

Canada: The whole world should be worried by the 'siege of Ottawa'. This is about much more than a few anti-vaxx truckers

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How did this 'grassroots' rebellion paralyse the Canadian capital? With funding from the far right and a boost from Facebook misinformation

What the truck is going on in Canada? No offence to Ottawa, but it's not the most exciting place in the world. Over the past couple of weeks, however, the Canadian capital has been embroiled in drama: hundreds of truckers, ostensibly protesting against vaccine mandates, have brought the city to a standstill. Members of the so-called "Freedom Truck Convoy" have been blaring horns, desecrating war memorials and setting off [fireworks](#). Residents are being driven to distraction. The police chief has called the situation a "[siege](#)"; the Ontario premier called it "[an occupation](#)". On Monday, the city's mayor, Jim Watson, [declared a state of emergency](#).

There's a lot going on in the world right now. If you're not Canadian, then the protest in Ottawa might not be top of your list of things to worry about. But I'm afraid you should be worried. You should certainly be paying attention. What's unfolding in Ottawa is not a grassroots protest that has spontaneously erupted out of the frustration of local lorry drivers. Rather, it's an [astroturfed](#) movement - one that creates an impression of widespread grassroots support where little exists - funded by a global network of highly organised far-right groups and amplified by Facebook's misinformation machine. The drama may be centred in Canada, but what is unfolding has repercussions for us all.

That's a big claim, so let me break it down. We'll start with the Canadian lorry drivers. The people protesting against vaccine mandates, it can't be stressed enough, are by no means representative of the Canadian haulage industry as a whole. Just 10% of cross-border drivers refused the jabs, according to the Canadian Trucking Alliance (CTA), meaning that from 15 January they can no longer cross back into Canada without quarantine. The CTA, along with other major industry organisations, has disavowed the protest. The protesters don't represent the vast majority of lorry drivers, nor are they representative of public sentiment towards vaccines in Canada - a country where [84% of the population](#), children included, have received at least one vaccine dose. They are, as Justin Trudeau has said, a "[small fringe](#)".

They may be a fringe minority, but that doesn't mean you should (as Trudeau seems to be doing) downplay or dismiss them. For one, they have a lot of powerful supporters. The usual crowd of rightwing politicians in the US, including Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, have been cheering them on. They have also been getting millions of dollars in funding across crowdfunding sites from international donors.

“Donations from abroad are quite a common part of any large crowdfunding campaign,” Ciaran O’Connor, an expert on online extremism at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, [told Politico](#). “But the scale of this one is unprecedented.”

Another reason why you should take the Ottawa protests seriously? Thanks to the wonders of modern technology, fringe groups can have an outsize influence. I’m sure you’ve heard of troll farms: organised groups that weaponise social media to spread misinformation, promote division and influence public opinion. Get this: in the long run-up to the 2020 US elections, Facebook’s most popular pages for Christian and Black American content were being run by eastern European troll farms. According to an internal Facebook report written in late 2019 and leaked to [MIT Technology Review](#), troll farms were reaching 140 million users every month. Three-quarters of these users had never followed any of the pages: they’d had the content thrust upon them by Facebook’s engagement-hungry content-recommendation system.

“Our platform has given the largest voice in the African American community to a handful of bad actors, who, based on their media production practices, have never had an interaction with an African American,” wrote the report’s author, a former senior-level data scientist at Facebook. “Instead of users choosing to receive content from these actors, it is our platform that is choosing to give [these troll farms] an enormous reach.”

After that report was leaked in September, Facebook made a lot of noises about how it was aggressively cracking down on troll farms. Has it followed through on these promises? [Meta Platforms, Facebook’s owner, said on Monday](#) that it had removed dozens of scam pages associated with the convoy protest from Facebook; however, there are still a huge number of recently created pages supporting the hauliers, with suspiciously large numbers of followers. Meanwhile, on Telegram, a social network favoured by the right, people across the world are urging each other to replicate the tactics in Canada in [their home towns](#). Canada may not be on the brink of civil war, but what is happening in Ottawa is one small front in a global information war. And the baddies, I’m afraid to say, are winning.

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P.S.

- The Guardian. Tue 8 Feb 2022 15.39 GMT:
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