



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

November 2018

China's Influence Activities: What Canada can learn from Australia

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Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) long-term objective is to absorb Australia into its sphere of influence and shift Australia away from its alliance with the United States. That objective was decided in 2004 when the Central Committee of the Party resolved to include Australia in China's "overall periphery," that is, to regard it like countries that have a land border with China and therefore need to be controlled.

The CCP views Australia as a weak link in the American alliance and, as a European nation located in Asia, a major prize in its push for strategic dominance across the Asia-Pacific region. Australia has accordingly been the target of the full force of the CCP's sophisticated influence and interference operations.

Canada's place in the CCP's strategic map of the world is as important as Australia's in its own way, and it too has been subject to a "full court press" of influence operations.

As I show in my book *Silent Invasion* (2018), the CCP has been engaged in a thoroughgoing, systematic campaign to shift elite opinion in Australia so that decision-makers act in ways conformable with Beijing's wishes. We can see, so far with less clarity, a similar process in this country.

Over decades, the Party has built a complex network of agencies tasked with exerting influence abroad. The agencies deploy sophisticated techniques to influence, persuade, and coerce others to act in ways approved by Beijing. The techniques have been refined over decades and are far more extensive, intrusive, and secretive than those used by other nations.

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United Front Work

In this commentary I will focus on the United Front Work Department.¹ Under President Xi Jinping, United Front activities have assumed much greater prominence in the CCP's conduct of foreign relations. Xi has echoed Mao Zedong's description of the United Front as one of the Party's three "magic weapons" (along with Party building and military activities).

In the West, the United Front's work has traditionally been aimed at suppressing dissidents, winning overseas Chinese to the CCP cause and mobilizing them to act in support of Beijing's political and strategic interests. It aims to "influence the choices, direction, and loyalties" of its targets by overcoming negative perceptions and promoting favourable perceptions of CCP rule in China.

In Australia over the last 20 years, the CCP has succeeded in suppressing voices critical of the Party (primarily those organizations campaigning for democracy, Tibetan autonomy, Taiwanese independence, and rights for Falun Gong practitioners).

In the 2000s, trusted individuals sympathetic to the CCP, encouraged by the Chinese embassy in Canberra and PRC consulates, infiltrated most of the established Chinese community groups and professional associations in Australia. Earlier generations of Chinese-Australians tell of meetings at which long-standing social and professional associations were taken over by new members with pro-Beijing sympathies. Those unsympathetic to the CCP were forced out.

In addition, many new organizations have been established that take a pro-Beijing position. They include student associations on campuses across Australia, various business organizations, and a number of organizations for ethnic Chinese professionals.

The effect has been that pro-Beijing elements are now seen as representing "the Chinese community" in Australia and are often reported that way by the mainstream media. Politicians have been naively willing to associate with them. Two years ago, ignorance was an excuse for naivety. But after the extensive media coverage beginning in September 2016, followed by statements from the government and the intelligence services, naivety is no longer an excuse.

From the early 1990s the foremost objectives of the United Front concentrated on suppressing critical voices and winning over Chinese-Australians to the CCP cause. But in more recent years it has increasingly been oriented towards promoting a more favourable view of the PRC in the Australian mainstream. Its efforts are directed at countering negative perceptions of CCP rule and highlighting the positives through co-opting and cultivating elites. The strongly pro-Beijing views of sections of elite opinion today testifies to the success of this campaign.

