
CASE STUDY

Litmus Testing as a Tool of Political Exclusion

Canadians United Against Modern Exclusion · 1 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This case study examines how litmus testing, judging individuals' loyalty based on their views on specific issues, has been practiced in Canada. Through three examples involving parliamentary committee hearings and a public inquiry, it shows how litmus testing shifts the focus in conversations about foreign interference from evidence and logic to personal opinion and prejudice. This practice not only harms those directly implicated but also discourages broader political participation, by equating loyalty to Canada with holding certain approved views.

What is Litmus Testing?

If you've ever taken a high school chemistry class, you'll understand litmus testing as a way to quickly and effectively determine the acidity of a solution.

The idea behind the litmus test, using a simple test to make a judgement, is also prevalent in places outside the classroom. For instance, Canadians engage in litmus testing when they decide who to vote on the basis of an issue important to them, such as carbon taxes or gun control. It can be a useful heuristic that makes it easier to participate in politics.

However, litmus testing can also be harmful. It is harmful when it is used to make a judgement not about personal support for a party or individual, but about whether someone is a "good" or "bad" Canadian.

Specifically in the context of understanding and combatting foreign interference, litmus testing has reached an extreme where individuals are judged to be disloyal to Canada when they "fail" these tests. It

shifts attention away from evidence-based analysis, fostering a culture of exclusion that targets people based on their positions on certain issues deemed as “litmus tests” of being a good Canadian.

In this study, we outline three examples of litmus testing in practice and discuss their consequences for those directly involved and Canadians at large.

1. Litmus Testing in the House of Commons

The Special Committee on Canada–China Relations (CACN) was first established in 2019 as a special committee of the House of Commons and continued until the 45th Parliament in 2025. Over the course of its existence, it heard from hundreds of witnesses and produced reports that reflected the dominant narrative in Canadian thinking about China, such as those analyzing the presence of “police stations” in Canada acting on behalf of the Chinese government and the firing of scientists from the National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg. While most witnesses were government officials or individuals whose views aligned with the majority of members, a smaller number were perceived as too “pro-China” and faced combative questioning for holding positions seen as inconsistent with this prevailing perspective.

For instance, Yves Tiberghien, a professor at UBC, was scrutinized for his alleged involvement in the university’s financial ties to China and Chinese companies. As the director of the UBC China Council, he faced questions from MP Garnett Genuis such as: “Do you think it's a problem for you to be responsible for working with the university, advising them on their financial interests vis-a-vis China, while also offering expertise to the public on Canada-China relations?” Instead of drawing on Dr. Tiberghien’s expertise in Canada-China relations, the exchange focused on whether he could be trusted as a credible source. In doing so, it reflected the logic of litmus testing, which prioritizes and filters testimony through judgments of loyalty and perceived bias.

Dominic Barton, then Canada’s ambassador to China, was accused during his appearance in CACN of being too “pro-China” on the grounds that his previous employer advised Chinese state-owned companies, that he praised aspects of China’s COVID-19 response, and that he acknowledged that China is a distinct society with its own history and values. He was criticized so heavily for his testimony that his next committee appearance made headlines for a noticeable shift in tone: more openly critical of the Chinese government and with far less nuance than before.

Simply because these witnesses did not take every opportunity to criticize the Chinese government, committee members deemed them to have “failed” their litmus tests, treating this as evidence suggestive of foreign influence. Such thinking is not just flawed but also dangerous. Commentary in response to these meetings drew comparisons between the treatment of these witnesses and McCarthyism, with one

witness remarking that it was becoming the “committee for un-Canadian activities.” Such a characterization underscores the harm caused when those in positions of power act on prejudice and fear rather than on reason and evidence.

2. Litmus Testing in Dotting the Map

In a previous case study, we outlined how the online publication Dotting the Map (DTM) contributes to a culture of exclusion that compromises the ability for Canadians, specifically those of Chinese descent, to participate freely in politics. Aside from their maps, DTM also encourages litmus testing of candidates and politicians, with a list of suggested questions to ask them to determine whether they can be trusted as loyal Canadians. Among these are questions such as:

“Do you agree that the Beijing regime’s bullying and thuggish behaviour is unacceptable, that it is eroding the rule of law based international order; therefore, Canada should halt and rethink our “engagement policy” with China?”

“Do you agree to withdraw our membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which is led by the PRC?”

Whether and to what extent Canada should continue to engage with China and be involved with the AIIB are complex questions with no easy answers. It is certainly anyone’s right to believe the answer to the first two questions should be an unqualified “yes.” However, to consider anyone who does not also answer with a categorical “yes” as possibly under the influence of the Chinese government is to engage in litmus testing that excludes Canadians on the basis of their views.

3. Litmus Testing in the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference

On April 2, 2024, former MP Han Dong provided witness testimony as part of the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference (PIFI). His inclusion in the inquiry was a consequence of allegations that the Chinese government had interfered in his 2019 nomination race to help him win and that he had encouraged the continued detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in China.

