

Politics

Intelligence community was concerned with Russia prior to 2019 vote, former top officials say

Daniel Jean, Michael Wernick appear before committee probing China's alleged election interference

Catharine Tunney · CBC News · Posted: Apr 18, 2023 9:54 PM EDT | Last Updated: April 19, 2023



Daniel Jean, former national security and intelligence adviser to the prime minister, told MPs on Tuesday he briefed Justin Trudeau on interference by Beijing prior to the 2019 federal election. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

 [comments](#)

A former national security adviser to the prime minister says he had "numerous conversations" with Justin Trudeau about Beijing's interference in Canadian affairs before the 2019 election, but added that, at the time, Russia was a major concern for the intelligence community.

"At that time we were a lot concerned about Russia," Daniel Jean, who served as national security adviser from May 2016 until May 2018, told a parliamentary committee Tuesday night.

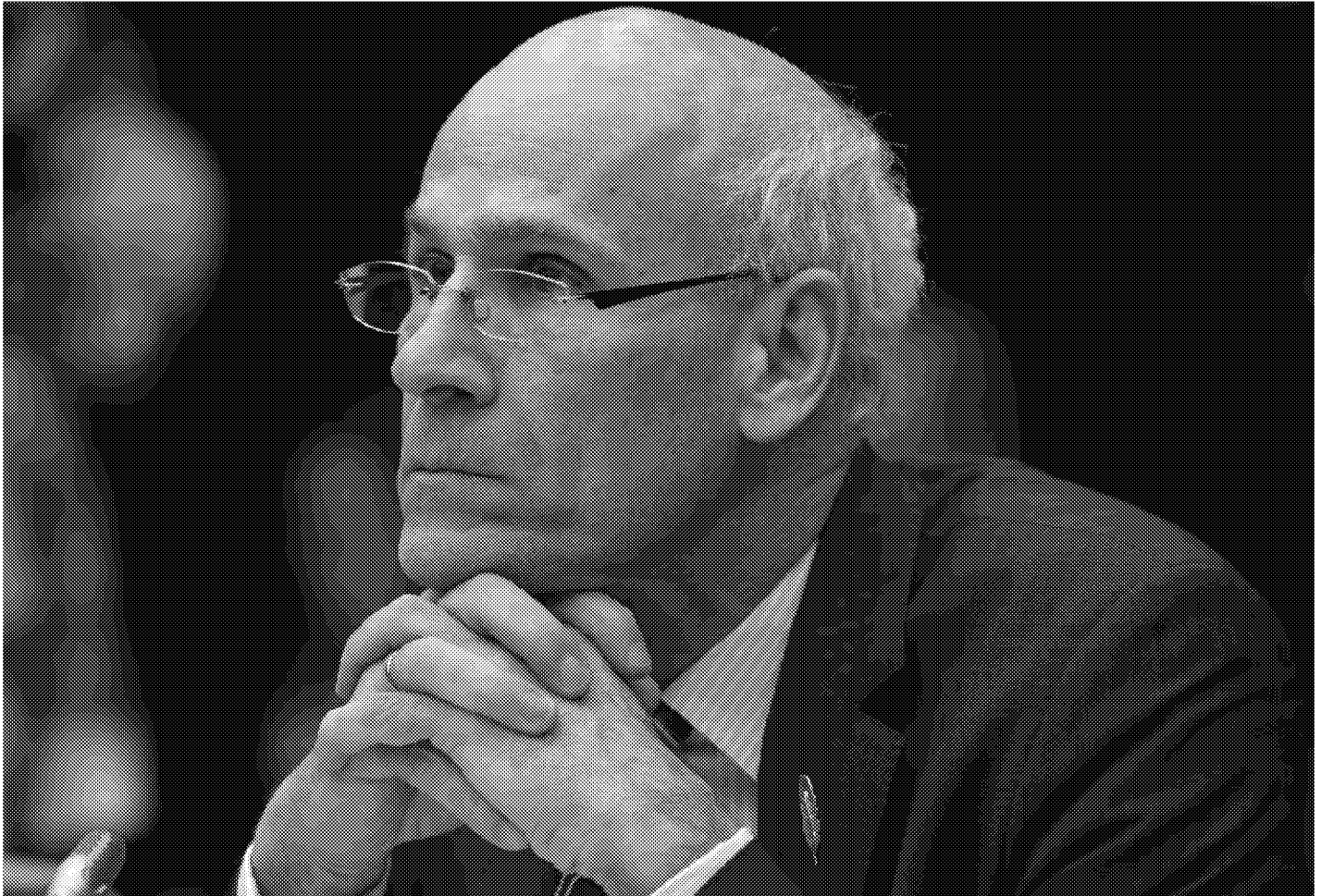
"But definitely we were more and more concerned about Beijing."

