

Freedom Comes to Canada

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Canada has been rocked in recent weeks by the “Freedom Convoys” that have descended on the nation’s cities and blocked border crossings across the country. Bryan D. Palmer maps the political and social composition of this new alt-right uprising.

Everything happening in the United States comes to Canada, only a little later and a tad more politely. The rage that erupted in a Presidential-endorsed riot in Washington on 6 January 2021 has now exploded to the north. Fueled by a confused swirl of resentment against the array of pandemic protocols that all advanced capitalist states have invoked to curb and contain Covid-19 – including vaccination passports, mandatory masking, business lockdowns, and cross-border restrictions – so-called “Freedom Convoys” have descended on the nation’s capital Ottawa, holding the city hostage. US-Canada border crossings have been blocked in Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and the convoys have staged sporadic protests across the country, from Fredericton, New Brunswick to Surrey, British Columbia.

Ostensibly led by “truckers,” the mobilization has generated international attention. Copy-cat movements are springing up around the world, with Wellington, New Zealand besieged, Washington, DC threatened, and the Los Angeles – hosts of the recent Super Bowl LVI – worried that they would have had to face the blaring horns and diesel-fume spewing tractor trailer rigs of the “No Mandates: Freedom Now!” crusade. In Europe, Paris and Brussels are currently targeted by the vehicular brigade, although Macron’s gendarmes, fresh from street battles with the *gilets jaunes*, have indicated they will brook no blockades.

“Freedom” in the face of the pandemic we have all been living through has a nice ring to it. But the politics of these Canadian convoys do not. They are animated by a *Breitbart*-like appreciation that destabilization of the status quo is the first step in halting the rush to a Marxist-inspired, totalitarian world order and the restoration of a political economy of acquisitive individualism. You do not have to scratch too deeply below the surface of the leadership of this movement to discover alt-right conspiracy theories, Q-Anon claptrap, and racist anti-Muslim and white supremacy sensibilities. Twitter chatter has dubbed this mobilization the *FluTruxKlux*.

These Canadian protests have been sustained through GoFundMe and its Christian fundamentalist equivalent, GiveSendTo. The latter site, dressed in evangelical garb, has materially facilitated unashamedly racist movements; coordinated support for the poster boy of right-wing vigilante movements, Kyle Rittenhouse; and raised money for neo-fascist organizations like the Proud Boys.

Millions of dollars have so far flown to the non-trucking leadership of the Convoy. As the taps of the crowdfunder have been turned off by regulatory bodies, the organizers are looking now to cryptocurrency markets to rally donors and continue what has proven a bonanza. Whatever happens in the next days, this will undoubtedly turn into a for-profit grift for some, as well as a boon to other alt-right campaigns. Fueled by donations large and small, the angry anti-mandate contingent is backed by some undoubtedly dark quarters, with particular anonymous donors anteing up hundreds of thousands of dollars. About 55% of the money raised comes from the United States, with fund-

raising techniques and the leadership of the “Freedom Convoy” drawing from the playbook of the Tea Party that launched the alt-right into the mainstream of American politics. Ted Cruz and an array of Republican governors in the US are hailing the “truckers” as heroes, anointing them the freedom riders for our times. Fox News is making the highwaymen of the Convoy into a vanguard of the right, with Tucker Carlson chipping in \$15,000 to the cause and marketing T-shirts playing off of his name and the protest, stenciled “I Love T(r)ucker(s)”. Trump has tooted his approval, and Elon Musk has given his endorsement (and undoubtedly some big bucks).

The symbols of all of this are a blend of the banal and the brutalizing. MAGA hats bob in the crowd, along with Stetsons and baseball caps proclaiming “Fringe Minority.” Canadian and American flags fly, and “O, Canada” is the anthem of choice at the occupations and blockades now underway. Patriotism seemingly predominates, but last refuges of ugliness are never far from the surface of contemporary populist nationalism. The standards of Trump, the Gadsden Flag emblazoned with a coiled rattle-snake and the words, “Don’t Tread on Me” (so prominent at the 6 January Capitol riot), the Confederate flag, and the Swastika have all made appearances, as have anti-communist placards and Q-Anon symbols. The banner of choice, however, is the simple declaration: “Fuck Trudeau!” It predominates among flag wavers and is emblazoned on the grills and side panels of massive trucks.

The expletive pretty much sums up the political consciousness of the protests. Like 6 January, the aim of the “Freedom Convoy” is to bring down the Canadian Liberal government headed by Justin Trudeau. An early manifesto stated that the protesters were intent on getting in on the governing act, calling on Parliament to dissolve and be replaced with a coalition composed of the antiquated appointed Senate, the Governor-General (an equally outdated post, representing the Queen), and some of their ranks, political cranks aligned with right wing and western Canadian separatist parties who cannot manage to get elected. Even though provincial legislatures are responsible for establishing most Covid protocols, it is the hated Trudeau and his Party that has been called upon to capitulate. Vowing to remain and continue to disrupt the places they have settled into until all pandemic mandates are withdrawn, the “Freedom Convoy” is entirely out of touch with the vast majority of Canadians and anything approximating political reality.

