that various platforms are aware of the activity. Should they take action, it should be their responsibility to adhere to their terms and conditions.

That's another piece of the work that we do. We want to also hold social media platforms to account in implementing the monitoring of their platforms.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: In terms of the by-elections, could you give us any insight into lessons learned on how you would improve monitoring? Like you said, the rapid response mechanism kicks in when the writ is dropped for the by-election. Having now gone through this successfully in a by-election and having been able to monitor it quickly, had one of the candidates in these by-elections been a target of misinformation, I would assume that the necessary communication to the candidates and/or political parties and/or the SITE task force would have happened.

Do you have any recommendations for us going forward with the RRM, having just gone through these by-elections?

• (1125)

Ms. Tara Denham: I thought you started by asking about an ability to monitor the landscape on an ongoing basis. That would be something for this committee to explore in more detail.

Again, that moves into domestic authorities, but I think that would be an interesting exploration because, again, to monitor the social media landscape, when the RRM is triggered—just again to explain some of the work—to understand if there is a spike in activity, you have to understand what a normal level of activity looks like. When we are looking at by-elections, we do and we have strong capabilities, but those capabilities would be augmented if you understood what the baseline was.

That has to be balanced against all of the authorities that are in place to make sure that they adhere to human rights and rights to privacy on any monitoring of the social media landscape.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you may go ahead for six minutes.

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

I'm hoping you can clarify a few things. It would be great if we could speak in French just so everything is clear. I do want to say, though, that the interpreters do a great job, so thank you to them.

I want some clarity on the issue before the committee.

In your opening remarks, you talked about Global Affairs Canada's rapid response mechanism and the fact that it relied on public information. If I understood correctly, the mechanism uses information that is widely shared on popular platforms. We saw that in 2017.

Conversely, the interference we saw this year, the subject of today's meeting, was very targeted. That makes me wonder whether we are equipped to act and react and whether we shouldn't go further. When we see an open door, we can close it, but there may be other ways in that we, as parliamentarians, aren't even aware of.

I'd like more information on the current situation.

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you.

Forgive me, but I just want to be sure I understand your question.

[*English*]

If I understand fully, just to really see if we're properly equipped to address some of these issues—because the social media landscape is quite open—there are a lot of layers to actually address disinformation and some of the activity on the platforms. I think as this committee is doing, and with the conversation that's happening in Canada, we have to understand all of those layers and make sure we're actually coming at them from multiple perspectives.

I would say that one is a role of the RRM, which is to monitor and understand what's happening. However, as I alluded briefly, I also think a lot can happen around the engagement with the platforms in terms of making sure content moderation is done in a transparent way and that we're able to engage with those platforms.

Also, just recently Canada signed a declaration of information integrity, which we led with the Netherlands. That is also about calling on states to not adhere to or promote disinformation campaigns and inviting companies to be more transparent in how they handle it.

I guess my answer would be that we're using a lot of tools. Understanding disinformation and trying to find ways to address it is one, but there are many layers we have to focus on to actually address the issue.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If I, as a member of Parliament, notice something I'm not sure about, what mechanism can I use to educate myself and recognize potential interference, versus considering the need to go further?

We all know that a major shift has been under way for a few months, but parliamentarians may not have the expertise to figure out what's what. Is there adequate monitoring? Will action be taken quickly, not in two months?

• (1130)

Ms. Tara Denham: I had trouble understanding the question.

[*English*]

Just to be sure, were you asking what we as individuals and MPs can do when we're actually seeing activity that impacts us individually?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Yes.

If we don't have enough information, should we do something right away and report the situation? We shouldn't close our eyes. The matter has to be considered.

[English]

Ms. Tara Denham: I'll speak first to what individuals can do and then MPs and Canadians.

I think people are becoming more aware of the Canadian cyber centre and the tools and resources that are there. That's an excellent resource to actually report activity. They collate that and also track and understand issues. There's a lot of support provided there. Social media platforms also have recourse mechanisms whereby you can report the activity. As much as they are monitoring their information environment as well, they do also rely on consumers of and individuals on their platforms to report activity.

That's at the level of an individual. I think we all have to increase our understanding of what it takes.

For MPs more broadly, I think this is where we all have to think about the tools at our disposal. How can we actually shed as much light as possible on the activities that are taking place so that we increase the collective understanding? I do feel that this is a very live conversation right now in Canada. I don't think we are a population that has been as exposed to disinformation campaigns as other countries have, so I think the more we can collectively understand that and the more we can bring it to light and call it what it is, the more beneficial that will be. Again, that was where the RRM started from; we wanted to actually be able to share information and share it more broadly. Again, that's why we use only open-source information.

It's about continuing to explore what tools we have and how we can use them as effectively as possible.

[Translation]

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

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, you have six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, and welcome back. It's always good to visit.

I'm trying to get little bit more clear here. I think I understand, but it sounds like your department was watching during the by-elections. I want to clarify. Does that mean that during elections is the only time that this has been requested and that, outside of any kind of election, the work isn't being done?

Ms. Tara Denham: In terms of monitoring the information environment on threats to elections, it has been during a writ period, so during the 43rd and 44th parliaments. Then, this summer was the first time that it was initiated for by-elections. That is when we are initiated to look within election periods.

However, as I indicated, RRM Canada is always working, but again, driven by our mandate, we're looking to understand what that information environment looks like more broadly in terms of threats to democracy and threats to advancing our foreign-policy priorities.

I'll give you an example of how that would usually look. If there's a major international event, we would be looking at the in-

formation environment to see if there are indications of artificial amplification that may have links to a government trying to use the information environment to drive their foreign-policy priorities. I'm not sure if that's clear enough, but for Canadian electoral processes, we are initiated during writ periods and as directed by the SITE task force and the panel, which was for during writ periods and elections. However, we are always looking at understanding the information environment, just not within the Canadian context.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that because one of the things I found interesting about your testimony was that your department, the group, was looking at the by-elections and then found something about another MP. That's a bit concerning to me because it's sort of like, if there were not any by-elections, that information could have been out there and we would not have been aware of it. We wouldn't be sitting where we are right now. In fact, MPs would still be under a level of threat that, I think, is concerning.

I'm just wondering if there are any recommendations that you have around how we can be gathering that information so that we're not put into this position as a Parliament. It is important that this place actually protect its members.

