

Scams

This is a difficult topic. No one likes to admit that they've been tricked. But far too many people have been victimized by telephone or online scams. There is a need to increase vigilance when it comes to protecting ourselves from scammers. They have become more cunning in their approach to stealing our money or personal information.

I've become aware of two types of scams that are a serious threat to my constituents: Revenue Canada (CRA) scams and romance scams.

The incredibly manipulative persons who conduct these scams have made it very difficult to discern these situations as scams. Their tactics take advantage of a person's vulnerabilities, coercing or threatening their targets—sometimes under the guise of government employees.

I was approached by constituents in my series of January Community Meetings throughout the riding, and they showed

me how meticulous and persistent these scammers can be. The scammers constantly change their phone numbers so they cannot be blocked, and the phone numbers resemble local phone numbers so that residents are more likely to pick up.

In the sections below I describe two common scams I hear about from constituents. Both scams are about personal aspects of our lives, so it can be difficult to reach out for help.

Whether you've been victimized or are in the process of being victimized, or if this has affected a loved one, it can be very difficult to discuss.

I would like to be of help. Even if you don't want to disclose your name or personal details, my office can help with advice if you have questions about Revenue Canada or Immigration Canada.

CRA Scams

Fraudulent CRA communications and scammers impersonating CRA agents continue to rise. At least 60,000 Canadians have reported being targeted by phone scams over the past five years and more than \$10 million dollars has been stolen in that same time period.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/cra-phone-tax-scam-marketplace-1.4830141>)

CRA scams use various methods to contact you: by telephone, mail, text message, and e-mail. These scammers may insist you must pay fictitious debt to the CRA immediately to avoid further penalties, or request personal information so that the taxpayer can receive a refund or benefit payment; leaving you vulnerable to identity theft.

Similar to the websites pretending to be news sources, these scammers have created fake CRA websites that look legitimate to the untrained eye. When receiving communications from what looks to be the CRA, it is important to analyze what you have received before taking any action. The key thing to look out for is if they are requesting certain personal information such as your passport, health card, or driver's license.

The CRA will never:

- ask for information about your passport, health card, or driver's license,
- demand immediate payment by Interac e-transfer, bitcoin, prepaid credit cards or gift cards from retailers such as iTunes, Amazon, or others,
- use aggressive language or threaten you with arrest or

sending the police,

- leave voicemails that are threatening or ask for personal or financial information.

If you ever find yourself victim to one of these scams, contact your local police service immediately and then contact CRA to inform them that your information has been compromised.

You can report deceptive telemarketing to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre by telephone, 1-888-495-8501, or visit their website: <http://www.antifraudcentre.ca/>. If your social insurance number has been stolen, contact Service Canada at 1-800-206-7218. For further information about CRA scams, and how to protect yourself, please visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/corporate/security/protect-yourself-against-fraud.html>.

My constituency office can give advice and assistance with CRA cases. If you feel unsure about a call or email you've received, reach out to my office at 250-657-2000. My staff can give advice on how you should proceed if you've been contacted by the CRA. They will be happy to help.

Available resource: *"The Little Black Book of Scams, 2nd Edition", Competition Bureau of Canada, 2018.*

Romance Scams

Romance scams are typically conducted through social media or dating websites, using fake profiles to lure potential victims into relationships. Once a relationship is built and a semblance of trust has been established (usually after long, intimate conversations and tokens of love sent by the fraudster in the form of gifts), the fraudster eventually requests money or banking information.

Usually the fraudsters live in other countries and will ask for money for travel costs to visit their new lover (but will never actually physically show) – or they will suggest investing money into a business opportunity that could support the financial cost of being together, or ask for money to support them through personal crises (e.g. needing money to support their Canadian visa application, fake tragedies, medical issues, asking for a ransom while pretending to be kidnapped, various other hardships/sob-stories).