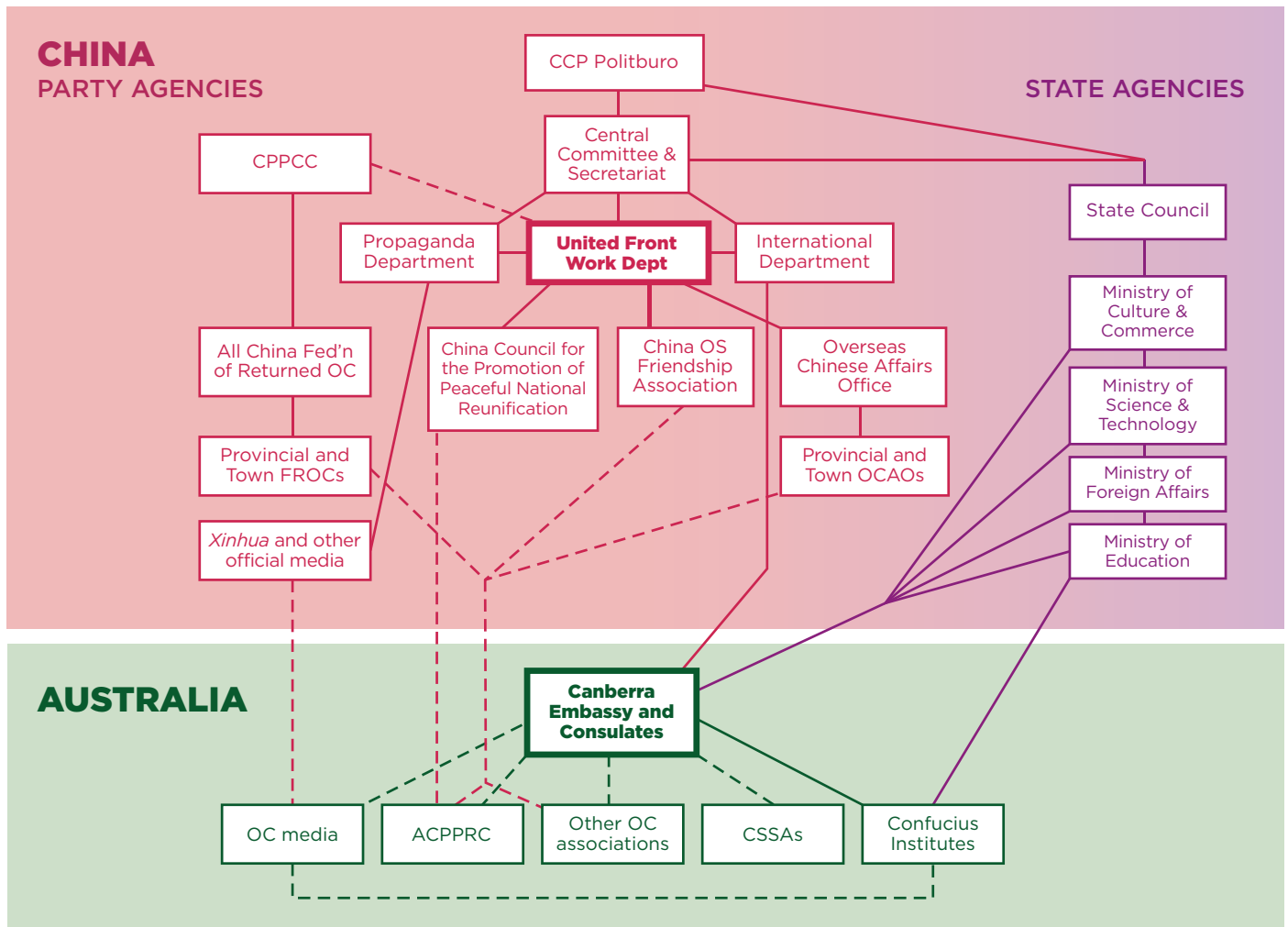
The psychological techniques applied in United Front efforts have been developed and refined by the CCP over decades and are taught to cadres with the help of (classified) manuals. New Zealand expert James To (2014) observes that the techniques applied to Chinese and non-Chinese alike are effective tools for "intensive behavioural control and manipulation" while appearing to be "benign, benevolent, and helpful" (189).

A similar one could be constructed for Canada. United Front activities fall under the aegis of the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee. The Third Bureau of the United Front Work Department is tasked with carrying out influence operations among ethnic Chinese communities abroad.

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It has four main agencies (see figure 1) - from right to left, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), the China Overseas Friendship Association, the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR), and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese. The last is an agency formally of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a large political advisory body run by the United Front Work Department. Its membership includes overseas Chinese who direct United Front bodies abroad or who use their wealth to acquire political influence.

