



## Interview Summary: Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance)

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland was interviewed by Commission Counsel on February 16, 2024. The interview was held in a secure environment and included references to classified information. This is the public version of the classified interview summary that was entered into evidence in the course of the Commission's in camera hearings held in February and March 2024.

### Notes to Reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary has been produced in reliance on subclause (a)(iii)(C)(II) of the Commission's Terms of Reference. It discloses the evidence pertinent to clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of the Commission's Terms of Reference that, in the opinion of the Commissioner, would not be injurious to the critical interests of Canada or its allies, national defence or national security.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission's mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Any information provided during the interview that relates to other aspects of the Commission's Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.
- This summary should be read in conjunction with the Institutional Reports prepared by the Government of Canada.

### 1. Background

- [1] Minister Freeland has held various Cabinet positions since her election in 2013. From 2015-2017, after her re-election, she served as Minister of International Trade. From

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2017- 2019 she was Minister of Foreign Affairs, with particular responsibility for Canada/US relations and NAFTA. Minister Freeland was appointed Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs (“IGA”) and Deputy Prime Minister in 2019. Since 2020, Minister Freeland has served as Minister of Finance and continues to serve as Deputy Prime Minister. She has also chaired and served on many Cabinet Committees.

## 2. Role as Deputy PM

- [2] There is no formal definition for the role of **Deputy Prime Minister (“DPM”)**. There was a need to focus on national unity and to strengthen the federal Government’s relationships with the provinces after the 2019 election. Given her roots in Alberta and her experience coordinating a national position on NAFTA, Min. Freeland believes that the **Prime Minister (“PM”)** appointed her to be both the IGA Minister and DPM to demonstrate the importance he was placing on her efforts to strengthen the relationship with the provinces.
- [3] Min. Freeland’s status as DPM also gave the PM the flexibility to involve Min. Freeland in issues that are sometimes outside her main portfolio, and gave her an added convening authority to discuss time-sensitive issues. For example, when the PM established the COVID committee in March 2020, Min. Freeland was well-placed to serve as the Committee’s chair, although this role did not necessarily fit directly within her then portfolio as Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. Another example is Minister Freeland’s involvement in the Government’s effort to support Ukraine.
- [4] As DPM, Min. Freeland occasionally chairs Cabinet in the PM’s absence.

## 3. Role as Minister of Foreign Affairs

- [5] As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Min. Freeland’s main involvement in efforts to counter **foreign interference (“FI”)** came through the implementation of the **Rapid Response Mechanism (“RRM”)** following the Charlevoix G7 meeting. Min. Freeland had been familiar with authoritarian regimes since the late 1980’s through her work as a journalist in Ukraine and Russia. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, she was keenly aware of how Russia, in particular, was seeking to undermine the foundations of

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democracy worldwide. She described Russia as trying to “make democracies not believe in themselves” by sowing doubt. Further, Minister Freeland and other G7 members understood that Russia was trying to support disruptive extremism globally. She saw the Canadian-initiated RRM as an important tool to combat malign misinformation and an important contribution to the preservation and protection of democracy.

[6] Min. Freeland had no memory of having reviewed or been briefed about the distinction between foreign interference and foreign influence. However, she noted that while many activities undertaken abroad by foreign states to promote their interests are legitimate, it is considered foreign interference when these activities are covert and corrupt and seek to influence events or sow doubt. She used as an example of foreign interference Russia’s attempt to influence the BREXIT vote as a means of weakening both the United Kingdom and the European Union. There is a grey zone in which behaviour that may be considered inappropriate can fall short of interference. For example, Minister Freeland explained that many had criticized President Barack Obama’s public comments about the BREXIT vote before the Referendum. While this was not interference in her view, President Obama’s comments may nonetheless have been viewed as politically sensitive. On the opposite end of the spectrum, public advocacy for one state’s interests in another’s territory can be a central part of a state’s legitimate diplomacy.

[7] Min. Freeland noted that foreign interference fell within the responsibility of the Minister of Public Safety. Then Public Safety Minister Goodale was primarily responsible for creating policy to address the issue. Minister Gould also played an important role in the creation of the 2018 Plan to Protect Canada’s Democracy. Before 2019, the conversations around FI were primarily focussed on the Russian threat, given allegations of covert Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and BREXIT vote. During the 2019 election, Minister Freeland’s primary concern had become the overt threat posed by China, rather than covert FI activities. The PRC’s arbitrary detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor provided clear evidence that China believed it could intimidate and control Canada. Minister Freeland opined that

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Canada must not allow itself to be strategically vulnerable to China. Min. Freeland understood that Iran, and India were also engaged in activities in Canada to further their own interests.

- [8] As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister Freeland was not directly connected to the national security community. She was aware and concerned about threats posed by Russia and China. Min. Freeland was primarily involved in diplomacy including Canada/US relations and negotiating the re-signing of the NAFTA deal. She noted that she received limited intelligence that was directly relevant to these negotiations.
- [9] When receiving intelligence, Min. Freeland explained that she always received intelligence directly from her Chief of Staff or from the Deputy Minister. She did not receive daily intelligence briefings. Members of Minister Freeland's staff brought intelligence to her attention when they considered it relevant. In her view, intelligence is relevant when (a) she is about to take an action that may have a consequence she needs to fully understand, or (b) something important has happened that she needs to know about. She trusted her team to bring her this information. Minister Freeland often received intelligence in the context of a specific event or in advance of ministerial travel.

#### 4. GE 43

- [10] Min. Freeland did not recall seeing a document called "National Security Outlook" for 2019. Min. Freeland understood that the RRM, the SITE Task Force and the Panel of Five were operational through the election period, and she felt confident that these tools would support the integrity of the election.
- [11] Min. Freeland was aware that both Russia and China could present threats to the election. The dynamic with China had shifted, as had the Government's perspective on China, as a result of the direct challenges involving the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor and the efforts to intimidate Canada in response to the extradition proceeding against Meng Wanzhou. China viewed Canada as an interesting target because of its natural resources and because they believed that Canada was a "middle power" that could be controlled.

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[12] Min. Freeland was not aware of allegations surrounding Han Dong or the Don Valley North nomination process. While she is a senior Minister who represents a Toronto riding, she was not involved in the details at the riding level of either the 2019 or 2021 election campaigns in the Toronto area. Generally, political parties have considerable discretion in the way they undertake their nominations processes, including whether a formal nomination process is even required.

## 5. GE 44

[13] Min. Freeland was not aware of allegations surrounding a specific incident of foreign interference in the 2021 Election until she reviewed documents to prepare for her interview.

[14] Min. Freeland had no specific recollection of notes in a document called “Briefing to the Deputy Prime Minister” regarding COVID. She was generally aware that China, Russia, Iran, and India were all involved in some form of interference in Canada.

[15] Min. Freeland did not know about any of the information published in the 2023 media leaks, including the names of individuals, before the articles were published.