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Canadian democracy is on edge — and China isn't to blame

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Canada has lost its mind.

To be precise, much of official Ottawa has abandoned the remnants of its already questionable faculties. A faux scandal, manufactured by the nexus of scoop-thirsty reporters and hyperbole-addicted politicians – is there any other kind? – has gripped the capital like a drug-resistant psychosis.

These fulminating reporters and politicians have been reduced – figuratively speaking – to parading around newsrooms and parliament in a critical-thinking-sapping state, carrying signs that read: The end of democracy is nigh.

Bit by devious bit, Chinese agents and their proxies have eaten covertly away, they say, at the vulnerable foundations that gird Canada's democratic institutions.

All that stands between apocalypse and possible salvation are the patriots working inside [Canada's always law-abiding spy services](#) who apparently belt out "O Canada" at breakfast and at bedtime with hands on maple-leaf-forever-tattooed hearts.

That, discerning international readers, is only a slightly exaggerated portrait of the hysteria that has paralysed a once-sedate city for months. I wouldn't be surprised if more than a few of its jittery occupants who hold public office have checked under their desks to see if a Beijing-compromised, fifth columnist is lurking there.

I live in Toronto. So, happily, I have been able to avoid succumbing to the ["yellow peril"-induced madness](#). Still, I had more than a disconcerting taste of it over the past few weeks while appearing three times as a witness before two House of Commons committees probing Chinese influence campaigns.

Given my long history of reporting on Canada's cavalier security services and Chinese influence efforts, I reluctantly agreed to attend via Zoom in the faint hope that my testimony might act as a

brake on the prevailing panic and the rampant, [McCarthyite guilt-by-association](#) accusations poisoning Ottawa.

How wrong I was.

I came away convinced that China poses less of a threat to Canada's democratic institutions than the sad, pedestrian members of parliament – with one exception – I encountered, who purport to defend those ever-so-fragile institutions now allegedly under siege.

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My overarching message did not register. While I agree that Chinese interference is troublesome, a witch-hunt-like fever has infected lawmakers and reporters intent on “unmasking” so-called “seditious” Canadians reminiscent of the shameful purge of public servants only a few generations ago as a result of their left-wing politics and homosexuality.

It is dangerous and corrosive. People's lives, livelihoods and reputations are being [damaged](#) by inept spies and their grateful conduits in the media and on Parliament Hill.

Indeed, I watched, sometimes with bewilderment, often in disgust, as a string of parliamentarians debased themselves and the country they supposedly represent, in search of a “gotcha” moment that might attract a reporter's ephemeral attention or the approval of their party leaders who are more interested in stoking fear and conjecture rather than encouraging sobriety and the truth.

In this deplorable regard, members of the opposition Conservative Party, the separatist Bloc Quebecois (BQ) and the pretend socialist party of Canada, the New Democrats (NDP), distinguished themselves.

Without fail, Tory MPs channeled every disagreeable aspect of Pierre Poilievre, their stunt-prone, smug demagogue of a leader who believes that anger and ignorance are essential prerequisites to becoming prime minister.

Each of these rabid partisans tried to out-smear the other to curry favour with a jejune politician who makes the Borg-like former Conservative Party leader, Stephen Harper, seem almost genteel in comparison.

The nadir of this ugliness occurred when a Conservative MP [asked](#) a witness and publisher of Sinophobic tracts whether former Governor General of Canada David Johnston was an “elite capture” of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) “based on his ties to China”.

Predictably, the conspiracy-consumed pair forgot that Johnston was appointed Canada’s titular head of state in 2010 by none other than Harper.

Oh, never mind.

In any event, the witness said that of course Johnston was an “elite capture” since “over his 40-year career [Johnston] has had a positive predisposition to China and the PRC.”

It was a disgraceful question and reply and I said so. Incidentally, the sorry exchange went some way towards suggesting that the Conservative Party’s email address these days should be: conservatives@inthegutter.ca.

Johnston is in the Conservatives’ ferocious crosshairs because he was appointed by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a “special rapporteur” to examine a slew of selective leaks concerning Chinese interference in Canadian politics and two recent elections.

In an interim [report](#), Johnston found that China’s influence campaigns had no impact on those elections, that media reports surrounding the scope and nature of that interference were overblown or “false,” and that, as a sinister by-product, loyal Canadians were being tarred as disloyal.

None of it mattered, such was the disfiguring intensity of the animus in the hearings towards an honourable man who has served Canada in a variety of important capacities.

Meanwhile, the separatist BQ was too busy bowing before the “expertise” of a couple of spooks-turned-boy-scouts to remember that not too long ago the very same security services set ablaze a barn where separatists planned to meet. Or that the security services were responsible for at least 400 illegal break-ins in Quebec (including the offices of a separatist press agency), and that they stole the membership list of the separatist Parti Quebecois.

The BQ’s amnesia is as halting as its naivete.

A starry-eyed member of Canada’s pretend socialist NDP allowed the two spies to claim – without a word of pushback – that the

secrecy-drenched and accountability-allergic agencies they work for are committed to openness, transparency and the rule of law.

I had to stifle the urge to laugh.

The criminally ill-prepared NDP MP was not aware, it appears, that a succession of federal court judges has, in the recent past, slammed the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) for withholding information from the court, lying and routinely breaking the law.

If the derelict legislator had done an ounce of research, she would have discovered that in July 2020 Justice Patrick Gleeson [excoriated](#) CSIS for having an “institutional disregard for — or, at the very least, a cavalier institutional approach to — the duty of candour and regrettably the rule of law”.

Examples of CSIS's subterfuge abound. In an effort to deport a Canadian it suspected of being a “terrorist” in 2009, the spy service not only lied to, but kept exculpatory information from, a judge deciding the man's fate. In 2016, another incensed federal court judge blasted CSIS for failing to disclose that it had, for more than a decade, illegally gathered and stored metadata unrelated to national security investigations involving scores of unsuspecting Canadians.

The solicitous NDP MP did not recall any of it. Like her flippant, sound-bite-happy leader, Jagmeet Singh, she capitulated to the hysteria, rather than make an informed effort to cauterise it.

Only Matthew Green, an Ontario NDP MP, struck me as having the gravitas to approach this delicate file with the calmness and intelligence it requires.

I should have listened to my instincts and stayed far away from Ottawa and the largely vapid politicians who populate it.

In the remote chance that I receive another emailed invitation to appear before a committee after this column is published, I will press delete.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.