

Politics

NDP MP, Beijing critics call on Ottawa to launch foreign agent registry quickly

New petition says the proposed registry should not be compared to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act

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NDP MP Jenny Kwan speaks to reporters about her briefing with CSIS in the Foyer of the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on May 29, 2023. Kwan is urging the Liberal government to launch a foreign agent registry as soon as possible. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

NDP MP Jenny Kwan and vocal critics of China are calling on the federal government to swiftly introduce — and on Parliament to quickly pass — foreign agent registry legislation to safeguard the next federal election.

In a new petition, Kwan and a coalition of human rights and pro-democracy groups are urging the House of Commons to pass the yet-to-be introduced legislation as soon as possible.

Under intense scrutiny over its handling of alleged Beijing-backed interference operations in the last two federal elections, the Liberal government launched public consultations on a proposed foreign agent registry in March.

A government source told CBC News in March that a bill will be tabled in the House of Commons later this year.

"This should have been done yesterday," Kwan told CBC News. "If we head into the next election without some safeguards and measures in place, then it is us, Canadians, who will actually suffer."

"The government has to be dragged kicking and screaming to the table to try and get this work done."

- China snubs Canada on its list of approved travel spots, setting back tourism's post-COVID recovery
- Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault heading to China for climate talks

Kwan, a Chinese-Canadian MP from B.C., said she was informed by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in May that she has been the subject of Beijing-backed foreign interference and "will remain what they call an evergreen target."

A string of media reports published earlier this year — many based on leaked intelligence and anonymous national security sources — raised questions about the

government's handling of China's alleged interference activities in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

No federal political party disputes the overall outcomes of the last two federal elections but opposition parties have criticized the government's response to Beijing's alleged activities.



Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre speaks at a news conference in Toronto on August 15, 2023. (Frank Gunn/The Canadian Press)

"I think it's outrageous that Justin Trudeau has done absolutely nothing to stand up for Canada against Beijing," said Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre at a press conference Wednesday.

"We're demanding an immediate public inquiry and a full registry to identify and expose anyone who works for a foreign dictatorship in a paid capacity to manipulate our politics."

The shadow of foreign interference hangs over the upcoming Liberal cabinet retreat in P.E.I. next week.

The government continues to negotiate with opposition parties on the terms of reference for a public inquiry to investigate foreign interference.

Duelling petitions

The new petition sponsored by Kwan follows a rival petition sponsored by Liberal MP Chandra Arya and backed by Sen. Yuen Pau Woo and Sen. Victor Oh.

Arya's petition called on the Canadian government to reconsider its proposed foreign agent registry, citing a concern that it could pose "serious harassment and stigmatization risk for racialized communities." It collected 2,450 signatures.

In an April letter sent to then-minister of public safety Marco Mendicino, Woo invoked the legacy of the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned the entry of nearly all Chinese immigrants to Canada until it was repealed in 1947.



Sen. Yuen Pau Woo denounces RCMP allegations of Chinese government interference in Canada as community organizer May Chiu looks on during a news conference at the Chinese Family Service center on May 5, 2023 in Montreal. (Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press)

Woo wrote that a modern-day registry may not be as severe as the Chinese Exclusion Act but it "could require the registration of all Canadians who are deemed to be under the influence of the Chinese (and other) governments.

