

Why is the Freedom Convoy Different from Other Protests?



Image of the Freedom Convoy, juxtaposed with details from editorial cartoons by Theo Moudakis and Michael DeAdder (Toronto Star), Greg Perry (Penticton Herald), and Bruce MacKinnon (Halifax Herald)

If the independent truckers and farmers who have parked in the streets of Ottawa, and effectively blockaded several border crossings into Canada have done nothing else, they have certainly succeeded in uniting politicians, public officials, the press, the Twitterati and the enlightened elite of Canada in an ecstasy of contempt and foaming disdain that is almost without precedent in Canada's history.

Journalists and politicians seem incapable of talking about the protesters without dissolving into a litany of adjectives, pejorative and unflattering comparison with [Nazis](#) and the Ku Klux Klan, which is objectively unfair – given the fact that none of the protesters have anything whatever to say about race, and that over 60 percent of truck drivers in Canada are Punjabi.

Nevertheless, the People who Matter in Canada really don't like the Freedom Convoy. When faced with a mass protest of Black Lives Matter advocates in June of 2020, over an event that happened in another country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed his support and literally knelt before the mob. This time, it's different: he [described](#) the Freedom Convoy protesters as a "Small fringe minority of people with unacceptable views who don't represent Canadians", and promised a severe response by all levels of law enforcement. "There is no place in our country for threats, violence or hatred", Trudeau [continued](#).

The press responded in spirit, attempting to link the protesters to white nationalist groups, and comparing them to "Jan. 6 Insurrectionists" and Trump supporters in the [United States](#). This in turn caused the government to erect hoardings and barriers around the parliament buildings – something they did not do during the Black Lives Matter protests, even while cities burned in the United States.

The Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford declared a [state of emergency](#) in Ontario, threatening protesters with fines of \$100,000 and a year in jail. The Ontario government has also interfered in fund-raising by the group, seizing or freezing millions of dollars in donations repeatedly.

The Ontario Provincial Police have started combing through social media posts on Facebook and Twitter, and apparently are [visiting people at their homes](#) if they “like” the organizers’ pages or show support for the event. Offenders are presented with a flyer entitled “Your right to peaceful protest”, along with a sizable dose of intimidation.

This hasn’t happened before.

During other recent protests, downtown businesses in Ottawa remained open. Starbucks even printed Black Lives Matter t-shirts for their employees. Canada’s big unions published statements of [support](#) for BLM, and politicians fell all over themselves expressing [support](#) for the protesters.

But this protest is different. Starbucks is shuttered, like most downtown businesses, (though they haven’t bothered to put plywood over their windows this time). Instead of supporting the organizers, Canada’s big public service unions issued a *joint* condemnation of the [protest](#), stating “We have seen right-wing extremists spreading messages filled with racism and intolerance, flying the Nazi and Confederate flags, alongside other symbols of violence and hate. We have seen organizers not only demand the end of all public health rules, but also call for the overthrow of our democratically elected government.”

All of those statements are part of a narrative that emerged among journalists and the Twitterati almost immediately after the protest started, but it’s a narrative that doesn’t reflect reality. A masked protester showed up among the crowd with a Confederate flag, and was promptly confronted and shamed by the protesters, who didn’t want him there. Many of the protester’s vehicles sported “F*ck Trudeau” flags, but contempt for politicians is hardly new in any democratic country, and is generally not considered seditious, nor as a call to overthrow the government.

The fact is, incidents like these are commonplace at any protest. Protests are interesting and they happen outdoors, so by their very nature attract a certain detritus of homeless people, trouble makers and drug users; the bored and indolent, and the just plain weird people who inhabit the forgotten corners of any city. In the past, journalists have never tried to pretend that these people are representative of the protest or its organizers, which is why this seems so unfair.

Journalists [repeatedly talk](#) about how “intimidating” the protesters are, but that characterisation doesn’t stand up very well to direct observation. There are no masked youth with umbrellas and gas masks. There isn’t even much in the way of shouting or slogans. If anything, the most striking characteristic of this protest is how - ordinary the protesters are. There is little to distinguish the protesters from tourists except the fact of their being there.

So why is the Freedom Convoy being handled so differently from demonstrations by other groups in the past?

As the nation’s capital, Ottawa sees a more or less constant parade of protests in front of the parliament buildings. An unending litany of demands marches across Peace Park: “Save the Whales”, “End the Tar Sands NOW”, “Stop Big Oil”, “Free Palestine”, “Save the Unborn”, “My Body, My Choice”. Unless there is an underlying threat of violence, as there certainly was during the Black Lives Matter protests, which took place against a background of riots all across the United States, nobody cares – certainly not the People who Matter.