The other part is that it took quite a while. I'm curious about.... With a much larger election, instead of just a few by-elections, if it takes two months to get that information clarified—and I understand that you don't want to just throw it out there and create chaos without having that clarity of information—how is this place, or Canada, going to be able to do it so that, during an election, information is made clear so that this doesn't take over an election and cause people to lose because of massive misinformation? I would hate to be going through the incredible work of an election in any role that you play and then finding out at the end that there was a targeted attack that created so much misinformation that your election was then questionable.

● (1135)

Ms. Tara Denham: I think I understand which questions were in there. I'm going to try. If I miss anything, please let me know. Let's start at the end, maybe, and go back in terms of the information environment during an election and protecting MPs.

When the writ period is in place, we do report the activity to SITE, and the SITE task force up to the panel. As part of that work, there were also briefings of political parties. There are a few mechanisms in place where, if there are indications of activity, that information can be shared up.

As this committee has also heard many times, disinformation or information operations in and of themselves do not mean they're significant enough that they could impact the results of an election. That is a very.... That's a high threshold, I would say. While we're always wanting to understand the information environment, there's also a lot of research under way into “does a disinformation campaign actually change people's behaviour?”

I can't speak to that, but I flag it because I think we've made progress in having ways that we can trigger information, share that with political parties and share that with the panel. Just because there's disinformation—of which there's a lot—and misinformation in an election period does not in and of itself mean that it's going to potentially impact the results of an election.

Also, then, you were talking about how we can protect parliamentarians.

Again, during the writ period, there were briefings to the political parties. I think there are probably recommendations of how those can continue to be strengthened, because it is part of the protocol: How can those briefings continue? Then, I think, as I mentioned, there are a lot of resources available for parliamentarians to actually report any activity they see and get advice on what's there.

I think I would finish on that one by saying that our motivator and our mandate is to understand that information environment not only to protect parliamentarians but also so Canadians writ large can understand that information environment, because there are a lot of people in Canada who may be impacted.

Perhaps I'll stop there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Cooper for five minutes, who will be followed by Ms. Sahota and then Madame Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney for two minutes.

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

Through you, Madam Chair, Ms. Denham, you stated in an answer to my question in the previous round that part of the mandate of RRM is to make disinformation public so that Canadians know about it and individuals targeted know about it. Consistent with that, MP Chong was briefed, and a statement was issued by Global Affairs Canada on August 9. That's a good thing.

However, on October 18, 2021, the rapid response mechanism prepared a report that also identified a disinformation campaign through Beijing-based state media accounts targeting former members of Parliament Kenny Chiu and Erin O'Toole and the Conservative Party, among others. That was not made public.

Why was the disinformation with respect to MP Chong made public a good thing, but Canadians were kept in the dark with regard to the October 18, 2021, RRM report?

● (1140)

Ms. Tara Denham: October 18.... Again, that was during the writ period and, as a SITE member, we did report that up to the panel as part of the task force, but in that report, which you've read or have with you, it was very clear that we did.... Again, we were notifying that there was particular activity that we had seen, but at

that time, we were unable to determine direct linkages between the CCP and the rest of the network that we were identifying. What we were flagging was that we could see disinformation and that there was some coordination of accounts, but we were unable to make that determination at the time. That's what we reported up to the panel.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You reported it to the panel, but that would have been provided to the panel in September, during the election. The election date was September 20, 2021. The report prepared was on October 18, 2021, so that was after the election.

In other words, RRM would not need to go through the election panel because the election was over, and the report of October 18 does make clear.... Although you weren't able to completely verify it, it's unequivocal that CCP state media accounts were spreading disinformation against MP Chiu, Erin O'Toole and the Conservative Party. Again, why was that not made public? There was no election concerning MP Chong when that was made public, but here, we have this report after the election, so I really don't see the distinction.

Ms. Tara Denham: To clarify, there were the CCP-related news sites that were included in that report, and there are many news sites that, at times, have disinformation on them. We were not able at that time.... I believe the wording is that we were unable to determine coordination with the CCP and the news sites.

Again, we're looking for foreign information manipulation, and we are always looking to see if there are strong enough indications of a link to a government entity. At the time, we were not able to fully assess the network. When you then look at disinformation—and disinformation can be on certain platforms—that's where I come back to an important point, which is that when there is disinformation, another avenue is to raise that to the awareness of social media platforms and ask them for content moderation.

Again, at that time, we didn't have sufficient information to report.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The report refers to Chinese Communist Party media accounts on Douyin that have published videos repeating a Global Times headline published on September 8 that suggests the CPC's platform would lead China to break off relations with Canada. It refers to a Douyin account involving another CCP media outlet.

Very clearly, the report establishes that this disinformation was being shared by CCP-controlled media accounts in the same way that the August 9 statement makes this clear. With respect to MP Chong, one-third of the accounts through which the disinformation was shared were on state media accounts.

Again, I'm not following how it's possible in light of that, but there was a distinction made between August 9 versus back in October 18, 2021. I would put it to you that what changed is that this interference on the part of Beijing became public because of whistle-blowers and because of media reports putting pressure on the government to be more transparent—not sufficiently transparent, but more transparent—than the previous approach, which was to cover this interference activity up.

Ms. Tara Denham: There is a distinction between the two. You're correct. In the report, it indicates the state media news sites that had the content on them. When we're looking for disinformation campaigns, what you would typically see or what we've seen could start with a news site that may have affiliations with the government. In that case, it did.

What you're watching for is how that's interacting with other accounts. Is there coordination, for example, of timing and content? That's when you start—I've spoken to the committee about this before—to look for that artificial amplification of content to try to make it sound louder and to try to make it look like a more natural conversation.

At that time, we were able to see certain accounts and news sites that were state-affiliated, but we could not see a corollary with other accounts that were putting up similar content. We couldn't find that linkage.

What I am trying to clarify is that, yes, at times, you can see state-affiliated news sites that have information on them, but if they're not linked and trying to amplify in a coordinated attempt to have inauthentic amplification, that's where we are not able to make the link. That was very different in the more recent situation.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Sahota.

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

This is very interesting. What I want to ask you is in line with the questioning that we've had. You were talking about coordination and having to find coordination. There are many sites out there that we know will put things out that they think might be sensational or might be of interest to community groups. They will check out or test whether they can monetize off of certain information. The Prime Minister of Canada is a perfect example. Social media accounts around the world are starting to find that they can monetize by spreading disinformation about the Prime Minister. It's quite lucrative.