It is incredibly difficult to identify a romance scam. As the victim is manipulated by the fraudster to hide the nature of the relationship, banks or family relations have trouble recognizing that exorbitant amounts of money – disguised as property or business investments - are being used for deceitful ends. Reported instances of romance fraud are much lower than the statistics because many victims will not report the crime or inform their loved ones due to shame, fear of ridicule, and denial. Romance scams are the highest grossing scams compared to other Internet frauds (according to the CAFC's 2016 statistics, source: <http://www.rcmp.gc.ca/en/gazette/romance-scams>).

There is a greater danger than just financial loss. Some persons leave the country to visit their 'partner' in a foreign country in an effort to either retrieve them, or to help them get into Canada, or because they plan to move to the foreign country to be with their 'partner.' In some cases, Canadians have left their jobs, homes, selling all of their belongings for a marriage abroad that fails to take place. Some cases can result in violent situations including kidnappings and forced imprisonment.

To protect yourself, find out in advance about the laws and customs on relationships and marriage in the country where they say they're from, and what the visa and immigration laws are for that nationality coming to Canada. NEVER disclose your banking information, NEVER send intimate photos (as those can be used as blackmail at a later point).

How to report it/what to do if you find yourself in this kind of situation:

- If you did send money or share financial information, report it to the financial institution used (e.g., your bank, Western Union, MoneyGram).
- Gather all information pertaining to the situation, including the scammer's profile name, how you made contact, social media screenshots, emails, etc. and contact your local police.
- File a report with the CAFC toll-free at 1-888-495-8501 or online at www.antifraudcentre.ca.
- Notify the dating website or social media site where you met the scammer. Scammers usually have more than one account. Be proactive, tell family, friends, coworkers and neighbours about your experience to warn them about romance scams.
- If you've sent money or transferred money or goods on behalf of a scammer, the police and financial institutions need to be aware in order to properly investigate, recover stolen funds and/or goods if possible and work toward preventing further criminal activity.

Reporting romance scams helps fraud authorities to warn other people about current scams, monitor trends and disrupt scams where possible.



Sunday, March 31, Anacortes—Sidney ferry returns. Left—Richard Riddell, Anacortes Town Crier. Right—Kenny Podmore, Sidney Town Crier.



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Introduction

Some say that we are in a post-truth era, but the reality is that the truth matters today more than ever.

I am very concerned that the recognition that there is such a thing as "truth" and that it matters not to tell lies is increasingly treated as an anachronism, a quaint tenet of by-gone days. I am appalled when various leaders in Canada show no remorse when, à la Trump, they are exposed as having deliberately misled the voter. Attacks on legitimate news organizations and the "media" in general are creeping into Canadian politics, while more people are relying on highly dubious sources from various websites.

The truth matters. And being able to discern who is telling the truth is increasingly important.

As we enter another federal election campaign, I want to focus this newsletter on how citizens can effectively separate truth from lies, real news from fake news, and be watchful for attempts by foreign entities to interfere with our elections.

Just as 2018 ended, the Liberal government succeeded in getting the *Election Modernization Act* (Bill C-76) passed into law in time for this fall's election.

There is much in that bill which is good and necessary. It repairs much of the damage done to our voting process in the previous government's so-called "Fair Elections Act." That bill made it harder for people to vote and restricted the scope of action of the Chief Electoral Officer. As well, Bill C-76 attempts to update our election laws to prevent foreign interference in our elections through such measures as prohibiting selling advertisements or knowingly accepting election ads from non-Canadians.

Nevertheless, the Hon. Karina Gould, Minister for Democratic Institutions, has been clear: the Government of Canada does not have the tools to make our election process bulletproof against foreign-funded attempts to distort it. In late November, the minister told the Senate committee studying Bill C-76, "It would be virtually impossible to prevent foreign interference during elections. This has always been a problem in democracies," Gould said. "Based on our research ... on global elections, foreign players could use social media platforms to influence the voting of (Canadians)."

(Alex Boutilier, "‘Virtually impossible’ to prevent foreign meddling in 2019 election, Karina Gould says" *Toronto Star*, November 22,

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2018)

Gould's conclusions were echoed by Canada's former National Security Advisor, Richard Fadden. Noting that foreign entities had interfered in the United States, England, France and Germany, Fadden said, "I can see no rationale for concluding that we will not be the subject of meddling as well."

