

Canada: Maple leaf flags, conspiracy theories and The Matrix: inside the Ottawa truckers' protest

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What began as a protest against vaccine requirements for truck drivers has grown into a widening movement as Trudeau refuses to engage with demands

Diesel fumes and marijuana smoke filled the air outside the Canadian parliament as a “Freedom Convoy” protest against vaccine mandates headed into a third week.

Columns of big-rig trucks, pickups and RVs have blockaded the heart of the Canadian capital since 28 January. Camped out in the vehicles are several hundred protesters – including many children – who have driven thousands of kilometres to be here.

Protesters have also [blocked the international Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor](#), and two smaller border crossings with the US, prompting growing fears of serious economic impact.

Justin Trudeau, the White House and even [the US Teamsters union](#) have called for an end to the protest. But those camped out in downtown Ottawa insist they will not leave until their demands are met: an end to Covid lockdowns and vaccine mandates.

What began as a protest against vaccine requirements for truck drivers entering Canada has grown into a widening protest movement against all Covid public health measures, with copycat demonstrations [in the US](#), [France](#), [Belgium](#), Australia and [New Zealand](#).

On a bone-chilling night this week, protesters gathered around open fires and propane stoves as police officers looked on, seemingly unwilling to enforce an order against bringing fuel into the city centre.

It was quieter than in the earlier days of the protest when truckers infuriated residents by honking their horns late into the night; on Monday, a court injunction was handed down banning air horns for 10 days after a class-action lawsuit by sleepless locals. Instead, a semi driver loudly gunned his engine, launching thick black plumes of exhaust into the night sky.

“It was definitely time to take a stand,” says Spencer Bautz, a 24-year-old who drove his truck here from Saskatchewan on day one. Dressed in a black cowboy hat, Bautz described vaccine mandates as “medical segregation” and argued that exclusions for the unvaccinated were an infringement of their freedoms. His views, he said, had been greatly informed by the thinking of the [psychology professor and culture war provocateur Jordan Peterson](#).

“I’m not going to pretend like I know what goes on in upper management or big government. I’m just a farm kid from Saskatchewan,” said Bautz. “But I know that anytime you talk about silencing

people, anytime you talk about taking away people's freedoms ... it's to be taken seriously."

Such good-versus-evil posturing is apparent in the hundreds of handmade signs that line the fence around parliament – little jabs of resistance against Covid policies that the prime minister himself said have "sucked for all Canadians".

Lurking below the surface, though, is the same undercurrent of populism that powered the January 6 Capitol insurrection and the yellow vests movement: a powerful current fed by disinformation, conspiratorial thinking and deepening social divides.

"Wake up Canada! You are being lied to. Take the red pill and roll on!" reads a sign attached to the front grille of a parked semi. The concept of the "[red pill](#)" – which originated in The Matrix films – has become a token for incels and the far-righters who hold that they are "awake" to the way the world really works.

"Populist movements are notoriously distrustful of government," said the Queens University assistant professor Amarnath Amarasingam, who specialises in extremism and social movements.

"They don't trust politicians, they don't trust the media, they don't trust academics, they don't trust scientists because they believe that historically, this 'elite class' of society has always harmed those at the bottom, the underdogs," Amarasingam adds.

As men and women dressed in flannel hunker down in the cold with their Tim Hortons coffee cups and Canadian flags draped over their shoulders it is clear that the Freedom Convoy's movement has crystallised. They are here to wake the rest of [Canada](#) up to the tyranny of the Liberal government and its "oppressive" vaccine mandates.

"Freedom!" bellows one man wearing the flag as a cape. "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" comes the response from others outside the parliament building – where earlier in the week Trudeau described the same protests as "unacceptable".

The Freedom Convoy is quickly becoming a defining moment in Trudeau's leadership.

The prime minister has refused to lend legitimacy to this movement by engaging with the protesters' demands – a decision that led two Liberal party members to break rank. Meanwhile, the failure to take decisive action to break up the protest has exposed Trudeau to criticism from all other party leaders.

The discord in parliament has allowed protest organisers to become further emboldened in their demands, with some of them openly call for Trudeau to be forced from office.

The opposition Conservative party and People's Party of Canada have both cheered the protesters on, even encouraging donations to their million-dollar crowdfunding efforts. Similarly US Republicans, including Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, have praised the convoy, with some of the protest's funding believed to have come from south of the border.

Such support has given fresh momentum to the truckers as they launched additional protests at the Canada-US border, and tightened their grip on the capital.

On Thursday, trucks circled the Ottawa airport, clogging traffic. People flooded the local 911 number with fake calls, and some tossed around the idea of parading outside schools. Elsewhere, some journalists have reported being followed, particularly at secondary staging camps outside of the downtown core.

Amarasingam outlined several ways the standoff could end: in tragedy, in violence or because of potential in-fighting. A negotiation, at this point, seems unlikely. "If this ended in some sort of mass arrest or violence, or some sort of tragedy – someone dies or one of these propane tanks explodes – I think it's that kind of turning point that will change the conversation," he said.

As the protests stretch on, many local residents have become increasingly fed up with their temporary neighbours. Violent confrontations have broken out as protesters harass and insult people wearing masks. A counter-protest is planned for Saturday.

The protesters are deeply aware of the negative coverage they have earned, and now espouse peace and love to an almost aggressive degree. One trucker uses a megaphone to loudly proclaim "I love you" to anyone who walks by.

A few blocks away, Gurtek Singh – one of the few people of colour at an overwhelmingly white protest – said he was the only breadwinner in a household of six, but that the financial hit from staying off work was worth it.

As he spoke, at least a dozen protester supporters stopped to thank Singh. He smiled politely and accepted the effusive praise.

Snowflakes glistened in his bushy salt-and-pepper beard as he said that he had joined the convoy for the sake of his children, who he had kept home from school because of mandatory mask and vaccine mandates.

"No government, no other human being can tell me what's good for my kids, other than me," he said.

Tracey Lindeman

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P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/canada-ottawa-truckers-protest-covid-vaccine-mandates>