I want your recommendation on this. Do you think the RRM should perhaps be looking at not just coordination all the way through from a foreign state-sponsored media source, but also how the interest that's built through monetizing off these platforms can really propel that initiated or state-sponsored disinformation campaign? They may not realize how far it would go, and it's perhaps not coordinated all the way through, but the result or impact of it could be really great. The impact could be devastating to democracies around the world.

What are your thoughts on that? What more could we do? Do you have further recommendations? Do you think we should be looking at that and not just a coordinated attack that has coordination at the beginning but then authentic misinformation spreading?

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you for the question.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Did that make any sense? I don't know.

Ms. Tara Denham: I think it did. I will attempt to answer on my views there.

On the RRM itself, again, as I've said a few times, I think there are various tools. We have to use all the tools as designed. There are always ways in which we can improve the tools, but then we have to complement them with other efforts. The RRM is a very tactical team in terms of understanding that information environment. It's a particular skill set to do what I've described. I think that needs to be protected, with an ability to share with allies, academics and researchers about what we're seeing so that we can increase our understanding in complement.

Then a full spectrum of effort needs to take place. Another part under my responsibilities is the digital inclusion lab, which then works on, as I mentioned briefly, the declaration on information integrity. This is where you're taking a combination of operational lessons that we may be learning and some of our other policy work on protecting human rights online and off-line. Then we look at what the opportunities are and where we can advance that internationally.

There is a full spectrum of tools. It's not necessarily the RRM, I would say, but are we looking at that? Absolutely. The declaration on information integrity is actually an excellent example of that. We're working with other governments to identify the various mechanisms we could use and the various approaches. With that type of declaration we ask countries to sign on. Currently, 30 countries have signed on. One of those commitments is for countries to abstain from and condemn state-led disinformation campaigns. It also invites private sector companies and industry to enhance transparency in advertising, algorithms and content moderation.

We have to use everything at our disposal to address this. Those would be some tools within Global Affairs, but there are also a lot of other actors in this space.

• (1150)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It's excellent to see that there's progress being made. However, I think we can't move fast enough on this. This problem is growing at a rapid speed. If it doesn't rise to the level or the threshold today, then it will soon enough.

You've had experience in this over the last few elections. From that experience, can you tell me how many countries are heavily involved in influencing Canada's election? If you're comfortable, can you name some of those countries?

Ms. Tara Denham: I think others have testified in front of this committee, including the NSIA, who has been here before, and our deputy minister, and named some of the countries that are primarily involved in this. We've seen China and Russia involved in this. I think the committee has heard that on a number of occasions.

There is also a lot of public reporting. We have CSIS reporting on this. We also have a rapid response mechanism annual report that I believe is publicly available and has been shared. I think all of these actually give the committee a lot of nuancing about who those actors are and the types of tactics they're using.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau.

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

Usually, I try to look for the positive, but at some point, you have to tell it like it is. The work we've done has paved the way for one thing, in particular—

[*English*]

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I have a point of order. There is no interpretation.

The Chair: We'll just pause. There is no interpretation. I understand it's not working.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: French would be great.

The Chair: Is it working now?

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It would be great if the witness could answer in French.

The Chair: It seems to be working now.

You can start over, Ms. Gaudreau.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'll be perfectly frank. The committee's proceedings highlighted how urgent the important stuff is.

It's been said over and over again: the information culture is not what it appears. At least we've learned that. I still have questions. Is the Communications Security Establishment looking for people with the ability to explore tactics? You said you had an amazing tactical team. I appreciate that, but will this issue be a priority going forward? The hole has been patched up a few times, but the leak hasn't been fixed. It's sad to see what's going on. The situation is critical.

Reassure me, please. Tell me that you're taking this very seriously, that this kind of thing won't happen again, and that it will no longer take months and months to get to the bottom of an event like this. Parliamentarians and our institutions need to be protected for the sake of our democracy.

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you.

[*English*]

Is it a priority, and will we be able to respond faster?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Do you see this as urgent and important?

[*English*]

Ms. Tara Denham: The RRM was created five years ago. It's very new, actually. I'm very proud that it was put in place. It was

identified that there was an emerging threat and there was a gap, and Canada actually took leadership there. I think that's a really good thing. However, we have to keep on top of that. We have to keep on top of the game.

For us, absolutely it's a priority. We work with our international partners. I would say that the work we're doing is on par with that of a lot of our allies.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I want to hear you use the word “urgent”. I have all sorts of priorities in life, but they're five years down the road.

Is this something you need to address urgently?

• (1155)

[*English*]

Ms. Tara Denham: Yes. For me, it's a priority. It is urgent that we address it. I've said a few times that I am representing a tool in the tool kit. I think there are many layers to the work we do. As Canadians, and within Canada, we have to look at that full picture and at what we are doing to protect it.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a couple of questions. Since I have such a short time, maybe I'll ask both of them and then let you do your best to answer.

First of all, I agree that this needs to be dealt with urgently. It's not just about protecting MPs; it's also about protecting democracy and candidates. Could you share a little bit about what lessons were learned from the by-elections and how that is impacting the next steps to prepare for ongoing elections?

I noticed in your response to me last time around that you talked a lot about how Canadians need to understand misinformation, and you implied that we kind of are. I'll tell you that in my riding I'm seeing an increase in misinformation and in people being very confused and sometimes very angry and frustrated based on things that are totally misinformation. The resources to help support people are not easy to find. I'm wondering about the work you do, especially around human rights, freedoms and inclusion, which is really about educating people so they know what's coming at them and how to decipher that.

I want to know about lessons learned and what's happening around actually educating Canadians.

Ms. Tara Denham: Thank you.

In terms of lessons learned from the by-elections, again, that was the first time the SITE task force was put in place for the by-elections, and we are of course having ongoing conversations about what could be done. I can't speak to any of the final recommendations because those conversations are in play.

For the RRM, as I've said, I actually think it was a success story that we were able to identify an activity. We were able to actually do the research, and while perhaps different people's definitions of "rapid" may be different, I just want to reiterate that this is a very technical area. You do want to be sure when you are putting it in public that it is founded and that it is accurate, that it is as accurate as you can be, because what we're trying to do is use it to educate Canadians, so you want to be increasing that through the most accurate information that you can. In terms of success, that was one. I think we've seen that as well with allies. It shed light on the issue so that we can continue to do that and continue to contribute to the learning.