Instead of focusing on the evidence behind these allegations, however, questioning of Dong also veered into questionable territory. For instance, Gib van Ert, lawyer for Michael Chong, asked: “Sir, do you accept that the People's Republic of China is attempting to interfere in Canadian democracy?” Despite the fact that one of the objectives of PIFI was to determine whether inference was occurring, Dong was subjected to a litmus test requiring him to accept the allegation as fact before any evidence was considered.

Another example is Nando de Luca, lawyer for the Conservative Party of Canada, asking Dong why he did not vote on two motions in the House of Commons concerning the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and Canada's response. The stated purpose of these questions was to know "the extent to which Mr. Dong has been prepared to or not to speak out against foreign actors such as the PRC." The obvious implication of this statement is that, insofar as Dong did not take every opportunity to criticize the Chinese government's actions, he must be acting as a foreign proxy and a disloyal Canadian.

The Han Dong case reflects a broader premise underlying the inquiry's work: that agreeing with or sharing positions held by the Chinese government is equivalent to acting under its influence. Such an approach shifts the focus away from examining actual evidence of foreign interference and toward judging individuals on the basis of their personal views and whether they "pass" a political loyalty test. During the inquiry, this same presumption was applied to Canadians more broadly, particularly those of Chinese descent, who were portrayed as being under the Chinese government's influence whenever their actions or opinions happened to align with its positions.

The Implications of Litmus Testing

These three examples of litmus testing show that exclusion is not a peripheral issue: it is embedded in our central political institutions and shapes thinking even at the highest levels of government.

Litmus testing is not inherently harmful. It is perfectly fine to not support, or even dislike, those whose views diverge from yours on issues you are very passionate about, even if doing so is not conducive to robust democratic debate. For instance, MPs' voting records are public, and you are certainly free to use it as the basis for your vote. But to say that an MP is acting in association with, or is influenced by, a foreign government on the basis of their voting records is to take litmus testing to a dangerous extreme. This is what happened in the case of Han Dong.

Alignment or lack of opposition is not proof of foreign interference and we should take care not to conflate personal opinion with objective facts. A failure to do so leads to exclusion in the most literal definition of the word: Han Dong left the Liberal caucus shortly after allegations against him emerged and he is no longer an MP.

Litmus testing also contributes to exclusion in a more nuanced way that impacts all Canadians, particularly those of Chinese descent. They may refrain from participating in politics for fear of being labelled a proxy or as someone who cannot think for themselves. They may also fear being dismissed if they do not first preface any opinion they share with statements proving they pass common litmus tests (e.g., declaring that the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs is a genocide), even when the

opinion they want to share is entirely unrelated.

Beyond its impact on individual Canadians, on the aggregate level litmus testing limits the scope for informed debate on issues such as Canada-China relations. So long as the only acceptable view is to see China as an “adversary” and to understand constructive engagement with China to be “pro-China” and detrimental to Canada’s national interests, we deprive ourselves of the ability to consider a diverse range of opinions, pursue innovative solutions, and craft policies that genuinely serve Canada’s long-term interests. These constraints are particularly salient in light of ongoing U.S. economic coercion against Canada, when maintaining flexibility and autonomy in foreign policy is more important than ever. Democracy depends on open political engagement. Rejecting litmus testing is essential to ensuring the inclusion of all Canadians in politics and charting an informed path forward for Canada.

References

1. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/CACN/Work?parl=44&session=1>
2. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-1/CACN/meeting-7/evidence>
3. <https://www.chc.ca/news/politics/china-kovrig-spavor-dominic-barton-1.5835036>
4. <https://www.hilltimes.com/story/2020/03/04/tory-questions-turning-house-canada-china-group-into-committee-for-un-canadian-activities-says-witness/228217/>
5. <https://www.cuame.ca/dotting-the-map-modern-exclusion-and-the-making-of-the-disloyal-canadian>
6. <https://www.canfriendshk.ca/ask-politicians-questions>
7. https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI_-_Public_Hearings_-_Volume_8_-_April_22024-Floor_transcript.pdf
8. Mr Dong sued Corus Entertainment, owner of Global News, for publishing the allegations about his involvement in foreign interference. The lawsuit was settled out of court in June 2025 with an admission by Global News that the “. . . Final Report of the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference, including . . . the classified information reviewed by Justice Marie Josee Hogue corroborates that Mr. Dong did not suggest that the PRC extend the detention of Michael Kovrig and Micheal Spavor”.
9. February 22, 2021 vote: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/votes/43/2/56>; February 1, 2023 vote: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/54157/motions/11892002>
10. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/donald-trumps-dangerous-game-of-territorial-expansion>
11. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-as-canada-scrambles-for-options-beware-the-temptation-of-china/>
12. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-china-canola-tariffs-canada/>