

For Public Release

SECRETMEMORANDUM FOR THE PRIME MINISTER

c.c.: Janice Charette

**NATIONAL SECURITY BRIEFINGS TO OPPOSITION LEADERS**

(Decision Sought/Signature Required)

**SUMMARY**

- Classified briefings by Canada's security agencies to the leaders of recognized parties in the House of Commons on matters such as foreign interference and domestic extremism would support informed policy debate and better position Canada's political leaders to take action to protect themselves, their parties and Canada's national security from specific threats.
- For this reason, it is proposed that you offer to appoint the leaders of recognized parties as Privy Councillors. This appointment, together with the oath they would take when sworn in and a security briefing provided by PCO, would confer on them the equivalent of a security clearance, thereby enabling Canada's security agencies to prepare and deliver tailored, classified briefings to them as needed.
- Background checks undertaken for Privy Councillors are less intrusive and would require less engagement from the party leaders than a standard security clearance screening. That said, should any party leader prefer not to accept an appointment to the King's Privy Council for Canada, they could request a security clearance as an alternative, which would also enable them to receive classified briefings.
- If you agree with this proposal, PCO will prepare letters for you to offer appointments to the leaders of the recognized opposition parties and, subsequently, will work with your office to draft appropriate Instruments and to determine an appropriate time for the swearing in of the Privy Councillors-designate. I will then work with our security agencies and the offices of the opposition leaders to coordinate the briefings. **Do you agree?**

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- Recent media reports have brought attention to allegations of foreign interference in Canadian democratic processes during the 2019 and 2021 General Elections. These allegations have led to calls for a public inquiry into foreign interference in Canada. Debate on these issues has been ongoing in the House of Commons, including within the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.
- The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) recommended in two separate reports in 2018 and 2019 that “[in] the interest of national security, members of the House of Commons and the Senate should be briefed upon being sworn-in and regularly thereafter on the risks of foreign interference and extremism in Canada.”
- Likewise, in the context of his recent evaluation of the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol, Mr. Morris Rosenberg recommended that the National Security Agencies develop a program of unclassified briefings to increase the awareness of Members of Parliament and Senators on foreign interference and on election interference, and on measures they can take to safeguard themselves and their online information.

**Proposal**

- In view of growing threats to Canada's national security, there would be significant value in providing classified briefings to the leaders, or interim leaders, of recognized parties in the House of Commons, which would serve to highlight specific risks to Canada's national security, political parties and parliamentarians themselves.
- Such briefings would support informed policy debate on foreign interference and other national security threats, such as violent extremism. The briefings would better position Canada's political leaders to take action to protect themselves, their parties and Canada's national security. This initiative could also signal publicly that Canada and all Canadian political parties take threats to our national security seriously.
- The focus of the briefings would be to provide opposition leaders with information that is not available publicly or through the regular means by which officials provide unclassified information to Parliament. As such, it is envisioned that the briefings would be infrequent and typically delivered at the SECRET level. Care would be taken to protect all Cabinet Confidences.

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- If you agree with this proposal, PCO will prepare letters for you to offer appointments to the leaders of the recognized opposition parties and, subsequently, will work with your office to draft the appropriate Instruments and to determine an appropriate time for the swearing in of the Privy Councillors designate. I will then work with our security agencies and the offices of the opposition leaders to coordinate the briefings as needed going forward.

### Considerations

- As lawmakers and politicians, all Members of Parliament are at risk of targeting by foreign interference actors and, increasingly, by domestic extremism, as are many of their constituents.
- In parallel, as part of the Parliamentary security initiative under development by Ministers Mendicino and Leblanc, the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre intends to offer on a more regular basis unclassified threat assessment briefings tailored to parliamentarians' needs.
- Opposition leaders have been sworn-in as Privy Councillors in the past to allow for the sharing of sensitive information. As a former minister, the current Leader of the Official Opposition, Mr. Poilievre, is already a Privy Councillor.
- Individuals appointed as Privy Councillors go through the same background check process as Cabinet Ministers and Governor in Council (GiC) appointments. This process is less intrusive than a standard security screening process. Once the checks are complete, and regardless of whether any adverse information is uncovered, appointment is at the discretion of the Prime Minister.
  - For clarity, the background check does not confer a security clearance to Privy Councillors. Rather, the oath that they take when sworn-in, in conjunction with a security briefing provided by PCO, confers the equivalent of a security clearance.
  - It is considered unlikely that Mr. Blanchette would accept the title of King's Privy Councillor. As such, as an alternative, opposition leaders could request a security clearance, which would also enable them to receive classified briefings.
- Additional security measures, such as ensuring that opposition leaders sign a specific undertaking to keep secret any classified information shared with them in the context of such briefings could be considered.

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- Based on the experience of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force in the context of previous federal elections, some Party Leaders may choose not to accept an invitation to classified briefings. Nevertheless, I believe it is in the best interest of Canadian democracy to offer such briefings to all opposition leaders.

Jody Thomas

Attachments

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