In terms of misinformation and disinformation, again, I focus my work on disinformation. I know these words probably are thrown around a lot, but misinformation could be inaccurate information. It may not be intentional. It may just be inaccurate information. Disinformation has a covert nature to it, so I'm focused on that.

However, on misinformation and what we're doing in Canada, the RRM is focused on sharing more information, but I believe this committee has heard from other departments. Canadian Heritage has a lot of programs out there. We work with our other departments to actually look at the full breadth of how we can improve education and awareness in Canada.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I understand that you're in conversations about what the lessons learned were. Will there be anything that comes out publicly or that can be sent to this committee to let us know what was learned from the process? I'm just wondering.

Ms. Tara Denham: Again, in the by-elections, there were actually no findings of foreign interference. That was publicly available. Those reports are there.

What we're doing is making sure.... We're having conversations to make sure that we're always improving or reflecting on where we are as SITE members. There wouldn't be anything per se in terms of findings from the by-elections.

The Chair: With that, I want to thank you for your time and attention today.

I think what was quite fruitful was actually understanding the mandate of what you do compared with perhaps what we might want you to do. You can only do what you're mandated to do. I think that was quite eye-opening for me. Even though we've had so many meetings, being able to actually understand what your role is, where information is obtained and then how it's acted upon and who can and who can't, is quite interesting.

With that, I want to thank you for your time and attention.

If members have other comments, we might send them to you, so please stay tuned. If there is anything that comes to mind that you'd like our committee to know, such as feedback that we should be considering, please don't hesitate to send that to the clerk. We'll have it translated in both official languages and shared around.

We're going to suspend, committee members, for a quick three minutes to get ready for our next panel.

Thank you to you and your team. Have a great day.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: We're going to continue with our meeting.

I just want to say that Mr. Cooper has asked for the floor really quickly. I'll offer him the same courtesy, and then we will continue with our panel with a guest who committee members have all agreed we would like to have here, so we're excited to get to that promptly.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

• (1205)

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

I'm just following up on the point made by Ms. Blaney during the first panel that we do have an hour on Thursday to deal with future committee business. I think Ms. Blaney was alluding in part to the need to get to the bottom of the incident that brought shame on Parliament when a former SS officer was introduced during the address of President Zelenskyy.

I have a motion on notice that I would submit. I would hope that there would be consensus that there would be agreement that this be done openly and transparently, and that we have the second hour on Thursday in public, not in camera, not behind closed doors, and deal with that issue, which is pressing.

The Chair: Thank you for putting your position on the record.

I do hear that this is the matter that we would like to deal with next. I think there are details in what you're suggesting, and I think committee members need to determine what the best approach is. I think members are hearing what members are saying. I encourage those conversations to continue.

With that, I will be continuing with the work of the day. I would like to welcome, from the Treasury Board Secretariat, Mike MacDonald, senior assistant deputy minister, office of the chief information officer. He is here in his former capacity as the former acting national security and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister.

Mr. MacDonald, we appreciate your responding to our request to appear again so quickly. It means a lot to us. I know that it adds a lot onto your schedule, but you bring us insights and information that are important to the work that this committee is doing.

With that, we welcome you to PROC. You will have up to five minutes for your opening statement. Then we will proceed to questions.

Mr. Mike MacDonald (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Office of the Chief Information Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll be very quick. I have an opening statement that I'd like to make.

First off, I'd like to say good afternoon to the members of the committee. As mentioned, my name is Mike MacDonald. I'm currently the senior assistant deputy minister, and I work in the office of the chief information officer of Canada, which is housed at the Treasury Board Secretariat.

I was the former assistant secretary of the security intelligence secretariat, which is at the Privy Council Office. I held that job from 2020 to 2023, a three-year period. At one point, I acted as the national security and intelligence adviser in 2021 for a period of two and a half weeks.

[*Translation*]

The Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada advises and supports the national security and intelligence adviser, or NSIA, including coordinating operational and policy initiatives. It also provides management functions for interdepartmental security and intelligence committees.

[*English*]

The secretariat also supports the NSIA and, more recently, the deputy NSIA in their briefings of the Prime Minister and cabinet on key national security issues, policies, operations and crises, as necessary. It also has a coordination role whenever national security or intelligence issues are going to cabinet.

You've already heard from many senior officials who have underscored the seriousness of the threat of foreign interference. You have also heard that, yes, there have been issues with the sharing of intelligence internally, including the mechanisms that are meant to flag important issues. The NSIA, Ms. Thomas, has spoken about changes that are being introduced or that have been introduced to the intelligence-sharing system to strengthen information sharing.

[*Translation*]

There should be no illusions about the threat posed by foreign interference against our institutions. I would reiterate what witnesses before me have said—there is confidence that Canada's 2019 and 2021 federal elections were free and fair.

[*English*]

As you have already heard, we have robust tools in place, such as the critical election incident public protocol, which established both the panel of five and the SITE task force. This view has also been reinforced and thoroughly examined in both protocol reports—the Jim Judd report and the Rosenberg report—as well as by the independent special rapporteur. Both NSIRA and NSICOP have studies on foreign interference under way, providing further assurance that our system is robust, and we are co-operating with the review agencies.

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

We continue to build on this foundation to address a serious threat to our democracy.

I welcome any further questions from the committee.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

We're going to enter into six-minute rounds. We'll be starting with Mr. Cooper, followed by Ms. Sahota, Madame Gaudreau and then Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Cooper, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. MacDonald, on what date did you first read the July 20, 2021, CSIS memo that indicated that an MP—whom we now know was MP Chong—and his family were being targeted by the Beijing regime and that Beijing's intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security, had taken specific actions to target other Canadian MPs, as we now know—MPs Kwan and O'Toole? When did you first read that memo?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Madam Chair, I don't have an exact date of when I first read that memo, but it was in the spring or early summer of this year.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You were the national security and intelligence adviser to the Prime Minister on July 20, 2021. Is that right?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Yes. That is correct, Madam Chair.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That is the date of that memo. We know it was sent to the PCO. According to the testimony of Jody Thomas, it was sent on July 20, 2021.