(*CTV News*, "Former national security adviser questions feds' plan to prevent election meddling," *January 6, 2019*)

So, what can we do to ensure Canadians vote based on facts - and not conspiracy theories and trumped up lies? The tools we need are between our ears. We need an informed and engaged citizenry, capable of critical thinking and analysis.

We need to be our own watchdogs, our own defenders of a healthy democracy. I hope this newsletter helps you sharpen those tools.

Finally, I sometimes hear from constituents who have been victimized by scammers. Most often it's too late for my office to be of assistance. The two most common scams involve CRA and romance. I'll share with you what I've learned about both.

What is “Fake News”?

There is such a thing as “fake news.” I first encountered it in 2009 in the midst of the disastrous climate talks in Copenhagen. I knew immediately that the “news” I had in front of me on my laptop screen was a hoax. I thought it was brilliant.

It was a meticulously designed sting intended to expose Harper’s climate obstructionism. It came in several parts: first, a news release that perfectly mimicked Environment Canada committing Canada to deep reductions in green house gas emissions; second, a further release carrying reaction from other delegations to the “news” from Canada, then, a link to what appeared to be Environment Canada’s website with more details; lastly, a link to a perfect replica of the *Wall Street Journal’s* home page, confirming the news.

Within hours, the “Yes Men,” a self-described “culture jamming activist duo,” claimed credit. While I was marveling at their strategies, I should have been quaking in my boots. What if such tactics were used, not as hoaxes to be unveiled by those seeking climate action, but by those planning to bury the truth under mountains of lies?

“Fake news” in our current context is communicated like a virus. It looks like the real thing and presents outrageous and

untrue nonsense as fact. In the 2016 US election campaign, the claims that President Obama had banned the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, that Hillary Clinton planned to limit Christians’ right to worship, and that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump appeared on the Internet with the look of real news. Not a shred of truth to any of the claims. The mastheads of real news outlets were appropriated to convey credibility. Who knows how much that trickery impacted the election.

But now in office, Trump is benefiting from the term “fake news.” He has misappropriated the term to discredit articles focusing on his administration’s ties to Russia and accusations of criminal activities carried out by his close associates. Are the claims inaccurate? He can dispute that. But it is even more dangerous that he labels it “fake news.” By definition, “fake news” is not what appears in newspapers written by reporters working for those papers. That is real news, whether it contains errors or displays biases, it is not “fake.”

Reporters can make mistakes. Those mistakes are usually corrected with retractions. Where there is room for debate, traditionally, both sides of the story are given a voice. The purpose of journalism is to inform an interested and engaged citizenry. It is an essential element of a healthy democracy.

Canada is not immune: What can we do as citizens?

In a New Year’s Eve post, veteran journalist Jennifer Ditchburn, formerly of the CBC, urged Canadians to take up a 2019 Resolution: “Our New Year’s resolution as citizens should be to declare ourselves the first line of defence against the weaponization of lies.”

[Policy Options, “This year resolve to be a more intelligent reader on line,” published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, December 31, 2018]

She warned, “The implications of not taking more care about what we absorb and then distribute online can’t be overstated. Information is being used as a weapon not just against parties and politicians but also against our sense of trust in institutions and our social harmony.”

Ditchburn spoke with psychologists who warn that the deluge of misinformation can lead to apathy, to a culture of “I don’t believe in anything.”

She went on to set out findings from a recent study by the Oxford Internet Institute’s Computational Propaganda Research project. It established that Russia used social media to suppress the African-American and Hispanic vote during the 2016 American election. Ditchburn explained, “Russia’s Internet Research Agency used the segmentation of advertising markets offered by social media platforms such as Facebook to tell those voters that they should boycott the election. It encouraged right-wing voters to vote for Trump and shared posts with them designed to kick up anger around minorities and immigration. The Russians also sought to drive a wedge among liberal voters, trying to reduce trust in the political system.”