Following the mythical script of the American rough-and-tumble frontier, protest organizers have sworn in their followers as vigilante “peace-keepers.” They conceive of themselves as modern-day militiamen, riding shotgun in the good cause of refusing all infringements on their liberty.

How did these protests come to hold Canada’s capital hostage and shut down a continental economy, blockading the Ambassador Bridge that links the Canadian-US continental economy at its Detroit-Windsor juncture, holding up international trade valued at almost \$3 billion. How has it happened that residents in Ottawa fear walking the streets and international capital moans that it is now suffering unduly and must shutter auto plants and other enterprises from Arkansas to Ontario? In a word, they were welcomed, just like the 6 January rioters in Washington, DC.

It was not Trudeau who summoned them, although hatred of this upstart politician with few policies but an abundance of rhetoric, did galvanize the rebellion. The official parliamentary opposition, the Conservative Party, has been cozying up to the idea of a “Freedom Convoy” for some time. Trumpism has taken over sectors of the party, and the Tories’ former head, Erin O’Toole, was recently voted out by his caucus for failing to live up to his promise to lead from the far right, his wishy-washy support for the truckers that many in his Party deify being a part of this downfall. O’Toole has since been replaced by Manitoba’s Candace Bergen as interim leader. Known to sport a MAGA cap, she at first hailed the convoy en route to Ottawa as akin to a people’s parliament.

As the truckers approached the national capital, there was no attempt to thwart their takeover. Electric highway signs pointed them in the right direction of their protest destination. The Ottawa

Police Services did nothing to prepare for the takeover of streets they are called upon to patrol, with many of the cops – not unlike the situation in Washington a year ago – obviously sympathetic to the protesters. After 15 days of chaos, Ottawa's gendarmes remain largely missing in action, their chief complaining that his forces do not have the required strength to handle the crowds. The Canadian Security and Intelligence Services, an historical outgrowth of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (CMP/Mounties) apparently failed to provide local Ottawa police with information on the trucker protest, or if such reports were passed on they were ignored. Both the Trudeau Liberals and the Conservative government in Toronto, led by right-wing populist Doug Ford (whose daughter has been visible in the Ottawa protest throng) originally sat on their hands and did nothing. This created a vacuum that an 18-wheeler could drive through. Many obviously did.

The licensing of this motley crew, then, came from many quarters, all of which hoped to make political capital out of the protests, or harbored genuine sympathies for their cause. Trudeau, waylaid by a mild case of Covid and attentive to the ways the political winds were blowing, was largely unseen during the first stages. He understood that the bulk of the country agreed with his dismissal of the occupation of Ottawa as an annoying undertaking of a far-right fringe, figuring that the fallout would rub up negatively on both the federal and provincial Conservatives. Trudeau, as usual, misjudged the level of animosity and pent-up antagonism that has been building over years of his political posturing, exacerbated greatly by Covid-19 frustrations. Ford, waiting out the mess snowmobiling at his cottage, was counting on things further blackening Trudeau's already pummeled eye. The Ottawa police merely played the role of enablers. It has been left to citizen's direct action, of late, to thwart the infusion of new trucks coming to the protest party, thousands gathering at specific junctures to block entrance to the city center.

The scene in that central district looks like a Woodstock for the alt-right. Portable toilets have been set up on Parliament Hill outside of the Prime Minister's office windows, large tents erected in the streets blocked by horn-blowing rigs, violating a judicial injunction against such noise pollution, secured by an irate Ottawa resident. There is even the odd hot tub, in which bearded belligerents bathe in below-0 temperatures. Music blares from sound systems, a stage has been set up, and one evening a rock concert could be heard for miles around. Fireworks explode in the night sky, pancake breakfasts start the day, and barbecues and booze keep things going well into the afternoons and evenings. Young children, schooled in the rhetoric of refusal to wear masks, play ball hockey in the streets or gravitate to inflated bouncy castles erected at intersections. Their presence is a useful shield wielded cynically by parents who proclaim they are there for the youngsters.

As the blockade of the Windsor-Detroit Ambassador Bridge angered international capital, it was apparent that something had to be done. Capitalist supply lines, already on life support after two years of Covid-19 constipation, have been crippled.

States of emergency are now declared by the Ford-led Ontario government and the non-descript Ottawa mayor, but they have timelines and will soon lapse. Bergen and the Conservatives continue to champion the heroic truckers, but have now called for them to go home, vowing to fight on in the arena of parliamentary cretinism. Trudeau is talking tougher, a phone call from his Uncle Sam, Joe Biden, prompting a bit of a tongue-lashing of the Ottawa police and a commitment to send the Mounties in, if not to get their man, at least to make sure that he doesn't remain a visible thorn festering in the side of constituted authority.

