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What's really behind Canada's 'trucker protests'

The protests were never about truckers, vaccine mandates, or Covid restrictions. Instead, they exposed the threat of home-grown right-wing extremism

More than three weeks after a convoy of transport trucks first rolled into Canada's capital city Ottawa and stayed, it's become clear that this protest was never about truckers, vaccine mandates, or even about Covid-19 restrictions. Instead, the ongoing occupation has laid bare the increasing threat of home-grown populist, right-wing extremism and revealed deep problems in Canada's democratic institutions.

The situation began in late January, when convoys made up of hundreds of tractor-trailers and personal vehicles converged on Ottawa to protest new rules requiring cross-border truckers to be vaccinated. The protest's theme grew murky as thousands of people joined on foot for what would become a chaotic, ongoing occupation of Canada's capital city, steps from its seat of government.

Although convoy organisers and their supporters like to paint a picture of a divided country, in reality Canadians have been relatively unified in support of strong health measures over the course of the pandemic. Almost 85 per cent of eligible Canadians are fully vaccinated, among the highest vaccination rates in the world, and only a third of Canadians say they are ready to drop all Covid-19 restrictions. As for the truckers, it's estimated that nine in ten are fully vaccinated, and the industry has firmly distanced itself from the protests.

Canada isn't immune to right-wing extremism

The story of how this small group of convoy occupiers ended up triggering a national, provincial, and local state of emergency while shutting down the capital of a G7 country, is a cautionary tale for anyone who believes that Canada has escaped the toxic right-wing populism that

has so divided our neighbours to the south. Canada's so-called trucker protests are evidence of the growing grip of disinformation, and the emergence of new and troubling home-grown threats to national security.

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This occupation has two faces. On weekends, the police inexplicably stood back as the blockaded streets filled with a mix of people opposed to Covid-19 restrictions and vaccines, conspiracy theorists, and those united by a dislike of the sitting government. There were bouncy castles for kids, fireworks, DJ'd dance parties in streets blocked off by semi-trucks, and a festival ambiance. The lawless mood at times turned dark, as protesters danced on the hallowed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or threatened or assaulted local workers and residents. In general, however, the media coverage of the early days of the occupation treated it as a loud but benign protest.

But from the very outset, this chaotic gathering was animated by a troubling and extremist agenda. Well before trucks rolled into Ottawa, the threat of violence in the capital was obvious to security experts. Organisers were openly calling for civil war and stating their intention to drive massive trucks — which can easily hide or become weapons — to the gates of Parliament. They wanted demonstrations to become 'Canada's January 6th', in reference to the storming of the US Capitol, and just in case their intent wasn't clear enough, they even issued a pseudo-legal manifesto of demands that focused on ousting sitting Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Once in Ottawa, convoy organisers — some with very recent police and military experience — moved quickly to cement their successful occupation. They dug in with a network of satellite camps in other parts of the city and surrounding rural areas to keep occupiers fed and fuelled. They swore in their own 'peace officers' and reportedly attempted to arrest members of the Ottawa police. Linked blockades sprung up in other parts of the country, including one at a major US border crossing that lasted six days and cost billions in lost trade. As the weeks wore on, children became a visible fixture at the occupation site in Ottawa, despite official pleas to move them to safety.

Fuelling extremism online

Organisers of the convoy include individuals who openly espouse racial conspiracy theories like white replacement, and those who have ties to organised hate groups active in Canada. Nor was this all just talk: when police seized a weapons cache and arrested four men at a satellite blockade in Alberta, found among the guns and tactical gear was the insignia of the Diagolon network, a little-known far-right accelerationist group bent on government overthrow. In Ottawa, the convoy included visible displays of white supremacist symbols, including Confederate flags and swastikas. Far from a case of a few bad apples, the convoy was interwoven with white nationalist right-wing extremism from the outset.

All of which begs the question: how did such a small group with a dangerous affinity for insurrection gain so much traction?

Online disinformation has played a powerful role in mobilising people to join the convoy, and much of this is also homegrown problem. Canadian-based right-wing extremist online content has increased sharply during the pandemic, and a recent survey found that as many as 40 per cent of Canadians may be susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. As violent anti-government extremism takes hold in the US, these events fuel and inspire extremists in Canada, which in turn inspire similar actions abroad.

The Canadian government's lacklustre response

The police and government response to the convoy was also nothing short of disastrous. Despite plenty of advance warning that the convoy was coming equipped for the long haul and fuelled by dangerous ideology, it seems it never occurred to those responsible for securing the capital that these protesters might simply not leave.

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Local policing was virtually non-existent for weeks, with the (now former) police chief claiming it was too dangerous to issue tickets or enforce laws. The local mayor managed to offend everyone by engineering a bungled negotiation with organisers to allow them on some streets in exchange for leaving residential areas.

Ontario's populist, conservative premier Doug Ford was conspicuously absent until convoys blockaded border crossings, leading to the closure of

some manufacturing plants that rely on parts imported from the US.

At the federal level, divisions over the convoy cost the unpopular conservative party leader his job when he was ousted by his own caucus. Prime Minister Trudeau at first dismissed the convoy as a 'fringe minority', yet days later invoked the Emergencies Act for the first time in Canadian history to grant authorities extraordinary powers to put an end to the occupation. And while different levels of government spent weeks pointing at each other, the occupiers dug in, networked, and radicalised.

For a country like Canada, which was founded on 'peace, order and good government', there could be little more destabilising than finding key democratic institutions incapable of assuring any of these things in a crisis — yet that is exactly what has unfolded in Ottawa over the last month. If we are to learn anything from this strange and disturbing chapter, there will have to be a serious reckoning about the weaknesses of our core intuitions, and the dangers of writing off even a small fraction of the population caught in the grip of conspiracy and hate.



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