

The Unanswered Question of Chinese Interference

February 17, 2023 came just under a year after CSIS warned the Canadian government about possible foreign interference in recent federal elections. On that day, a whistleblower revealed documents through a Globe and Mail article that contained information of how China employed a “sophisticated strategy” to support a Liberal minority government in the 2021 election. The backlash in response to the report has been swift and the calls for an inquiry fierce.

With the reports still classified, much of the story remains unknown. Nevertheless, this is an issue of national importance, and a lot has happened since the documents were first disclosed.

The initial report

The reports contained within the article had information on how China sought to protect and grow their network within Canada. This network’s purpose was to gain influence over Canadians in business, academia, politics, and within the Chinese diaspora, with the intention of tampering in Canadian federal elections.

Most of the findings within the reports remain hidden to the Canadian public. Still, tangible methods employed by the Chinese government were described. The Globe reported the use of undeclared cash donations to Liberal candidates, disinformation spread throughout ridings, and cyber tracking of specific targets. The People’s Republic of China also leveraged relationships with existing Chinese nationals in Canada and those with ties to Chinese communities back home. These individuals were instructed to support a pro Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stance within Canadian politics and, in certain situations, volunteer to help in political campaigns.

The CCP focused their attention on ridings within Vancouver and the GTA, which both hold large Chinese immigrant communities. The Globe report continues in detail, with quotes and conversations from Chinese diplomats bragging about their interference in the election and how they helped Liberal candidates win their ridings. The CCP did not favor the Liberals for any ideological reasons though. They believed a Liberal government was best due to the Conservative party’s stronger anti-China sentiment. And they thought a minority government would be less focused on external matters, especially those pertaining to China’s interests.

The Canadian political response

In the face of the allegations, the outcry from the opposition was fierce. Initially, the House voted unanimously in favor of expanding the mandate of an existing parliamentary committee. It had initially been tasked with reviewing possible Chinese interference in the 2019 election – the new mandate would bring the 2021 election under their scope as well. This initial consensus within parliament quickly broke down. A divide sprang up that ran between the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and the Liberal party on one side and the opposition parties on the other.

The split began when opposition parties, headed by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, called for a public inquiry. Despite this request, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had already dismissed any possibility of a public inquiry, which would create a public committee to review documents and

interview officials. Instead, Trudeau favored an “independent special rapporteur,” who would have unlimited access to documents and testimonies but would investigate privately and advise the government accordingly.

Trudeau would name former governor general David Johnston to this role of special rapporteur. Mr. Johnston was given a deadline for when he must express to parliament whether he believes the government should call a public inquiry: May 23rd, 2023. Trudeau has said that if Mr. Johnston recommends a public inquiry he will happily oblige. Despite this, the opposition parties passed a non-binding motion, in which they ratified their support for a public inquiry – cementing their disapproval with the decision to go with a special rapporteur.

With the motion being non-binding, it will not go forward until Mr. Johnston’s recommendations have been heard. Nevertheless, the motion remains important; almost all Liberal MPs voted against, and it represents the divide that has grown between the Liberal government and the opposition parties. The motion came on the back of Han Dong’s exit from the Liberal caucus. The current MP for Don Valley North resigned due to accusations that he gave advice to a senior Chinese diplomat. Mr. Dong voted in favor of the public inquiry and thoroughly denies the accusations.

What did the government know?

With no resolution in sight and most of the information hidden behind classified reports or private committees, it has become increasingly difficult to see the truth past all the rhetoric. What can be sure though, is that the Prime Minister and his office have been under serious pressure.

Despite the general ignorance Justin Trudeau has demonstrated as the reports went public, many experts find it hard to believe that the PMO would have had no knowledge of the interference beforehand. The Prime Minister has also consistently dodged questions surrounding his knowledge of the issue and the Liberals succeeded in filibustering within the House to block Trudeau’s chief of staff from testifying before a committee. All this, along with Trudeau’s refusal to support a public inquiry, has raised much speculation about how much the Prime Minister and his office knew before the CSIS reports were leaked.

Without question the PMO must be held to account, but the question of election interference should remain one that is fundamentally nonpartisan. The CSIS report stated that they did not believe the interference had caused any major difference to election results. The fact remains that the majority of MPs and Canadians regard this interference as an attack on Canadian democracy, not a specific party.

How should Canadians respond?

Whether the Liberal party and Justin Trudeau did or did not know about Chinese interference remains to be seen. What remains certain is the importance that this issue has for how Canadians view their political institutions. Recent events in the United States have given ample opportunity for other democracies to observe what losing faith in a country’s ability to host fair elections can

bring people to. The impetus of any special rapporteur or public inquiry should be to chiefly shore up Canadian faith in the electoral system and in other Canadians.

With the focus on Chinese interference centred around Chinese Canadian communities, many pundits fear the possibility of the public's ire shifting in their direction. This finger pointing must be rebuffed completely. It would not only encourage conspiracy theories, but it would be a missed opportunity to bolster how Canadians identify themselves. With diversity at the forefront of the Canadian identity, we would be wrong to urge our immigrant populations entirely away from their previous national and cultural identity. Kash Heed, a city councillor in Richmond, differentiates between a diaspora community's affinity to their home country and the kind of systematic interference CSIS has observed coming directly from the CCP. In truth, many Chinese Canadians have familial ties to mainland China and are at the mercy of the CCP. This intrusion by China is not only an attack on Canadian democracy, it is an attack on Canadian citizens. Such a violation cannot be something that Canada will stand for, and an active denouncement of China must come with a recognition of how integral Chinese Canadians are to Canada.

What remains to be seen?

The continuation of the story and its implications continue to be unknown. To be sure, there was Chinese interference in the most recent Canadian elections. To what extent though, and the significance of that interference remains to be seen. Despite unanswered questions, in search of the truth all Canadians should be exhorted to abandon the potential polarization that could arise. Canada and its citizens must focus on strengthening the legitimacy of our most basic political institutions and protecting those within our borders who may be vulnerable to foreign coercion.

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