I will correct that. She said that in July 2021, it was received by the PCO.

Where did it go in the PCO? Why did you not see that memo at that time?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: I have a few things for some context. Thank you for the question, by the way.

As it has been explained previously—and certainly based on my experience working in the national security community—intelligence is sent out and shared through various means. For example, I was provided intelligence when I was in my role through the electronic system or the top secret classified system. I could be provided intelligence by some of the analysts. Sometimes, people prepared briefing packages for me. In the cases when, for example, I was interested in certain issues at play, I would ask the client relations officer at CSE, based on my requirements at the time, to create intelligence and information.

The point I'm trying to make here, sir, is that there are a variety of ways in which intelligence moves into the system.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

It went, though, to the PCO in July 2021. It eventually made its way into the reading package of Mr. Morrison, who returned to his role after you completed filling it on an interim basis.

Do you have any details on who it went to at the PCO in July 2021? Who would have been involved, and how would it have eventually made its way into the reading package for Mr. Morrison, I believe, on August 17, 2021?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you for the question.

Chair, I can confirm that the document—the intelligence assessment—did not come directly to me. I checked my personal holdings back when I was still working for the Privy Council Office.

Where it went in the Privy Council Office, when it was sent out and to what other offices, I don't know. I don't track.... I do not have knowledge of where it went.

If you refer to Ms. Thomas's testimony, it went to several other departments and deputy ministers. I can only surmise that it went to places in the PCO where most intelligence is sent for forward distribution and/or printing in packages and so on.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Where would that be at the PCO?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: One of the places, as was mentioned in previous testimony, would have been the office of the NSIA. There are, perhaps, other places. I'm not familiar with the distribution of intelligence in the PCO.

• (1215)

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's concerning that it was not brought to your attention and that it only made its way into the reading package of Mr. Morrison. He has testified he doesn't recall reading at the time what was, as he characterized it, a nine-page memo—as if that is prohibitive to seeing it.

This was the second memo, it should be noted, that went to the PCO and, eventually, to the Prime Minister's national security adviser. The first was the IMU in May 2021. Mr. Rigby said he did not receive that IMU, but we now learn that it was, in fact, sent to Mr. Rigby in May 2021.

It seems to me that what we have is a breakdown of communication of information that is about as serious as it gets. It involves the targeting of multiple MPs—including the family of one, in Hong Kong—in the immediate lead-up to an election. It was information that ultimately resulted in the expulsion of a Beijing diplomat.

Would you at least concede that the information should have been brought to your attention?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you for the question. There was a lot there.

I think I'll address your last point and your last question.

I rely on, stand by and agree with the testimony of several previous witnesses. If I look at one of the comments that was made, there was a breakdown in the process—it was not only a breakdown in the process but, I think, it was an insufficient process, so we have rectified those problems. What's important here is the recognition that information was not shared when it should have been shared. Systems are in place now and changes have been effected extremely quickly to ensure that doesn't happen again.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Through you, I would like to thank the witness for being with us today.

The goal of this committee is not to lay blame. It really is to identify what happened and to make recommendations, as you said, with the goal of improving the system.

Further to what my colleague Mr. Cooper was just referring to, I started to create a timeline because, as you know, we had a lot of turnover in the NSIA position in the last couple of years. We want to make sure that we have a better understanding of what happened, who was where and so on. Again, this is not with the purpose of laying blame, but so that in the event we have a situation again whereby people are leaving a position and/or are absent and so on, we make sure that there's adequate coverage.

In the Right Honourable David Johnston's report, he mentions that you were briefly the interim NSIA when Mr. Morrison went on personal leave. I understand that Mr. Rigby announced he was stepping down on June 30, 2021, and Mr. Morrison was going to take over on an interim basis. However, I understand that you served as acting NSIA from July 16 to August 3, 2021, when Mr. Morrison was on personal leave. Is that correct? Was it roughly those dates?

Do you have the exact dates that you served as NSIA?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Chair, I can confirm the exact dates that I acted. I believe it was a Friday. It was July 15 to...I believe it was a Tuesday, because of the long weekend of August 3, which is two and half weeks.

Yes, you are correct.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

During that time, as Mr. Cooper mentioned, there was a deep-dive memo—an intelligence assessment—drafted by CSIS outlining the threat to Mr. Michael Chong. That was dated July 20. You left the position on August 30. Mr. Morrison came back from his leave on that day and continued until the order in council dated January 4, 2022, naming the current NSIA Jody Thomas.

Is that correct?

• (1220)

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Your timeline is correct.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Perfect.

One of the things we heard from Mr. Vigneault, who is the director of CSIS, when he testified before this committee on June 13, 2023.... I'm going to quote what he said, because it was something that was really important to us. He said that "intelligence must be shared to have an impact."

You mentioned that a lot has changed since that time. I know Ms. Thomas has testified that they've put processes in place to make sure that there are no gaps in the event there's a change in position and so on.

Can you provide us with any recommendations, in your opinion, for how we can continue to strengthen that to make sure that, in the event there is some turnover, or if there is turnover in the future, the hand-off is done well?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thanks for the question, Madam Chair.

There are a few things that I would like to take a moment to briefly go over.

One is that I actually appreciate your comments about not laying blame. When public service officials appear before committee, we try—certainly, that's my mantra—to help the committee understand. You will make your decisions, and recommendations come up, which is super helpful.

Continuity is key, and continuity I think in any senior executive position—positions in the public service—is key, because as senior executives we move around a lot. It's a leadership dynamic and a skill that you have to work through. There are ways to have continuity, often referred to as “briefing binders”. People show up to new jobs and have very comprehensive binders, but I think—and what I've experienced—is that reaching out to staff and sitting down and talking with staff is one of the best ways to ensure continuity, because they're the experts. They can help you understand.

If I look back at my time in the Privy Council Office, there are three things that I have taken away that I would share with the committee in the spirit of recommendations around changes.

One is that you, as a consumer of intelligence, need to challenge the intelligence. Ms. Thomas was very helpful in helping me think about the way in which I challenge the conclusions, because intelligence is often not a complete picture. It is simply a moment in time, and that is key to understand.

I think the other thing that senior officials have shown me is that you need to seek clarity and to try to build a bigger picture of what the intelligence is showing you—or not—which kind of goes to the comment about sharing intelligence. It has to be assessed and contextualized, and you need to challenge that function and get that clarity.