Figure 1: Organizational structure of United Front operations in Australia (indicative)



OC - Overseas Chinese OS - Overseas CPPCC - Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
 ACPPRC - Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China
 CSSA - Chinese Students and Scholars Association

Direct relationship ————— Guided relationship - - - - -

Source: Adapted from James To, Figure 1, 74e

Importantly, each of the four agencies has provincial, city, and county counterparts throughout China, and these have a direct role in maintaining and cultivating links with provincial and hometown associations of overseas Chinese in Australia and elsewhere. Examples include the Australian Guangdong Chamber of Commerce and the Australia Fujian Association.

The China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR) is especially important for its work in Australia, where it is represented by the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC), described by expert Gerry Groot (2018) as “the overarching organizational vehicle in Australia for helping coordinate smaller bodies” (9:30).

Media attention on the activities and CCP links of the ACPPRC and its controversial former president Huang Xiangmo has been instrumental in raising public awareness of the United Front in Australia. Its central organizing and guiding role for many other Chinese-Australian organizations is the reason it warrants its own box in the bottom row of figure 1. The ACPPRC has state-based subsidiaries, with Tasmania being the last state to acquire one, in October 2017.

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The third box from the left refers to other overseas associations. In this category, we find a range of United Front organizations, including:

- hometown associations, such as the Australian Fujian Association;
- business associations, such as the Australia China Economic, Trade and Cultural Association (ACETCA) and the Australian-China Belt & Road Initiative;
- ethnic Chinese professional and scientific associations such as the Federation of Chinese Scholars in Australia; and
- cultural and religious groups, such as writers’ organizations.

The Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) are a further category. They are an integral component of United Front work, helping to monitor the thoughts and behaviours of the 178,000 Chinese students on campuses across Australia. More recently, they have been at the centre of brazen attempts to close down free speech on Australian campuses by organizing online protests and calling in consular officials to pressure universities to discipline staff members who make statements contrary to Beijing’s position, such as by referring to Taiwan as a separate country (Horwitz 2017).

Confucius Institutes operate more subtly, but leading CCP leaders have said they are important for “overseas propaganda” and are part of “a strategic plan for increasing our [China’s] soft power” (Fitzgerald 2018). Recently, Victoria University, which hosts a Confucius Institute, refused to host a documentary critical of Confucius Institutes, illustrating how, in the words of leading Sinologist John Fitzgerald, their presence signals to Beijing that the host university puts its relations with Beijing before academic freedom.

All but a few Chinese-language newspapers and radio stations in Australia are now controlled by pro-Beijing elements. As figure 1 indicates, these media are integral to United Front activity in Australia as they communicate to the diaspora the CCP view of the world. They also foment patriotic feelings and amplify official messages. At times, they

help promote nationalistic gatherings, like demonstrations against The Hague Tribunal’s ruling on the South China Sea in 2016, and stir up Chinese students to complain about any “anti-China” comments made by their lecturers.

Influencing elites

Elements of the diaspora have been put to good use targeting Australia’s political leaders. One favoured avenue is to draw them into engagement with Chinese community organizations like the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC) and festivals and cultural activities like Chinese New Year celebrations, where personal relationships are fostered and feelings of reciprocity are established. Through these contacts, Beijing’s view of the world is absorbed and becomes accepted.

Large donations to political parties have oiled the process of engagement. For example, ACPPRC president Huang Xiangmo reportedly demanded that the Labor Party change its policy on the South China Sea if it wanted to receive a promised \$400,000 donation (McKenzie et al. 2017).

Another example is election meddling. China’s consulate in Sydney is believed to have been linked to a social media campaign urging Chinese-Australian voters in the December 2017 Bennelong by-election to unseat the sitting conservative member (Joske 2017; O’Malley and Joske 2017). It was a way of sending a powerful message about Beijing’s capacity to mobilize Chinese-Australian voters and about the political risks of pursuing the proposed counter-subversion laws.

“United Front organizations also encourage their members to enter politics by joining mainstream parties and running for election.”