Jean was appearing before the procedure and house affairs committee as MPs dig into recent allegations about the extent of the Chinese government's attempts to meddle in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

Former clerk of the Privy Council Michael Wernick also fielded questions from the committee, telling Conservative MP Michael Cooper he recalled no conversations about interference by Beijing.

"At the time the main preoccupation was Russia," Wernick, who served as the country's top public servant from 2016 to 2019, said.

"It was a month after the French presidential election and we were very concerned about disruption of elections, but most of the attention was on Russia at the time."



Former clerk of the Privy Council Michael Wernick also fielded questions from the MPs. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

Both former top federal officials said no subjects were off-limits when they briefed the prime minister.

The committee has been investigating what the Liberal government knew, or didn't, about Beijing's meddling in Canadian affairs following recent news reports.

The Globe and Mail has published reports alleging Beijing tried to ensure the Liberals won a minority government in the last general election and worked to defeat Conservative candidates who were critical of China.

Global News has reported that intelligence officials told Trudeau that China's consulate in Toronto had floated cash to at least 11 federal election candidates "and numerous Beijing operatives" who worked as campaign staffers in 2019.

- **PM briefed at least 6 times on foreign election interference since 2018, says PCO document**
- **Trudeau admits he hasn't heeded intelligence watchdog's recommendations in the past**

Jean, who remains permanently bound to secrecy due to his former clearance level, said he couldn't comment on classified briefings.

"But I don't want to be seen as trying to evade the question. So I will be clear that during my period as national security adviser, yes, we briefed the prime minister on foreign interference — China and others because, of course, it's not only China," he said.

Wernick said he doesn't remember any information about Beijing officials actively trying to interfere in Canada's democratic processes.

"Not that I recall," he said under questioning.

"I left government four years ago today. I did not take any records or secret documents with me. I don't have access to document logs, I don't have access to my old calendars, and I don't have access to any records."

Wernick stepped down as clerk in 2019 following the SNC-Lavalin affair, saying there is "no path" for him to have a "relationship of mutual trust and respect" with opposition party leaders.

The former clerk suggested Tuesday that MPs move on introducing legislation similar to one before the U.K. Parliament which would create a new offence of foreign interference.

Jean, who retired following furor over comments he made to reporters suggesting India sabotaged the prime minister's trip scandal-plagued 2018 trip to the country, told the committee it might be time to update the laws enabling Canada's spy

agency — the Canadian Security Intelligence Service — to better respond to foreign interference.



Liberal MP David McGuinty told the public safety and national security committee that Ottawa should pay more attention to the work of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press)

'More takeup, more action'

At a separate parliamentary committee Tuesday night, the chair of one the intelligence review bodies investigating foreign election interference said he'd like to see the federal government pay more attention to the work of the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP).

"We're hopeful that the government now will pay close attention, perhaps closer attention to some of the recommendations," Liberal MP David McGuinty told the public safety and national security committee.

"We're always looking for more takeup, more traction, because the purpose of the committee where we're here is to improve the situation for Canadians."

Last month Trudeau asked NSICOP to review the issue of foreign interference, with a special eye on election meddling.

It's not the first time McGuinty and the tripartisan MPs and senators on the committee have looked at the issue.

- [Agencies reviewing foreign election interference face a wall of cabinet secrecy](#)
- [Opposition critics denounce lack of access to cabinet secrets for agencies probing election interference](#)

The group, which receives top secret clearance to review classified intelligence, released a report back in 2019 that urged Ottawa to take the threat of foreign interference more seriously.

"Canada has been slow to react to the threat of foreign interference," wrote the committee in 2019.

"The government must do better."

That report made a series of recommendations about responding to the threat of foreign interference, but the committee said it did not receive an official response from Trudeau's government for years.

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