The other one, which is extremely important, is that you need to inform and you need to give advice on what it means and what the options are for senior decision-makers.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Mr. MacDonald, that was perfect, because I've actually suggested that intelligence is very much like puzzle pieces. You might have one puzzle piece, but unless you are able to put those parts together and see the big picture.... Also, does that puzzle piece belong in that puzzle? Sometimes intelligence is very isolated, and it may not be valid.

I think what you've explained to us is very helpful, and I want to thank you for coming in and answering questions. Thank you for the service that you have provided and that you continue to provide us.

Thank you again.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Ms. Gaudreau for six minutes.

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

This may surprise my fellow members, but I'd like to hear Mr. MacDonald's take on something Vincent Rigby, who's appeared before the committee before, said. It's from a Globe and Mail article. I'll even read it in English:

[*English*]

“The July 2021 report and the targeting of Mr. Chong and other individual MPs—

[*Translation*]

Not bad, eh? I'd like to see you do the same in French.

[*English*]

—was produced and distributed after my departure. But—

[*Translation*]

This is the important part:

[*English*]

—I am not surprised this intelligence was not raised to the political level,” he said. “This is where the system is particularly weak.”

● (1225)

[*Translation*]

I'd like you to comment on our weak system.

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Madam Chair, I think one of the important things when we look at intelligence—and I partly referenced this in my last response—is that it is but one picture. You need to ensure that what you may be providing to more senior decision-makers is never taken out of context, and that it is put into proper context.

There may be extraneous factors around that information or intelligence that the intelligence community does not yet know and may find out months or years from now in the future. The seriousness of the threats to national security in and of themselves dictate that extreme due diligence. At the same time, it's a balance.

[*Translation*]

It's a balance between the facts and possible actions.

[*English*]

At times those are judgment calls that are made around taking action versus continuing to monitor, assess and advise.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm glad to hear the witness say that, Madam Chair, because he referred to judgment.

I'm trying to put myself in your shoes. As I understand it, the information can come in four different ways. It can come right into your inbox, for instance, so you have to screen, and figure out what's more important and what's less important. Basically, it's about finding who's really responsible.

In life, if we know that multiple people have flagged something, we can rely on some of them to make a judgment call as to what's sufficiently important or urgent.

How do you do that screening? How do you demonstrate your ability and responsibility while having to make a judgment call? How do you go about doing that?

What happened can't happen again. No more. You said it. This is important and urgent.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I have a few comments on this, if I may.

I think it's more than just multiple doors of intelligence being produced and then disseminated. We do know—and I think the committee has heard—about the enormous volumes of intelligence that are created every year. Over 60,000 intelligence reports are created in Canada alone, let alone within the Five Eyes. It's hard to go through and distill and be aware. It's a reality. I'm not saying anything more than that.

The other thing I've experienced is that it's one thing to inform about intelligence, but there is always the question, from a client perspective, of what you do about it. What does it mean? That's often a comment back from a reader or a consumer of intelligence. They say, "So what happens now? What do I do?"

I think that's something on which more innovation, if I can use that word, is needed, but there is a balance between collecting and assessing intelligence and informing the decision-maker. Those are things that need to be balanced out. That is one of the improvements—or refinements, one could say—that the system is looking at, but it is something that has been heard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I appreciate your comments, because there are many lessons to be learned. You said that at the outset.

It works like a sieve in a factory. To let the granular material through, you often have to push the big rocks to the side.

You talked about having to be innovative in how advice is provided and how intelligence is communicated, assessed and put into context. Shouldn't there be some sort of formal commitment to address that?

When I go back to my riding, people tell me that this didn't make a difference.

Perhaps it's necessary to show that a real commitment is being made and that this is being taken very seriously.

That was more of a comment than a question.

I appreciate your suggestions.

• (1230)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Through the chair, welcome, Mr. MacDonald. I appreciate your being here.

I do understand—on the most basic level, I admit—that things are changing very rapidly. This area is moving so quickly it's hard to even stay close, let alone ahead of the issue. I think of my recent trip to Denmark, where I met with NATO parliamentarians. I heard from multiple countries that they are struggling with this as well and are trying to figure out how to address these issues. Technology is changing and growing in ways that we can't even begin to fathom. This environment changes so rapidly. I appreciate the challenges.

I appreciate as well the need to make sure that information is vetted so that it's not just given out without context and is creating fear where fear does not necessarily need to be. However, in the case where it could be something that we're worried about...

We are sitting around this table talking about a question of privilege for one of the parliamentarians who brought it forward. I know that other parliamentarians have been impacted. I know that one in my caucus as well has been impacted. I think the concern for parliamentarians and the concern for Canadians is that we need to be able to trust our system. When the fear begins and we don't have trust or faith in our system, it really can lead to things that I don't think any of us want to experience.

I guess my question really is this. As this picture, as I think you referred to it earlier, gets more and more complex and harder and harder to assess, how do we create information that will help protect parliamentarians and also help Canadians have faith in our system? I know that's a really profound and big question—I'm sure you can't answer it in, like, 30 seconds or less—but this is where I personally am struggling as we go through this. A lot of my constituents are hard-working people. They watch things happening, and they don't always understand all the nuances. Quite frankly, they're busy. They're doing the work they need to do and are struggling along on their own path.

To me, when I look at this process, I want to make sure that we're building faith and building consistency so that people can trust those systems and we MPs can know that we'll be alerted if we're targeted.

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you for the question—and for your thoughts, to be honest. There is a lot there. I will try to answer as quickly as I can, I promise.

First, protecting parliamentarians is extremely serious for parliamentarians and democracy. There are systems in place for that. There are places to go. I think review committees that review national security activities, the recommendations they make and the reports that come out from parliamentary committees all contribute to the body of changes or body of refinements or adjustments that are about raising confidence.

Canada has world-class national security agencies with some of the techniques and methodologies they use, and the dedication. That's comforting. Improvements can come daily. I don't deny that.

I also think that in the media the Prime Minister's directive and the Minister of Public Safety's ministerial directive about informing parliamentarians about threats was instrumental. I think the NSIA creating the deputy minister committee that assesses foreign intelligence and makes decisions therein was very instrumental. On the processes that I understand have been put in place—others can confirm—around tracking how intelligence moves, who accesses it, who reads it, what they do with it and so on, some of those changes were already in place even before I left my job.