United Front organizations also encourage their members to enter politics by joining mainstream parties and running for election to federal and state parliaments. Local councils too can provide experience and contacts. Members are also encouraged to seek positions in politicians’ offices.² The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was reported last year to have identified about 10 political candidates at state and local government elections whom it believes have close ties to Chinese intelligence services (Maley and Berkovic 2017).

Finally, after they have left politics, influential and well-connected figures are recruited to the PRC cause through inducements such as positions on prestigious boards, lucrative positions with Chinese companies, or through funding think tanks.

Targeting regions

It’s well known that Beijing’s influence activities often target countries and provinces that are relatively poor and feel hard done by. This is happening in Australia, with particular focus on Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and Tasmania.

In Tasmania, for example, for some time a concerted campaign has been underway to extend the CCP’s political influence. The structure of influence organizations on the mainland (as shown in figure 1) is being replicated in Tasmania, primarily through the work of the United Front. Surprisingly, one central figure is Wang Xinde, or Master Wang, the leader of a large and wealthy esoteric Buddhist sect said to have 3–5 million members around the world, including a large number in Canada.

Wang is president of the Tasmanian branch of the ACPPRC. His website is unabashed about his desire to promote President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" and "tell a good China story, propagate Chinese voices" (Wang 2013). He has said of his Buddhist organization: "We will hold the latest policies enacted by the motherland as guidance for everything we do" (Wang 2016).

Master Wang has ingratiated himself with the state's political establishment, including the current premier of Tasmania, the previous Labor premier, and the current Opposition leader. In addition to well-targeted donations, Wang uses his lion dancing troupe as an entrée into a broad range of political and cultural events. He is among the cohort of "red Buddhists" cultivated by the Party at home and abroad. In addition to Buddhist temples, the Party has infiltrated some Chinese Christian churches in the West, and Canada is not immune.

Australia's pushback strategy

Over the last year or so, the Australian government has been implementing a pushback strategy against the CCP's influence campaign. The building blocks are a series of legislative and administrative measures taken by the Turnbull government, the centrepiece of which is the new foreign interference law.

Foreign interference law

In addition to broadening the definition of espionage, the new foreign interference legislation proscribes conduct that is:

- a. directed, funded, or supervised by a foreign principal or someone acting on its behalf, and
- b. is intended to influence a political or governmental process or the exercise of a democratic or political right (or prejudices national security), and
- c. is covert or involves deception, threats, or menaces.

In short, engaging in covert activity on behalf of a foreign power, and aimed at influencing a government process or the exercise of a democratic right in Australia, is now a criminal offence, punishable by long jail sentences.

Some examples modelled on actual events give an idea of the kinds of foreign interference activities expected to become criminal offences under the new legislation and subject to heavy jail terms.

- A wealthy donor with demonstrable links to CCP agencies privately threatens to withdraw a promised large donation to a political party unless it changes its policy on the South China Sea.
- An organization acting at the behest of a PRC consulate mobilizes its members to disrupt a legitimate demonstration by Tibet autonomy supporters and intimidate those taking part.
- In the midst of an election campaign, a person aligned to a United Front group, and in consultation with a PRC consulate, circulates within the ethnic Chinese community a letter denouncing one candidate or party as "anti-China" and urging them to vote for the other candidate.

The new law's definition of foreign interference is broad, yet a range of other foreign interference or influence operations hostile to Australia's national interests will evade it. The following illustrations are also modelled on actual events.

- A wealthy individual with close but hidden links to the CCP funds the establishment of a think tank at an Australian university and chooses its director. The founding principles, expectations, and structure of the think tank are all oriented towards generating comment and output that is sympathetic to Beijing.

