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2017 memo prepared for PM warns of Beijing election interference

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▶ 2017 memo prepared for Trudeau warned of China's meddling

National security officials drafted a warning for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his office more than a year before the 2019 federal election, alleging that Chinese agents were “assisting Canadian candidates running for political offices,” according to a Privy Council Office document reviewed by Global News.

Written by the office of National Security and Intelligence Advisor, Daniel Jean, at the request of Trudeau’s chief of staff — and arguably his most trusted aide — Katie Telford, the document called “Memorandum for the Prime Minister” was also provided to Privy Council Office clerk Michael Wernick, records show.

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While the document is neither signed nor stamped, its high-level provenance likely indicates that it is an advanced draft.

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It remains unclear, though, whether the memo was finalized and sent to Trudeau and the Prime Minister's Office or if similar information was conveyed in another memo or under a different title.

The four-page, June 2017 memo asserted that senior intelligence officials had well-documented evidence of China's efforts to infiltrate "all levels of government" and goes on to allege that "[T]here is a substantial body of evidence that Chinese officials are actively pursuing a strategy of engagement to influence Canadian officials in ways that can compromise the security of Canada and the integrity of Canadian institutions."

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It also alleges that to avoid detection, Chinese officials used local, pro-Beijing community groups as intermediaries to engage Canadian politicians they identified as strategically valuable.

"Recent reporting indicates that Chinese diplomats are aware that Canadian officials with whom they have contact are being scrutinized for potential conflicts of interest,"

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says the memo from the PCO, which regularly briefs the Prime Minister's Office and appropriate cabinet ministers on national security intelligence.

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The 2017 PCO document also highlighted that subversion efforts had occurred before the 2019 election.

"Chinese foreign influenced espionage acts against elected officials and public servants in Canada is well documented," it says.

Citing confidentiality around national security issues, PMO spokesperson Alison Murphy said she could not comment on the memo's specifics or the existence of a note. She did say, however, that the prime minister is regularly briefed on national security matters, including foreign interference, and that he and his staff often request information on security and intelligence matters including as it relates to foreign interference from China.

Prepared for Trudeau 16 months before the 2019 election, the "Memorandum for the Prime Minister" raises questions about how seriously the PMO took the allegations and what steps Ottawa could have taken to address what national security officials later alleged was Chinese government interference in Canada's 2019 and 2021 federal contests.

The memo also presages similar allegations over five years that, according to sources, were one of many documentary and oral briefings provided by senior intelligence officials that warned of China's infiltration of Canadian political parties and elections.

Global News previously reported that Privy Council Office memos and briefs in 2020 and 2022 alleged that Chinese officials had covertly funded a clandestine network in the 2019 federal election that targeted 11 or more candidates.

The June 2017 “Memorandum for the Prime Minister” arrived at an amicable time in Sino-Canadian relations. Stephen Harper, with whom Beijing had a chilly relationship, had left office as prime minister, and Justin Trudeau’s more favourable attitude toward the regime — echoing his father’s trendsetting engagement with Mao’s China — brought new warmth to the rapport.

With the support of China’s considerable business lobby in Canada, Ottawa was championing a free-trade agreement to offset its reliance on the United States, which seemed to be increasingly protectionist under then-president Donald Trump.

Privy Council Office records reviewed by Global News explain that Trudeau’s chief of staff, Katie Telford, asked the office to provide an assessment with more specific information about an earlier Communications Security Establishment (CSE) report.

While Global News has not reviewed that CSE report, it understands from sources that it referred to intelligence on China’s efforts to engage and influence Canadian politicians.

A review of the resulting June 2017 memo for Trudeau shows that it was issued from the office of National Security Advisor Daniel Jean, a veteran Canadian foreign affairs official with experience in trade and immigration issues in Canada’s Hong Kong High Commission.

A year earlier, Jean replaced Richard Fadden, a former CSIS director who was controversial for his own warnings about Beijing’s influence on Canadian politicians.