The Freedom Convoy protesters have not been violent. They haven't threatened violence. They have blockaded border crossings, and that has a significance all its own, but it's the protest in Ottawa that has excited the most attention, and the most contempt, and I find that curious.

The protesters in Ottawa haven't done much except honk their horns and take up space. So why does this protest, above all others, excite this weird cocktail of existential panic and visceral disgust among the politicians, journalists, pundits and Blue Checkmarks of the world?

This Time it's Personal

This protest is functionally distinct from most of the protests seen in Ottawa. Most protests tend not to be about things the government actually does, or even can do. They're not to blame for the problem, and there's no political cost to appearing sympathetic: Free Palestine? Sure, why not? We'll be sure to take that up with the Israeli Prime Minister the next time he asks us for advice. The oil sands are bad? We agree. Those big oil companies sure are terrible. Residential schools were bad? Absolutely. Those 19th century bastards sure had the wrong idea about educating indigenous people.

This protest is aimed squarely at ending a specific policy enacted by *this* government. The protesters are angry with specific individuals inside the parliament buildings they're parked in front of. They want the government to end what has been an ongoing project of claiming new powers and exerting new controls over the population.

They want the government to stop doing something the government wants to do. That's a no-no.

Universal vaccination is not just a policy of our current government – it's *the* policy of government. For the past two years, responding to the COVID pandemic has been the reason cited to justify every action the government takes.

The government of Canada appears to have every intention of continuing their program of vaccine mandates, passports, and booster shots for the foreseeable future. They have committed to purchasing [more doses](#) of COVID vaccines than any other country in the world, and have secured, depending on the [source](#), between 9 and 11 per citizen. For the most part, we've only consumed the first two doses. That's a big hill to climb down from.

In fact, a sweeping and illiberal response has been the defining feature of this pandemic, and has resulted in more hardship than the illness itself, (which was bad enough, in all conscience). For the first time in the history of mankind, governments sought to stop the spread of disease by quarantining the healthy. This started with a two-week voluntary lockdown to "Flatten the Curve", and evolved into a series of increasingly arbitrary lockdowns, soft-lockdowns, closures of public spaces, curfews, limits on where and when people could shop, and restrictions on travel.

The more ambitious among the global elite saw this pandemic as their opportunity for a "great reset" and as a chance to transform society in a new, globalist utopian image. Canada's own Prime Minister talked about "Building back better", and called the pandemic an "[opportunity for a reset](#)". Journalists and pundits were quick to assure the Canadian public that the Prime Minister didn't mean to appear to mean what they thought he meant, but the actions of his government since then would seem to belie that, as Canada has embarked on a project of global welfare, inflationary spending, dramatically increased immigration, and a disturbing trend toward increased restrictions on civil rights, freedom, and mobility – all in the name of public health.

Public health officials, who two years ago couldn't have convinced 6 people to show up for a Zoom call became overnight celebrities who were now featured on almost daily TV broadcasts and flanked by their own personal sign-language interpreters as they made frequent, and often conflicting declarations of new health mandates.

In the meantime, Canada's police forces did irredeemable damage to their social contract with the public – transitioning smoothly from law enforcement to the enforcement of compliance with proclamations, mandates, and “emergency health orders”.

None of this was secured through legislation or tested in parliamentary debate. Officials, great and small and at all levels of government simply started issuing proclamations, and the police demonstrated that some of them at least were happy to [SWAT uppity pastors](#), [handcuff senior citizens](#), [knock down 12-year-old children for playing in the park](#), or [Taser teenage boys for playing hockey](#) – all in the name of “public health”.

Throughout all of this, the citizens of Canada were assured that this would all end and that life would “get back to normal” once vaccines were widely available and sufficient people were vaccinated to ensure “herd immunity”.

But that didn't happen. The 70 percent of citizens required for herd immunity became 80 percent, then 90, and then “herd immunity” – or any kind of immunity failed to be mentioned at all. When it became clear that merely being vaccinated didn't prevent you from getting sick, citizens were told that they made you less likely to get sick. Then they were told that the vaccine wouldn't make you less likely to get sick, but you would be less likely to get dangerously sick.

When vaccinated people still ended up in the hospital, the Prime Minister declared that this was a “Pandemic of the Unvaccinated”, and that the fearfulness and selfishness of these people was to blame for the misfortune of the vaccinated.

It's at this point that the government started to meet real opposition to their project of universal vaccination and vaccine passports. By now, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that these COVID vaccines are neither perfectly safe, nor particularly effective. Even people who have been vaccinated have started to wonder why it's so important to force people to take them.

