

Johnston says no to public inquiry on foreign interference



David Johnston, Independent Special Rapporteur on Foreign Interference, announces whether Canada should hold a public inquiry into foreign election interference.

PHOTO: LA PRESSE CANADIENNE / SEAN KILPATRICK

RCI

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Former governor general releases report after two months of investigation

David Johnston has recommended against calling a public inquiry into foreign interference in Canadian politics.

His decision comes after all opposition parties have called for an inquiry and after the government itself said it would support one — if Johnston recommended it.

“When I began this process, I thought I would come to the same conclusion — that I would recommend a public inquiry,” Johnston said in a news conference Tuesday.




“While it would have been an easy choice, it would not be the correct one.”

Johnston, appointed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a special rapporteur on foreign interference in March in response to the furor over Chinese government interference, has spent the last two months reviewing documents and interviewing policymakers.

While he isn't recommending a public inquiry, Johnston said in his report he did find “serious shortcomings in the way intelligence is communicated and processed from security agencies through to government.”

Johnston said he'll continue his work as special rapporteur through to October by holding hearings to find ways to fix those shortcomings. He said he will produce a second report later this year.

“The public process should focus on strengthening Canada's capacity to detect, deter and counter foreign interference in our elections and the threat such interference represents to our democracy,” Johnston said in his report tabled Tuesday.

- [PM briefed at least 6 times on foreign election interference since 2018, says PCO document](#) 
- [OPINION My family came to Canada to get away from China's influence. It turns out that was no escape](#) 
- [Poilievre declined meeting with Johnston on foreign interference](#) 

Johnston said he found no ethical fault with the way the federal government handled foreign interference.

“ I have found that the narrative that the government failed to act is not a fair conclusion based on the facts,” Johnston said. “ However, the machinery of government needs significant improvement to address the evolving threat of foreign interference.”

Johnston has asked the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA) — an independent government agency — and the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP), a joint parliamentary committee, to review his conclusions.

Attempts to intimidate and influence

Citing unnamed national security sources, the Globe and Mail and Global News have reported on a range of influence and interference operations coming from Beijing, particularly during the 2019 and 2021 elections.

They include attempts to intimidate and influence members of Parliament, funding political candidates and operating so-called “ police stations ” across Canada to intimidate dissidents.

Johnston said that, while the threat of foreign interference is real and Ottawa should address it, he found much of the media reporting on the issue was “ misconstrued ” and devoid of context after he reviewed the relevant intelligence.

Johnston was particularly critical of the person or people behind the national security leaks.

“ Any responsible intelligence professional knows how destructive and dangerous leaks can be,” Johnston said. “ It is a matter of urgency that all efforts be made to identify and hold the leaker(s) responsible. Malice cannot be ruled out.”

WATCH: David Johnston on foreign interference



David Johnston isn't recommending a public inquiry into foreign interference. Here's what he did recommend.

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DAVID JOHNSTON ISN'T RECOMMENDING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO FOREIGN INTERFERENCE. HERE'S WHAT HE DID RECOMMEND.

David Johnston says foreign interference is a 'real and growing threat' and more needs to be done. But the former governor general says that while a 'public process' is required, a separate 'formal' public inquiry isn't the way forward.

The RCMP is investigating the source or sources of the leaks.

Johnston was also critical of how intelligence agencies, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), share intelligence with the federal government.

"The materials are disseminated, but no one keeps track of who specifically received or read them," Johnston said. "This means there can be intelligence that is 'sent' to various consumers, but it does not always actually get consumed."

Johnston also found gaps in the ways agencies and federal government departments share information.

He said the fact that Canada is seen as a target for foreign interference "is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness.

"Foreign adversaries see our free, open and democratic society, and seek to undermine it."

Johnston says inquiry not best way forward

All opposition parties have called for a public inquiry into foreign election interference. The Liberal government said it would call one if Johnston recommended it.

A public inquiry would be able to hold public hearings, subpoena witnesses and produce a report. It would be led by a former judge.