- A former prime minister is invited onto the board of an important institution in China. He soon begins to see the world through “Chinese” eyes. A leading opinion-maker at home, he argues Beijing’s case consistently, often reproducing propaganda points from official state media. Although not caught by the interference law, the former prime minister may be required to register under the new transparency scheme.
- A wealthy businessman with close links to the CCP buys up Chinese-language newspapers and changes their editorial orientation so that they consistently promote the interests of the PRC, including where they conflict with Australia’s official position. They stir up patriotic Chinese students to report their lecturers and encourage readers to attend pro-Beijing demonstrations.
- A PRC consulate official complains to a university Deputy Vice-Chancellor about a lecturer who referred to Taiwan as an independent country. The DVC reminds the lecturer that, while she is free to say what she likes in class, the university derives hundreds of millions of dollars from Chinese students.

Beyond the new foreign interference law are other legislative measures aimed at countering the new threats.

- The new Critical Infrastructure Centre (2018) assesses the national security risks of foreign investment in the telecommunications, electricity, gas, water, and ports sectors. It was set up after some blunders, including the 99-year lease of the Port of Darwin to a state-linked Chinese company in 2015. That sale was a serious mistake and would not be permitted now.
- The new Centre also follows on the last-minute decision in 2016 to block the sale of New South Wales electricity distributor Ausgrid to the Chinese government-owned State Grid Corporation and the Hong Kong-based company Cheung Kong Infrastructure, apparently because of Ausgrid’s links with the top-secret communications base at Pine Gap (Hartcher 2018).

“A revamp is expected of the *Defence Trade Controls Act* that regulates the export of defence-related equipment and technology.”

- These decisions also led to the rewriting of the rules of the Foreign Investment Review Board to put greater emphasis on national security considerations.
- A revamp is expected of the *Defence Trade Controls (DTC) Act* that regulates the export of defence-related equipment and technology. After revelations that it was probably failing to prevent the PRC acquiring valuable knowledge from Australian research organizations, the Defence Minister ordered a review of the *DTC Act* (Dewar 2018).
- Since September 2018, the *Telecommunications Sector Security Reform Act* imposes obligations on carriers, carriage service providers, and intermediaries to beef up their efforts to protect networks and facilities from unauthorized access and interference (Department of Home Affairs 2018).
- The proposed ban on foreign political donations is currently held up in the Senate, but is likely to be enacted soon.

We should not neglect a series of measures that are administrative or signal Australia’s heightened vigilance in an era of political warfare, which in our region means China.

- The Immigration Department is more closely scrutinizing scientists from China applying to work in Australian universities, after revelations that scientists from the PLA have been working on military-related research in Australian universities.
- The creation of the Department of Home Affairs, a giant new intelligence, enforcement, and policy hub. Announcing it, Prime Minister Turnbull (2017b) said: “There is no national-security threat outside wartime that demands an integrated all-of-government capability like this one.”
- Senior officials from ASIO have for some time been meeting executives from Australian universities and large businesses offering warnings about how they engage with the PRC and the risks they face of co-optation.
- Awareness and attitudes at the senior levels of the Australian Public Service have shifted from appeasing Beijing at every turn to a more mature understanding of the PRC’s aims and techniques. Economic considerations no longer trump those of national security.
- China’s aggression and subversive activities are also driving the Five Eyes nations closer together in the area of intelligence collaboration. After meeting at the end of August 2018, the Five Eyes nations issued a statement condemning the coercive, deceptive, and clandestine activities of foreign governments and their proxies and committing to better sharing of intelligence to confront the foreign interference challenge (Porter 2018).

Prime Minister Turnbull used conciliatory language on China in a speech in August this year that some commentators read as a backdown or reset after Beijing had been expressing its displeasure. But it was a speech written for the optics (one given before the announcement of the banning of Huawei from Australia’s 5G network).

Newspaper columnist Greg Sheridan (2018) got it right: “This speech was as significant for the things it did not say. It did not back away one millimetre from any of the tough national security positions Beijing doesn’t like.” What Turnbull did say, he said in his speech at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue. There he laid out clearly and firmly the new view from Canberra. He called for an Indo-Pacific where:

freedom of navigation goes unchallenged and the rights of small states are untrammelled. . . .
And disagreements are resolved by dialogue in accordance with agreed rules and established institutions. This is a world where big fish neither eat nor intimidate the small. (Turnbull 2017a)

He went on with a very pointed defence of the rules-based order that no one could have doubted was a rebuke to the PRC’s behaviour.