I think those are all very reassuring.

• (1235)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Again, what I'm hearing, though, is that some of this information came to the member of Parliament, Mr. Chong, and to us.... Well, it was in the media. This is really concerning for me. This isn't the way we should be learning about this information.

One of the challenges is how quick the response is and how the information gets to us. I keep hearing about the need to assess the information before it comes out. I understand that, but how can we see that happen more quickly? Is there a way that we can do it? Is it more resources? Is it increased training? Is it having more people?

To me, there's a bit of a challenge here. I don't want to disrespect the hard work that's happening. I just want to find out how we can make sure that parliamentarians know more quickly so that we don't get lost in this sort of situation that we're in now.

Mr. Mike MacDonald: First and foremost, Mr. Chair, to speak to committee member's point, some of those changes are not really in my ambit to speak about. It's the intelligence agencies—the collectors, assessors and disseminators of intelligence—that would have thoughts on that.

To finish, I would go back to my previous comments and to the previous comments of other senior deputy ministers who have appeared here about the changes that they've put in place. That's the start of something immediate that's happening.

The Chair: We'll now go to our second round, starting with Mr. Cooper. He will be followed by Ms. Sahota, Madame Gaudreau and Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes.

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

Mr. MacDonald, you stated that you first learned of the July 20, 2021, memo sometime in the spring of 2023. Did you first learn

about it when it was reported in *The Globe and Mail* on May 1, 2023?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Yes, that is my recollection of the events.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

I recognize that you were in the role as national security and intelligence adviser for only the span of two and a half weeks, and that's fair enough. However, you were in the role of assistant secretary to the cabinet for intelligence and security both before and after, all the way until 2023.

Would you concede—or agree, at least—that this is the type of information that probably should have crossed your desk? Would you agree that the fact that it didn't cross your desk for two years is concerning?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Again, I will echo what many people have said: There need to be better ways in which intelligence is not only shared but also identified and flagged for individuals when there's a reason for it to be.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Mr. MacDonald.

Madam Chair, I will now be moving a motion that I had put on notice. I'm moving it reluctantly. I would have preferred that we dealt with it on Thursday during the second hour, but in a conversation that I had with Ms. Blaney, she was not in agreement that this be dealt with in the open and in a transparent manner on a matter of extreme seriousness involving an incident that brought great shame on the institution of Parliament and brought great hurt to many Canadians, particularly Jewish Canadians. It's, therefore, in light of the refusal of the NDP to be transparent in how this committee moves forward in getting to the bottom of this disgraceful incident, I will now be reading my motion into the record.

I move:

That, given the international embarrassment created by the Liberal government by allowing a former soldier of a Nazi military unit in World War II to attend and be recognized during the Address of the President of Ukraine, delivered in the House of Commons Chamber on September 22, 2023, and that either proper vetting was not done or the individual's military record was ignored, the Committee begin a study, pursuant to Standing Orders 108(3)(a)(i) and (ii), concerning this matter, and for the purposes of this study,

(a) the Committee invite the following to appear during the weeks of October 9, 16, 23 and 30, 2023:

(i) officials from the Office of Protocol of Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, including those who organized the President's visit, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,

(ii) officials from the Federal Policing branch of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, including those with responsibility for internationally protected persons under the Protection of Diplomats Convention, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,

- (iii) officials from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,
 - (iv) the Acting Director of the Parliamentary Protective Service, RCMP Superintendent Larry Brookson, by himself, for one hour,
 - (v) the Sergeant at Arms of the House of Commons, former RCMP Assistant Commissioner Pat McDonnell, by himself, for one hour,
 - (vi) officials from the International and Interparliamentary Affairs branch of the House of Commons Administration, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,
 - (vii) officials from the Privy Council Office, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,
 - (viii) officials from the Prime Minister's Office, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,
 - (ix) representatives of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and the Canadian Polish Congress, on a panel by themselves, for one hour,
 - (x) Michael Levitt, former MP and President and CEO of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, and Richard Marceau, former MP and Vice President (External Affairs and General Counsel) of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, on a panel by themselves, for one hour, and
 - (xi) two one-hour panels of stakeholder representatives whose names shall be provided by the parties to the Clerk of the Committee within one week; and
- (b) an order do issue for all e-mails, memoranda or other documents transmitted between the Speaker's Office or the House of Commons Administration, on the one part, and any government department or agency, including the Prime Minister's Office or any other minister's office, on the other part, in relation to the Address of the President of Ukraine and the arrangements concerning it, provided that these shall be deposited with the Clerk of the Committee, in both official languages and without redaction, within ten days.

Now, Madam Chair, because this motion was put on notice before October 9, the motion will need to be amended with respect to some of the dates, which we will be moving shortly, but with regard to the substance—

● (1240)

The Chair: Mr. Cooper, I will pause and give you back the floor—rest assured.

We do have a witness here. It sounds like we are moving on. Perhaps we can release the witness.

Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, the member is proposing that we wrap things up on the question of privilege and is engaging in sabotage.

I apologize, Mr. MacDonald, but now you're seeing what we deal with on the procedure committee, a place where we should be working more as a team. You're experiencing what we experience in question period and elsewhere.

If we must discuss the motion, Madam Chair, we should let Mr. MacDonald take his leave, but frankly, this is why we met, and I still have questions.

The Chair: I appreciate that.

[*English*]

Can I just get a nodding of heads? I think we are entering into other committee business, and the rules only permit me so much.

I do think Mr. MacDonald's time is valuable. Are we okay releasing the witness?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: With that, Mr. MacDonald, we want to thank you for your time. If something else comes to mind later, and if you would like the committee to consider that as we draft our report, please send it the clerk. We'll have it translated in both official languages and shared around.

Thank you for your time and service, and we wish you a good rest of the day.

● (1245)

Mr. Mike MacDonald: Thank you.

I would just like to thank the committee members.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Madam Chair, under Justin Trudeau's watch, a former soldier of the 14th Waffren Grenadier Division of the SS was shamefully recognized and honoured in Parliament during the state visit and address by the President of Ukraine.