But Johnston said he thinks an inquiry isn't the best way to address foreign interference and problems with intelligence.

“ A person leading a Public Inquiry would be unlikely to learn more about who knew what, when, and what was done with [intelligence] than has been made available to me,” Johnston said.

“ Duplicating this effort would not be productive and would lead to delay in addressing the issues. ”

- [Chinese Canadians worry foreign interference probe could stigmatize politicians, candidates](#)
- [A public probe of foreign election interference should also look at India, Sikh organizations say](#)

Johnston added that the sensitivity of the intelligence would create difficulties for a public inquiry, and the fact that he found the government did not commit any wrongdoing weakens the case for an inquiry.

“ The failures I have found relate to substantial gaps in the communication and processing of intelligence information as opposed to the prime minister, ministers or senior officials ignoring intelligence or recommendations,” Johnston said.

“ A further review of the specific media allegations through a public inquiry would not advance our ability to amend these arrangements and strengthen our institutional capacity to detect, deter and counter foreign interference. ”

Rapporteur disputes media reports

Johnston did not substantiate many of the allegations made in the media about Beijing's foreign interference.

With respect to a Global News story that said the Chinese government gave \$250,000 to 11 candidates in the 2019 federal election, Johnston said there is “ limited ” evidence the Chinese government intended to provide funding for seven Liberal and four Conservative candidates through a community organization and an unnamed Ontario Progressive Conservative MPP.

He added there's no evidence Beijing followed through with the plan, or that the candidates, including the MPP, ever received any money.

A story by Global News, citing an unnamed national security source, said Liberal MP Han Dong advised an official at the Chinese consulate in Toronto to lengthen the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, two Canadians the Chinese government had detained.

“The allegation is false. Mr. Dong discussed the 'two Michaels' with a PRC official but did not suggest to the official that the PRC extend their detention,” Johnston said.

- [CSIS has begun offering other MPs briefings on foreign interference](#)
- [A foreign agents registry bill will be tabled later this year: source](#)

Johnston said there were “irregularities” involving the Toronto Chinese Consulate and Dong's nomination as the Liberal candidate in the Don Valley North riding, but he added he found no evidence Dong was aware of this.

Canada recently expelled a diplomat, Zhao Wei, after a national security source told the Globe and Mail he had been assigned to target Conservative MP Michael Chong and Chong's family in China.

Johnston said he found evidence that Chinese officials contemplated taking unspecified action against Chong and sought to build a profile on him, but there's no evidence they threatened either Chong or his family.

Johnston also said there's evidence the Chinese government dislikes former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu, who has been a vocal critic of Beijing. While Johnston acknowledged misinformation on Chiu was spread, he said he didn't find evidence the Chinese government was the source.

“Chinese-Canadian MPs, including Mr. Chiu, were and remain of particular interest to the PRC,” he said.

Read the full report:

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Johnston responds to Conservative attacks

The Conservatives have been critical of Johnston's appointment as special rapporteur, pointing to his friendship with the Trudeau family and his former position as a member of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation.

At the news conference, Johnston, who served as governor general from 2010 to 2017, defended his appointment. He said he went on five ski trips with the Trudeau family decades ago and that he sometimes drove the Trudeau children to their mother's home after the trips.

But Johnston said he's had no unofficial contact with Justin Trudeau since Trudeau became a member of Parliament in 2008.

“Those are the facts with the so-called friendship, and the skiing,” Johnston said.

Johnston said he got involved with the Trudeau Foundation because the organization provides scholarships and Johnston has had a long career in higher education. He said the foundation invited him to become a member following his term as governor general, and that he attended four Trudeau Foundation meetings. He said he donated to the foundation a few times.

He said his impartiality and integrity have never been questioned over the course of his public service career. He said he finds the attacks “very troubling.”

“This kind of baseless set of accusations diminishes trust in our public institutions, and deters people who are publicly-minded, who are quite prepared to take on public service responsibilities,” he said.

“There's a chill on them and it's quite troubling.”

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