Having said all this, I think we are still a long way from institutionalizing the new China-vigilance to the point where we can be confident of rebuffing the CCP’s sustained attempts to influence, interfere, and subdue. For example, while progress has been made at the federal level, the new national stance seems to have passed over the heads of some state governments. So there is much work for Australia to do before we can be confident that our sovereignty and democratic processes are no longer subject to unwelcome foreign influence.

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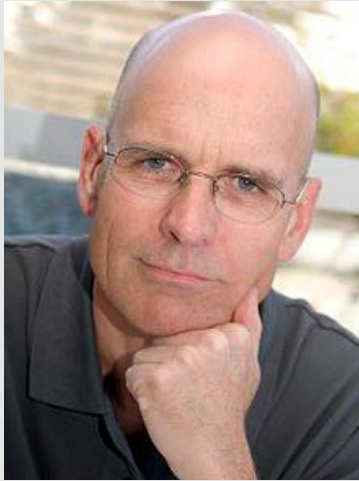
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Endnotes

- 1 See Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, 2018, *Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017*, January 22; Anne-Marie Brady, 2017, “Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping,” and the April 9, 2018 episode of Gerry Groot’s podcast, “How to Make Friends and Influence People: Inside the magic weapon of the United Front,” *The Little Red Podcast*. The definitive work on the CCP’s influence work among overseas Chinese is James Jiann Hua To, 2014, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill.
- 2 Some United Front operatives working in political offices have been named in the media (see, for example, Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, 2017, “Political Networking the Chinese Way – a Sydney MP and His ‘Community Adviser,’” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 22). Others have been identified but have not yet been exposed in the media.

About the Author



Clive Hamilton is an Australian author and public intellectual. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra. For 14 years, until February 2008, he was the Executive Director of The Australia Institute, a progressive think tank he founded. He holds an arts degree from the Australian National University and an economics degree from the University of Sydney. He completed a doctorate in the economics of development at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Clive has held visiting academic positions at Yale University, the University of Oxford, University College London and Sciences Po in Paris. In 2018, his controversial book, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*, was published by Hardie Grant after three other publishers pulled out citing fear of punishment from Beijing. It became an immediate best-seller. In 2009 Clive was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his contribution to public debate and public policy.



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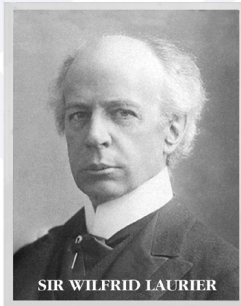
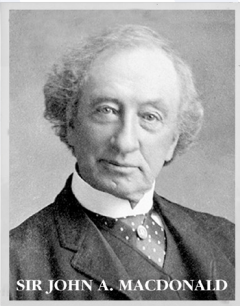
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In five short years, the institute has established itself as a steady source of high-quality research and thoughtful policy analysis here in our nation's capital. Inspired by Canada's deep-rooted intellectual tradition of ordered liberty – as exemplified by Macdonald and Laurier – the institute is making unique contributions to federal public policy and discourse. Please accept my best wishes for a memorable anniversary celebration and continued success.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is an important source of fact and opinion for so many, including me. Everything they tackle is accomplished in great depth and furthers the public policy debate in Canada. Happy Anniversary, this is but the beginning.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE PAUL MARTIN

In its mere five years of existence, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, under the erudite Brian Lee Crowley's vibrant leadership, has, through its various publications and public events, forged a reputation for brilliance and originality in areas of vital concern to Canadians: from all aspects of the economy to health care reform, aboriginal affairs, justice, and national security.

BARBARA KAY, NATIONAL POST COLUMNIST

Intelligent and informed debate contributes to a stronger, healthier and more competitive Canadian society. In five short years the Macdonald-Laurier Institute has emerged as a significant and respected voice in the shaping of public policy. On a wide range of issues important to our country's future, Brian Lee Crowley and his team are making a difference.

JOHN MANLEY, CEO COUNCIL