This should never have happened. It is a stain on the reputation of the institution of Parliament. It caused enormous hurt and offence to the Jewish community across Canada and around the world and dishonoured the more than six million Jews who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. Likewise, it caused hurt and offence to Ukrainians, Poles and Slovaks and embarrassed all Canadians.

It is an insult to the veterans and members of the Canadian Armed Forces, one million of whom fought valiantly to defend freedom and defeat the evils of Hitler and his murderous genocidal Nazi ideology, including more than 45,000 Canadians who laid down their lives to secure freedom and to defeat Hitler and the Nazis.

This shameful recognition is a massive propaganda win for Russia as Ukraine fights to defend its freedom and sovereignty in the face of Russia's illegal invasion. It has brought irreparable damage to Canada's international reputation and is perhaps Justin Trudeau's biggest international embarrassment in a long list of international embarrassments. This is a Prime Minister who was already regarded by our allies as simply not up to the job on the international stage.

Under this Prime Minister's watch, a series of inexcusable errors resulted in this disgraceful occurrence, and Canadians are left wondering how in the world this happened. How in the world did this happen? There is one person and one person only who bears the ultimate responsibility, and that person is Justin Trudeau.

It was Justin Trudeau's responsibility to invite President Zelenskyy to address Parliament. It was Justin Trudeau's responsibility to see that President Zelenskyy's visit was a success. It was Justin Trudeau's personal departments, the Privy Council Office and the Office of Protocol of Canada, which ultimately report to Justin Trudeau, that are responsible for arranging and vetting all guests and the programming of state visits of this kind.

This international embarrassment can be summed up in one sentence: Justin Trudeau failed, and in so doing, he brought significant hurt and humiliation.... In the face of that hurt and humiliation, caused as a result of Justin Trudeau's scandalous incompetence, what did he do? He hid in his cottage for five days and threw the now former Speaker under the bus. To this day, he has failed to take any responsibility and refuses to personally apologize for this colossal debacle.

Canadians deserve answers. They deserve to know how this happened under Justin Trudeau's watch. The responsibility to see that Canadians get these answers falls on this committee. That's why this motion calls for hearings to call witnesses from all of the departments and agencies that can shed light on this series of errors under Justin Trudeau's watch that led to this international embarrassment.

The motion also orders the production of emails, memos and documents from the relevant departments and agencies, as well as the Speaker's office and the Prime Minister's Office, concerning this debacle.

• (1250)

This motion ensures that Canadians can get the answers they deserve and that Justin Trudeau is held accountable for this stain on the institution of Parliament and this disgraceful international embarrassment, the biggest ever under his watch, which is, I repeat, saying something.

I surely would expect this motion will receive the unanimous support of this committee as we endeavour to get answers.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

As Mr. Cooper alluded to with the motion before us, there are some amendments required to that, considering it was put on notice before the break week.

I would like to move that the motion be amended by adding a section (c)—

The Chair: Do we have this?

Mr. Eric Duncan: I was going to give it verbally.

The Chair: I know you want to give it verbally, but I think we know that we have two official languages, and members like to see what they're discussing.

Something that's very clear is that, when we try to work with all members so the whole membership can at least have a say, it's important for them to know what's being discussed. There is no one party that owns this committee or government or Parliament.

Can you please share the wording so that we can make sure it's translated and circulated around? I will be pausing until it is shared.

Have you sent it to the clerk?

Mr. Eric Duncan: It is in the process right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will wait. Once it's circulated, we will hand the floor back to you, Mr. Duncan.

• (1250)

(Pause)

• (1255)

The Chair: The amendment has been circulated.

Mr. Duncan, the floor is yours again.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I'm just waiting for it to come into my inbox to make sure that it corresponds exactly to what I have, Madam Chair.

I'd like to move that the motion be amended by adding, "(c) That the Committee seek additional resources to meet for two extra hours each week until the above witness list is exhausted" and by replacing, in paragraph (a), "October 9, 16, 23 and 30, 2023;" with "October 16, 23, 30, 2023, and November 6, 2023:."

I believe that should match, Madam Chair, what has been circulated in both official languages to our emails.

Madam Chair, we need to move forward, and we need to study this issue to get some answers about what happened in this embarrassing international disgrace, which happened in our Parliament only a matter of a few weeks ago. I think there are many Canadians wondering with bewilderment how this could have happened.

There are a lot of answers that our committee needs to get on this issue, particularly because, as Mr. Cooper alluded to very well, the Prime Minister is responsible. He was the one who invited President Zelenskyy to come to Ottawa to address Parliament. I would say that, with these visits, every single minute is coordinated. It stops at the Prime Minister with the resources he has in the Prime Minister's Office and the operations and the accountability that he is responsible for. We need to get some answers to the document production and through the list of witnesses that we have before us.

Madam Chair, there was that delay and that need for suspension, because, as we mentioned, this was not our desired outcome today, but the reason we are moving this forward now is for this to be discussed in public and debated and to provide a timeline for our committee and a road map to get to the bottom of this.

I will note the bit of irony where, as Mr. Cooper alluded, we could not get support from the NDP and Ms. Blaney to bring this forward in a public setting to resolve this. It was actually her NDP counterpart on government operations, Mr. Johns, who, only a matter of a couple of weeks ago, put into the record in public at the government operations committee, the desire.... We got a letter from Mr. McCauley in his role as chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates requesting that this become a priority for our committee to undertake.

In public, members of the NDP have stated what they wanted for PROC. Mr. Johns said, “we want this to be their top priority. We know they're undertaking a lot of really difficult studies. It is a challenging job. They have as much as this committee.” He was referring to the government operations committee. He continued, “We have eight studies going on here as well. I want to make sure that we get this to PROC and that we write in the letter that this is an absolute priority of this committee and that we ask PROC to take this on and they study this urgently.”

Here we are now trying to do just that and being blocked, I think, from coming to a resolution and getting these meetings, these witnesses and these documents under way.

Madam Chair, I am happy to put forward the amendment to the main motion that Mr. Cooper has introduced. I think it is imperative, as suggested by Mr. Johns of the NDP only a couple of weeks

ago, that we get this under way, that we pass this motion and that we start to get answers about the actions or lack thereof of the Prime Minister and the government and how this international disgrace and embarrassment was allowed to happen in our House of Commons.

● (1300)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I know that we had agreed to discuss this on Thursday. Therefore, I move to adjourn.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned. I will see you on Thursday.

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