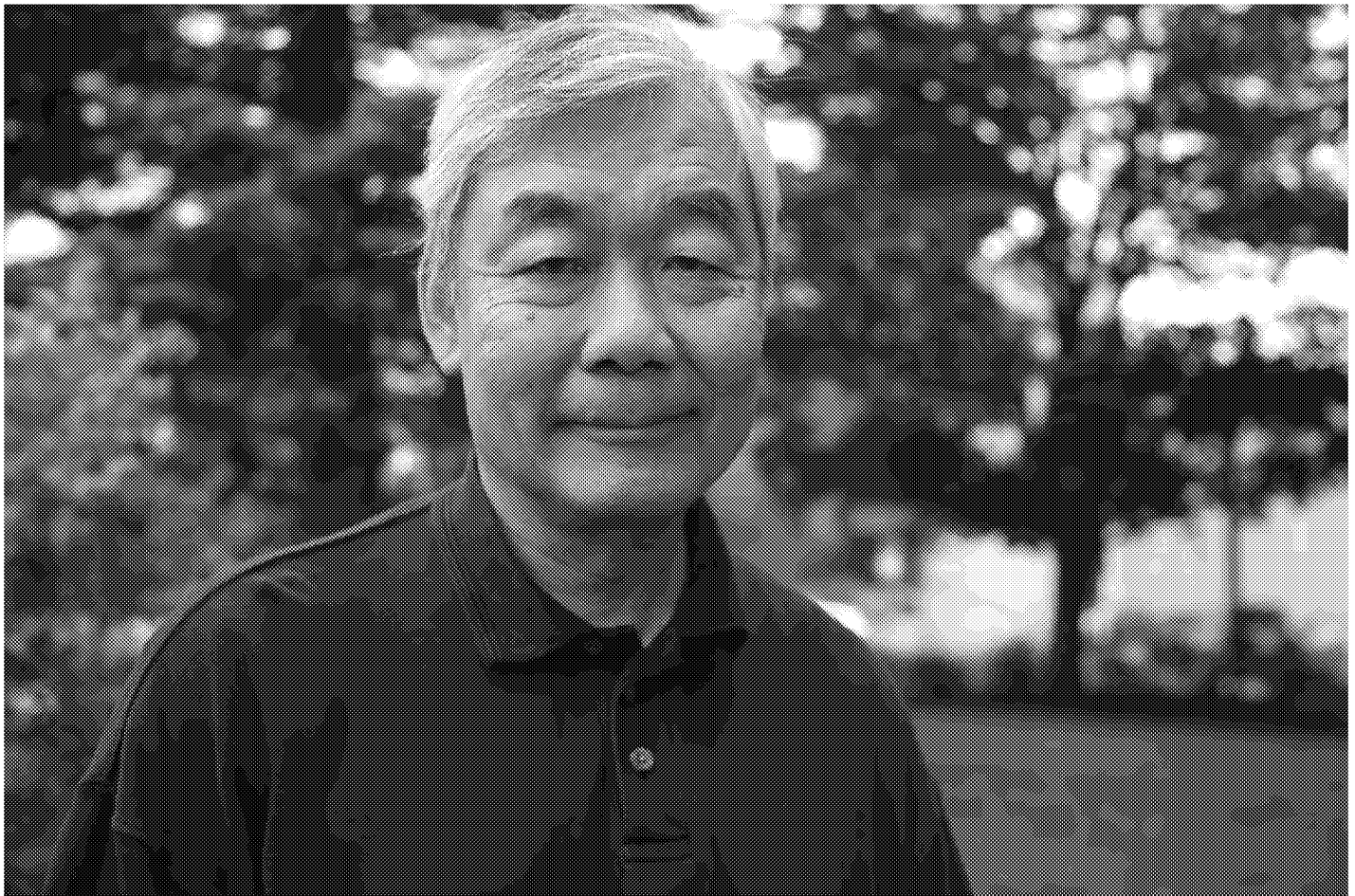
"In some ways, a modern-day registry is worse because it would suggest that we did not learn anything from previous episodes of xenophobia and discrimination against minority groups in Canada."

The petition sponsored by MP Kwan warns against comparing a proposed foreign agent registry with the Chinese Exclusion Act.

"It is imperative not to conflate the racist Act, which discriminates against all Chinese, with the Registry, which is applicable only to those, Canadian or not, who lobby on behalf of foreign governments," reads the petition.

Cheuk Kwan, co-chair of the Toronto Association for Democracy in China and a vocal critic of Beijing, said the new petition is intended to show the government that there is strong support among Canadians for the speedy implementation of a foreign agent registry.

"Sen. Woo and Sen. Oh and other people have the right to their own voices, but to be speaking out against a registry as a Canadian senator is unbecoming," Cheuk Kwan told CBC News. "I believe they are using the racism or anti-racism message as a shield for any action on a registry or on legislation to counter China interference."



Cheuk Kwan says Canadian senators opposed to a foreign agent registry 'should reconsider.' (CBC)

"I urge them to reconsider ... You should be protecting Canadian sovereignty."

Sen. Woo said Kwan is misrepresenting his position. "I am against foreign interference from all sources," he said.

Woo argues that there are already laws in Canada to address harassment and intimidation and that the costs of a registry would outweigh "its meagre benefits."

"If a registry is unavoidable, it should apply to all countries equally and be based on specific arrangements such as monetary payment between individuals or organizations and a foreign state, rather than on hypothetical or presumed arrangements," said Woo.

MP Kwan will join Cheuk Kwan and other pro-democracy activists at a press conference Friday to speak about the new petition.

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