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MEMORANDUM FOR THE MINISTER OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS, INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES

**PROTECTING DEMOCRACY UNIT:
PRIORITIES AND STATUS UPDATE**

(For Information Only)

SUMMARY

- o This note provides you with a status update on the priorities of the Protecting Democracy Unit (PDU) within the Privy Council Office's Democratic Institutions Secretariat (DIS). s. 39 - Cabinet Confidence [REDACTED] s. 39. It also highlights the PDU's priorities for the months ahead.
- o Progress has been made over the last six months in establishing the PDU team and advancing key priorities within the PDU's mandate to coordinate, develop, and implement government-wide measures designed to combat disinformation and protect our democracy. This includes providing significant support and resources to the broader response required to address parliamentary and media attention on the issue of foreign interference in democratic processes.
- o Notable milestones are expected to be reached in the Fall 2023 and includes, among others, updating the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy, establishing mechanisms to engage with civil society domestically and internationally, and developing tools to build resilience to mis and disinformation within Canada's public service.
- o Work will continue to evolve following the report released by the Independent Special Rapporteur, ongoing Parliamentary studies, as well as the reviews currently underway by the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians and the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency.
- o DI will continue to provide you with progress updates.

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- o The Protecting Democracy Unit was officially established in October 2022 with ten (10) Full-Time Equivalents divided among three teams: research, policy, as well as engagement and operations. The two latest employees joined the team in June 2023.
- o PDU has advanced in the areas of knowledge mobilization and research integration by investing in mis and disinformation (MIDI)-related research. Papers were commissioned from a number of academics to further our understanding of the state of MIDI in Canada. Some of the key take aways include:
 - many more people think that others are influenced by MIDI than they are, yet research suggests that a small (10% of population) but prolific group of digital activists produce 80% of political content, and may be spreading their higher-than-average rates of affective polarization (emotional animosity) to a much wider audience;
 - MIDI has not yet significantly impacted Canadian federal elections, but the amount of MIDI pertaining to federal elections is increasing;
 - MIDI has been correlated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy (increasing costs and deaths); it also appears to have played a role in the convoy protests and the attack on Rideau Hall;
 - the "movable middle" do not always trust government or use traditional media sources; this presents strategic communications challenges and opportunities; and,
 - society does not yet fully understand MIDI and there are significant opportunities to strengthen the role of civil society, and to enhance collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector; however, there are risks to government action to counter MIDI to the extent such measures are viewed as impacting on freedom of expression.

Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy

- o Effective knowledge mobilization is important because the research conducted to date, as well as ongoing research and engagement with the academic community, will be key in developing policies and tools that are responsive and effective. This includes new measures to deliver on your mandate, such as enhancements to the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy. These findings will also be critical to partner departments with related responsibilities with whom the PDU is collaborating in this government-wide effort.

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- o Since the 2021 General Election, work has continued under the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy. For instance, Morris Rosenberg completed an independent assessment of the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol (CEIPP), as required by the Cabinet Directive. His report was made public in February 2023. The Government's plan to implement his recommendations was included in the report that you and the Clerk of the Privy Council presented to the Prime Minister in early 2023.
- o In light of the increased attention to issues related to foreign interference in electoral processes, the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE) was asked to take a proactive posture to monitor and assess any potential foreign interference during the five recent by-elections. Classified and unclassified reports from SITE on the first four by-elections are expected shortly, and similar reports will be produced following the Calgary Heritage by-election taking place on July 24, 2023.
- o The assessment by Mr. Rosenberg, experience from the recent by-elections, ongoing parliamentary studies, report by the Independent Special Rapporteur, as well as the subsequent public process, will inform further initiatives and actionable improvements to the Plan to Protect Canada's Democracy.

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- o While foreign interference continues to be an area of focus, and efforts are necessary to continue improving our response, it is anticipated that the PDU's efforts will increasingly focus on potential responses to the challenge of MIDI. To address this growing challenge, the PDU is dedicating a significant amount of resources on concrete tools.

Improving the Strategic Communications Function: Counter disinformation Guidebook

- o Work is ongoing to develop a guidebook, inspired by the UK's RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit, to provide guidance to public servants (in particular, communications professionals) on how to prevent, counter and mitigate disinformation. A draft guidebook was developed, and input is currently being sought from a small working group of government partners, including Global Affairs Canada, Canadian Heritage, and Public Safety Canada. The guidebook includes general principles, tips, and best practices to build organizational resilience to disinformation and determine when and how to respond to disinformation campaigns.
- o Following an initial consultation with select departments, the guidebook will be piloted with a broader group of departments over the summer. An updated version, based on feedback received during the pilot, will be rolled out to all departments' communications team starting in October 2023. To ensure buy-in, the guidebook will be promoted through the network of heads of communications, as well as engaging individually with communication teams across the government in Fall 2023 and Winter 2024.
- o The guidebook is part of a larger toolkit, which will also include a training module being developed in collaboration with the Canada School of Public Service (CSPS).
- o The PDU secured a commitment from the CSPS to work on two learning products. A proposal is being finalized for a one-time training event in 2023 to increase awareness of disinformation and its impact on the public service.
- o The second initiative, while still in its preliminary stages, will have a longer-lasting, broader impact through the development of an online, self-paced training module focused on disinformation and made available to all public servants. The CSPS agrees that disinformation should be a learning priority and is dedicating resources to support these PDU-led activities.

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- o Based on its previous projects, CSPS estimates that it will take approximately 12 to 18 months to fully complete the project. The training could therefore be ready to launch across the entire public service in late 2024. While this would be a remarkable achievement and we appreciate CSPS' efforts, we will continue to push them to accelerate the timeline, including hitting milestones earlier.

Ministerial roundtable

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Intergovernmental and International Engagement

- o Bilateral engagement continues with provincial and territorial officials responsible for electoral law and policy to understand their needs and determine potential areas for future multilateral engagement. We will determine the feasibility of creating a one-stop hub of protecting democracy materials for other levels of government.
- o PDU is involved in multiple international fora where issues related to foreign interference and disinformation are being discussed. In particular, the team is closely involved in the work of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including its newly created DIS/MIS Resource Hub and the launch of its second annual trust survey across more than 25 countries.
- o In addition, per the commitment in your April 2023 report to the Prime Minister, PDU will re-engage with the partners in Principle 3 of the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace.

Interdepartmental Governance

- o Efforts have been undertaken to strengthen relationships with key partners across the government to better understand respective roles and priorities, and to raise awareness of the PDU's new mandate. Strong interdepartmental collaboration will be necessary for an effective delivery of these activities.
- o In May 2023, PDU hosted a first meeting of the interdepartmental Directors' Coordinating Group on Protecting Democracy. The meeting contributed to strengthening ties with existing partners, as well as the opportunity to engage with departments that were not previously involved. It was agreed that the group would meet every three months. The next meeting is expected to take place in August 2023.

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- o Increase engagement at senior levels continues through other existing networks, such as the Assistant Deputy Minister Committee (ADM) of Foreign Interference (led by Public Safety Canada), and the ADM and Director General Election Security Coordinating Committees (co-chaired by Elections Canada and PCO-Security and Intelligence).



Allen Sutherland on behalf of
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/Stinson/Sutherland/

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