The report found similar intrusions in Sweden and in Mexico,

generated by Russia. Canada is not immune. Despite efforts by Elections Canada to ferret out bot content and deliberate lies for political purposes, social media is an unregulated breeding ground for misinformation. Simultaneously, we must never forget that people have the right to free speech.

So what do we do?

A recent conference of political scientists in Quebec studied the problem and came up with a set of tools for the informed citizen. It starts with the “30 Seconds Rule.”

Conference organizer, Prof. Thierry Giasson at Université Laval, explained the “30 Seconds Rule.” Take 30 seconds before sharing anything: “Look at the source: where is this coming from? Usually a source is clearly identified. Is it a legitimate news organization?”

If you look through this newsletter, and all of its earlier versions over the last nearly eight years as your MP, you will notice that I always provide references. Readers can go back to the original source to see if the information upon which I have relied is verified.

But much in social media is based on propaganda websites that look remarkably like legitimate news organizations. When you follow the “30 Seconds Rule”, if the post has no clear sourcing to a reliable news organization, then do not share it or like it on social media. And I’ll take it a step further. Warn others. Explain that you have checked this or that tweet or Facebook post and have found it has no basis in fact.

More than one hundred years ago, Mark Twain quipped, “A lie can make its way half-way around the world while Truth is lacing up its boots.” In the era of social media, the lies move even faster.

We need to be vigilant.



January Community Meeting—Sidney with Saanich North and the Islands MLA Adam Olsen.



January Community Meeting—Galiano Island with Saanich North and the Islands MLA Adam Olsen.

An instructive Canadian example: the hysteria over Motion 103

What is happening in the US is dangerous, but it is also happening here.

There is a growing number of websites that do not fall into the “fake news” category because they do not pretend to be the home pages of real newspapers. They do pretend to be news sources. They create an echo chamber to appeal to those who are interested in a topic of concern and feel the mainstream media is not giving them the “truth.” Several of my constituents have sent me articles from US-based webpages that were new to me—the American Thinker and the Gatestone Institute. The content was disturbing. The focus was on creating fear, distrust and hatred of “other” peoples, particularly Muslims. Within Canada, Ezra Levant and his so-called Rebel Media are doing the same. And they seized on an entirely innocuous, non-controversial motion in Parliament to create fear and division.

Motion 103 was put forward by Liberal MP, Iqra Khalid, in December 2016. A motion is not a bill. It does not create laws; it does not bind governments. Khalid’s motion recognized a rising threat of Islamophobia and called on the government to “recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear.”

It is clear that, whether caused by Trump’s ascendancy or merely a free rider of newly empowered hate and racism, there has been a rise in anti-Semitism in Canada, with attacks even on the front doors of rabbis. But if anyone needed proof of an increased level of threat to Muslims, the murder of six men, killed while at prayer in their local mosque, is more than enough reason to reach out and assure Muslim Canadians of their place in our hearts and our society. The day after the attack, on January 30, 2017, I attended the vigil in Quebec City. It was shattering to be among the friends and families of those who were killed and of the many more who still lay in hospital. But it was also very moving to see thousands of local Quebec City residents, with their children bundled against the winter night, stand for over an hour in the bitter cold, warmed only by the glow of their candles.

Sensible conservative voices, such as MP Michael Chong, who was in the midst of the Conservative leadership race, and prominent columnist Andrew Coyne were drowned out by those claiming that Motion 103 would introduce Sharia law, or that it would place Islam “above” other religions. But as Coyne wrote, “the notion that this amounts to ‘singling out’ one religion for ‘special privileges,’ as some have claimed, is specious.”

I voted for Motion 103 and I voted for a similar Conservative motion, decrying the rise in extremism and discrimination more generally. I continued to hear from worried constituents that somehow Motion 103 would lead to Islam being placed in a privileged position over other religions. I kept trying to explain that a study by the Heritage Committee could not possibly put anyone’s rights at risk.