Even with State of Emergency provisions for \$100,000 fines to be levied against those blocking the Ambassador Bridge, and threats that vehicles will be impounded, trucking licenses revoked, and the right to enter the US rescinded, the police, who finally secured the opening of the thoroughfare on Valentine's Day, acted with a patience and restraint seldom witnessed in more than a century of left-wing protests. The protesters are not being handled with kid gloves, they are being coddled and

pandered to. Cops, in effect, have been giving the rowdies the thumbs up.

If this were indigenous people blocking a wilderness roadway in northern British Columbia to protest a gas pipeline traversing their lands or closing down railway lines and highway thoroughfares in Ontario over land disputes, blockades would have been broken up by the RCMP or Provincial Police detachments within hours, a day or two at the most. Homeless people tenting in Halifax or Toronto parks, causing minor inconvenience for a disgruntled few and threatening no one's jobs let alone having an impact on corporate ledger sheets, have been mercilessly bulldozed of late. Ontario Coalition Against Poverty activists rallying on Parliament Hill or at Queen's Park (sites of federal and provincial legislative buildings) never faced cops as congenially placid as those walking slowly in line formation at the Ambassador Bridge, politely nudging a hundred or so protesters along. The tens of thousands of people assembled to express their discontent at G-7 Summits years ago, or the many militant workers who have stood picket lines in defiance of injunctions, must be looking at their television screens in bewilderment, wondering what gives with the less than tough love these cops are exhibiting in their encounter with alt-right protesters.

Politicians and pundits preface every comment on blockades and occupations across the country with words defending the "right of protest" in a democracy. Then they ask those who have obviously unlawfully settled in and are obviously committing crimes by the minute to please disperse. It is all so polite.

The left has experienced dissent differently. Our organizations have been infiltrated, our movements monitored, our leaders and comrades physically assaulted and arrested. At demonstration sites we have been greeted by massive police presences, which routinely violate our rights by demanding to search knapsacks, question our reason for being at specific locales, interrogate our intentions. We have been met by steel fences and cement barriers; crowds are rudely dispersed; police mounted on horses or wielding bicycles have targeted and ridden down dissidents, or "kettled" them in cul-de-sacs; heavily armed, plexiglass shielded, flack-jacketed, helmeted cops, decked out in black, menacingly march in lockstep formation against us; we've tasted tear gas hanging thick in the air, watching the canisters explode at our feet as rubber bullets bounce off pavement; we've witnessed/experienced many a police beating.

This is not happening at the "Freedom Convoy" sites because there is one law for some kinds of people and quite another law for others. The "Freedom Convoy" is *not* a working-class protest. It is *not* a protest aimed at transforming the oppressive conditions of life under capital's reign, which weigh heavily on peoples of color and minorities, those whose freedom has never been recognized.

The trucker front-lines of this protest, reinforced by farmers and their large tractors and equipment, and the pick-up trucks and campers and SUVs of small business proprietors, are indicative of a mass constituency that may, to be sure, contain disgruntled proletarians. Yet the vast bulk of truckers in Canada, supposedly 90 percent, are opposed to the "Freedom Convoy," and disassociate themselves from it. Unionized teamsters want no part of this protest. The odd nurse who has lost her job for refusing to be vaccinated, may well be attending, but she is not the countenance of this protest.

Rather, it is the owner of the \$200,000 rig, the rough-riding "Don't Tread on Me" independent contractor who wants no incursions on his being, and has tapped into the ideological wellspring of current revanchist populism. On the whole, the "Freedom Convoy" is the lumpen petty bourgeoisie doing its revolting thing. Elements of the state and its forces of repression are, in many ways, connected with these protesters. They are genuinely liked in some quarters, especially by those farther down the chain of influence, the police ranks. In both their origins and instincts, the cops are not far removed from those of the anti-mandate crowds. Their sympathies for the protesters have been put on obvious, occasionally brazen, display. Those higher up see the "Freedom Convoy" as

exceedingly useful, shock troops of reaction. As cynical as they undoubtedly are, these overseers of the right share with those now in the streets a *politics of acquisitive individualism*, which resonate well with the shrill cry of capitalism in crisis.

As the protests end, the problem posed by the “Freedom Convoy” may well persist. For pandemic or not, protest occupations or not, capitalism’s crisis is not going away. Nor is the mentality of the lumpen petty bourgeoisie, and those stoking its politics of resentment, ramping up the rage, and validating a willingness to throw down the gauntlet of irrational resistance. That the anti-mandate movement was shrewd enough to mobilize convoys, occupations, and blockades at precisely the moment that many provincial governments, led by Conservatives, were already preparing to wind down their mandates, means that credit is going to be given, and seized, by this alt-right uprising. That, and the dollars flowing into its clandestine coffers, will only funnel the rage forward. This, sadly, is the political ground of our times.

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