FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 30.10.2020 | Jordan Leichnitz

Canada has a white supremacist problem

Canada—often viewed as a beacon of tolerance—has a growing white supremacist movement emboldened by events in the US

When President Trump once again garnered international attention by not only refusing to condemn white supremacists but telling members of the hate group Proud Boys to 'stand back and stand by', few viewers likely knew that the Proud Boys were formed by a Canadian right-wing media personality, Gavin McInnes.

Americans who joke about moving to Canada in the event of a Trump victory are largely thinking about Canada's global reputation for inclusion and diversity. But despite a largely thriving multicultural society, Canada is home to a troubling, and growing, white supremacist threat.

The growing threat of hate groups in Canada received renewed attention last month when a 58-year-old volunteer caretaker was stabbed to death in front of a Toronto mosque, allegedly by a man with ties to neo-Nazis on social media. The murder was reminiscent of a shocking shooting attack on peaceful worshipers at a Quebec mosque in 2017 that killed six people and wounded 19, by a man with far-right, white nationalist views.

Both crimes briefly galvanised a national conversation on Islamophobia and white supremacist terrorism and highlighted uncomfortable truths about hate in Canada. For example, those looking for homegrown hateful content can find it without a problem in Canada. Thousands of right-wing extremist channels based in Canada reach some 11 million users globally. While the over three hundred identified hate groups in Canada tend to be more loosely organised than their American counterparts, their ideologies are largely the same.

Canada's national narrative of tolerance

Like many around the world, most Canadians have watched developments in the United States – from the violence in Charlottesville to Trump's threats to deploy the military against Black protesters – with genuine horror. Canadians are also grappling with unique forms of racial injustice, including the legacy of colonialism and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples, increased hate attacks on Asians during the Covid-19 pandemic, and anti-Black racism called out by the Black Lives Matter movement.

White supremacists are evidently active in Canada, and they are clearly harming society in many of the same ways that American hate groups have south of the border. Why is it then so hard for Canadians to take action against the violent, racist hate and organised white supremacist groups that are a real problem at home as well?

As armed hate and neo-Nazi organizations rise up in the United States, emboldened by a dangerous President, the Canadian government ignores this threat at their peril.

One factor is no doubt Canada's strong national narrative of diversity and inclusion. Canadians are proud to live in a country that welcomes difference, and acknowledging a simmering white supremacist movement clashes with that ideal. It also makes it clear that racism in Canada can be every bit as violent and extreme as what we find in the US, a hard pill to swallow for many Canadians accustomed to measuring success by being better than Americans.

Another contributor is likely the muted response from elected leaders and government institutions. Fearful of angering voters, some politicians refuse to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in Canada. Others – including the sitting Prime Minister Justin Trudeau – acknowledge the issue, but have been slow to take concrete actions against hate groups.

Following the murder in Toronto, Trudeau has faced renewed pressure to take action against these organisations. A large coalition of faith communities and human rights groups joined together to call on the Canadian government to develop a plan to dismantle white supremacist groups across the country. Once again, Trudeau committed to do more to address the problem, but offered no specifics.

A muted response

There is also a gap between rhetoric and reality on white supremacists within the institution of the Canadian military. Recently, the Canadian

Forces received global praise for publicly denouncing hate and racism with a viral tweet celebrating LGBTQ rights using the #ProudBoys hashtag.

But behind this public diplomacy is the reality that hate groups have a foothold in the Canadian military and members who are involved in white supremacist groups often get little more than a slap on the wrist. In one notorious incident, a sailor was revealed as an active member of the terrorist neo-Nazi group Blood and Honour. He had been recorded trying to sell military-grade weapons to hate groups. Despite this, he was reinstated to the Navy.

In addition to cognitive dissonance within Canadian intuitions, legally, prosecuting hate crimes in Canada is also difficult. Hate crimes remain dramatically under-reported in Canada, and even when they do come to police attention, criminal charges are often limited to the most egregious cases involving the promotion of hate or advocating genocide. Many activities of white supremacist groups fall short of these legal tests, or happen in online spaces with little law enforcement oversight.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Canada has been slow to make social media companies responsible for removing hateful content on their networks. Following the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand in 2017, the government pledged to fight online extremism, but chose to work on voluntary measures rather than regulation. Last year, Trudeau promised specifically to require social media platforms to remove hate speech within 24 hours, but this has yet to be put into law. Until the government brings in regulation, there is unlikely to be a real change in how online hate spreads.

Taken together, these gaps leave space for white supremacist groups to spread their message of hate in Canada. As armed hate and neo-Nazi organizations rise up in the United States, emboldened by a dangerous President, the Canadian government ignores this threat at their peril.



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