Finally, on February 1, 2018, the Report of the Heritage Committee was released. Its findings were neatly summed up by Global TV’s commentator, Rob Breakinridge:

... hysterical warnings were coming from otherwise respectable commentators in mainstream publications. There were anti-M-103 protests in various cities across the country. Some Conservative leadership candidates even participated in a rally against M-103, where some of the most alarmist conspiracy theories were prominently on display.

And now, suddenly, the whole narrative lies in ruins. Nothing changed when the motion was passed, and nothing will change now that the committee has issued its report. There are no recommendations for banning criticism of Islam, no calls for a new blasphemy law or Sharia law. There is nothing in this report that is remotely close to the dire warnings we’ve been hearing for months.

(COMMENTARY: The implosion of Canada’s M-103 conspiracy theories, Global News, February 3, 2018)

The most recent efforts to scare Canadians over nothing

Two recent news stories gained attention. Some constituents wrote me very concerned that there was a new party in Ontario, called the Islamic Party. Others expressed concern about the United Nations Migration Pact.

It turns out that there is no new party in Ontario. There is a website that calls itself the Islamic Party of Ontario. So far, the name has been reserved with Elections Ontario, but it does not have enough supporters to gain official status, for which it needs 1,000 supporters. When stories about the party first emerged, it had 60 followers on Twitter.

A friend of mine, Michael Coren, who is a commentator for the *Toronto Star* looked into it. What he found was that the number of Twitter followers of the Islamic Party was going up. But when he looked at the followers, he found they were mostly Conservative commentators and party members who were also attacking the party’s existence. Coren noted:

“There certainly are Islamist extremists in Canada, but far fewer than in most countries. To be sure, [non-Islamist] right-wing extremists have killed far more people in Canada..... The vast majority of Muslims in Canada are moderate and even secular. For Canada’s right-wing, Muslims are marked as the “other” and something to be feared and hated.”

(Michael Coren, “Islamic Party of Ontario: latest extremist “threat” singled out by Canada’s right has PC party connection,” Toronto Star, January 9, 2019)

The second story, attracting far more attention, including globally, was the United Nations Migration Pact. The impacts of that shared multilateral statement included forcing the resignation of the Prime Minister of Belgium.

The statement is not extreme. It merely supports help in planned settlement of refugees. Doug Saunders in the *Globe and Mail* wrote a very clear analysis of the pact itself and the political efforts to distort the pact and create panic and fear.

“That document, if you bother to read it, is an anodyne, purely

symbolic statement of principles intended to reduce overall immigration numbers, and especially to discourage irregular – that is, illegal – immigration. Like other such UN compacts, its main purpose is to provide principled-sounding statements for preambles of other documents...”

Unfortunately, some political leaders in Canada, including Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, have misstated the pact’s impact. Saunders continued:

“... Mr. Scheer claimed that the Compact ‘gives influence over Canada’s immigration system to foreign entities.’ He then denounced the ‘crisis at our borders’ and ‘chaos at our borders’ caused by ‘illegal border crossers’ – suggesting that cross-border chaos, danger and criminality would be products of this document...”

“Where did this weird theory come from? As Laurens Cerulus and Eline Schaart found out in an investigation this week for Politico, it was the product of a calculated social-media campaign by “a coalition of anti-Islam, far-right and neo-Nazi sympathizers” based in Europe. It was taken up in September by far-right parties in Europe, and by figures in Mr. Trump’s circle.”

“Mr. Scheer’s decision to join Mr. Trump in picking up this ugly thread might have seemed like an expedient way to turn immigration fears into anti-Liberal sentiment. Yet, the larger danger of such conspiracy theories is not just that they are absurdly false – but that some people really believe them.”

(Doug Saunders, “The politics of border-crossing bogeymen are unwise – and dangerous,” Globe and Mail, January 12, 2019)

Saunders went on to describe the kind of damage done when people believe such nonsense. He linked the shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and the killings at the Quebec City mosque to people who have been misled to believe they are at risk from others. To protect and preserve a healthy democracy and a compassionate and healthy society, we all need to be watchful.



January Community Meeting—Brentwood Bay with Saanich North and the Islands MLA Adam Olsen.



January Community Meeting—Saanich at Reynolds Secondary.