The June 2017 draft was also copied to Michael Wernick, clerk of the Privy Council Office. Wernick and Jean’s duties included briefing the prime minister and relevant cabinet ministers on serious national security concerns.

Provided the contents of the June 2017 memo drafted by Jean’s office, both Wernick and Jean said they could not answer Global’s questions.

“It would be inappropriate for me to comment,” Jean said in a text message.

Along with its warning about Beijing’s attempt to infiltrate the Canadian political system, “Memorandum for the Prime Minister” also warned that Chinese security agencies might try to compromise Canadian officials who travelled to China. ^{LIGHT}

Under the subheading “Chinese Efforts to Influence Canadian Politicians,” the 2017 PCO memo also cautions that “Canadian officials are highly likely to be subjects of Chinese efforts to exert undue influence or otherwise compromise their independence during travel to China.”

Four months after the 2019 election, another PCO memo was presented to senior Liberal officials.

Echoing the warnings from the 2017 memo, “PRC Foreign Interference: 2019 Elections” went into some detail about the alleged network’s financing methods during the contest.

Reviewed by Global News, the memo said that the Chinese Consulate in Toronto used an extensive network of community groups to conceal the flow of funds between Chinese officials and network members.

“This network involves the Chinese consulate, local community leaders, Canadian politicians, and their staff,” the 2020 PCO report says. “Under broad guidance from the consulate, co-opted staff of targeted politicians provide advice on China-related issues, and community leaders facilitate the clandestine transfer of funds and recruit potential targets.”

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The outcome of these operations, the document says, is that “staff of targeted politicians provide advice on China-related issues” to the Chinese consulate.

Bill Blair, then public safety minister, acknowledged in December receiving “certain information” from the 2020 memo but declined to elaborate.

“I’m not able to share the details of that,” said Blair, now Emergency Preparedness minister and the only minister to publicly acknowledge the 2020 briefing.

Starting in January 2022, a series of memos and briefs, allegedly delivered to the prime minister and several cabinet ministers, provided additional detail of the purported network.

The Greater Toronto-based network allegedly included 11 or more candidates, 13 or more federal aides, an Ontario MPP and unelected public officials, according to a January 2022 Privy Council Office intelligence document. Called “Special Report,” the information was derived from 100 CSIS documents.

Separate sources told Global that the consulate also allegedly transferred around \$250,000 to a regime-friendly group to act as an intermediary, which in turn disbursed that amount to network members.

The same sources say this information was not included in the briefing provided to the prime minister or his ministers. They also said the network consisted of Liberals and Conservatives.

After Global first reported these briefings last November, Trudeau and several ministers insisted that the 2019 elections were not compromised. “Our integrity held,” the prime minister told Global News in December.

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When asked by Global News if it had gotten anything wrong in its reporting, Trudeau did not address the allegations in the 2022 memo, saying only that he was not informed of the allegation about China funding the 2019 candidates.

“I never got in all the briefings and all the serious briefings I got, I never got briefings on candidates receiving money from China.”

More broadly, however, many in the intelligence community believe their warnings on China’s interference campaigns have gone unheeded, endangering the integrity of future elections and eroding the trust of Canada’s allies.

“For Canada, Beijing is the biggest threat by far, and it’s getting worse,” said John Schindler, a former National Security Agency analyst. “Washington is definitely noticing the rising debate in Canada about Chinese espionage, illicit influence, and political subversion.”

Schindler added that without reforms, “Beijing will keep doing what it does with impunity.”

Global News sources who explained these various intelligence documents say the prime minister’s office has been reticent to adopt legal reforms already undertaken by Canada’s allies, such as a foreign-agent registry that would better protect Canada’s elections.

One official who was not authorized to speak publicly called it “inexcusable” that Trudeau’s office has yet to move forward with new laws despite years of “interactive” dialogue with senior intelligence officials regarding China’s incursions into Canadian elections.

“The floodgates have been opened in the last five years. There has been ample evidence placed in front of the Liberal Party of Canada, and they have done essentially nothing.”

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