As critics of this protest point out, vaccines are still not mandatory in Canada. You can choose not to take them. You simply can't cross the border, or travel on planes or trains, or go to most public venues, or eat at restaurants if you don't. In many cases, those who refuse to take the vaccine soon find themselves unemployed as well. I'm one of them, and there are many people in the same situation.

The freedom Convoy were incited to protest because of the federal government's mandate requiring truck drivers to show a vaccine passport in order to cross the Canada – US border. Since most of Canada's trade is with the United States, most of our trucking goes across that border. If the mandate isn't lifted, they're out of work.

If they had focused only on that particular rule, the government might have been willing to deal with them – at least superficially. But they got greedy. They want the government to end all vaccine and mask mandates, and to end its programme of vaccine passports. They want freedom.

The problem is that not just Prime Minister Trudeau, but public officials and politicians at all levels have fully committed to this project. They have invested all of their political capital into their management of the pandemic. If they abandon the principal of mandated health, then they must inevitably abandon the entire project of reshaping society and “building back better”.

What has completely mystified me is the fact the first instinct of virtually all opposition politicians has been to criminalize these demonstrators and demand that their protest be snuffed out, instead of recognizing the unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on it, shake hands, kiss babies, and effectively steal a march on the next election. This shows that either they are in ideological lockstep with the government, or they're just really bad at being politicians.

Canadian politicians and public health officials at all levels of government have presided over two of the most miserable years in Canada's history since the Great Depression. COVID-19 may have been a dangerous disease, but their response to it has resulted in economic chaos and misery. Instead of focusing on treating the sick, all of their public health policy has centered on controlling the healthy. Politically, they've painted themselves into a corner, and they now have no easy way to retreat without looking like failures.

For politicians and public officials, that makes this protest an existential threat. If the truckers and farmers in Ottawa win on any front, the politicians lose. Generally, politicians don't care all that much about protests, but this time, it's personal.

If the truckers win, the politicians will have to fight for their political lives. Their smarter opponents might be emboldened to ask if their leadership has actually done anything to make people happy or healthy.

If the truckers win, public health officials won't get to be on TV anymore, and they might even lose their personal sign language interpreters.

If the truckers win, the police will be faced with confronting, and trying to repair the damage they've done to their relationship with the community.

If the truckers win, the People who Matter will lose. This can't be allowed to happen.

Starbelly Sneetches

The fact that most politicians and public officials are unhappy with this protest is easy enough to understand. What's a little harder to understand is the degree of contempt and invective directed against them by people who have much less to lose. Typically, the protest is depicted in opinion pieces with accompanying editorial cartoons showing the protestors waving Nazi and Confederate flags standing next to trucks labelled "disinformation and extremism".

Globe and Mail columnist Andrew Coyne was pretty okay with Black Lives Matter during their protest, [tweeting](#) "If Black lives truly matter in Canada, an apology for slavery is only a first step". (There has never been slavery in Canada.) In contrast, the Freedom Convoy had him [clutching his pearls](#) in a recent broadcast, denouncing the protesters as "anti-social yobs with delusions of grandeur."

There's a lot of this kind of talk lately. Politicians find the Freedom Convoy protestors a threat, while pundits and journalists view them as repugnant.

There has been an accelerating trend to a kind of low tribalism in the growing cultural divide over the past few years. It's partly a class thing. People who talk a lot about freedom tend to be distressingly blue collar in a meshback cap and dogs-in-the-pickup kind of way. But this tribalism has more to do with the unfortunate tendency to equate politics with morality. There's increasingly little room for people to disagree on one issue while accommodating their opponents on other issues. Politics have become dogma.

The progressive left are especially vulnerable to this. People who disagree with them are not merely wrong: they're evil. They're moral failures who can be labelled and dismissed. People who disagree with the idea of transition therapy for kids are transphobic. People who complain about the high taxes on fuel do so because they don't care about the environment. Those who demand freedom of speech do so only because they want to spread hate. Those who fear government overreach are "insurrectionists".

To them, anyone who doesn't share their world view in full is part of an amorphous, almost wholly imaginary "other" who in the [words](#) of our Prime Minister "Don't believe in science and are very often misogynistic and racist."

This "othering" of the political opposition is a very disturbing trend, and one that will likely continue, because there's a certain guilty pleasure in feeling good about yourself while identifying a group of people that you can hate with the approval of your conscience.

Journalists and pundits like Mr. Coyne have been indulging more than a little in the Pharisee's prayer lately ("I thank thee, Lord that I am not as other men"). To them, the Freedom Convoy are not just wrong, they're morally corrupt, and stupid as well. Like Dr. Seuss' Sneetches, the Twitterati have bellies with stars, while the truckers and farmers have no stars on thars.

To the People that Matter, the Freedom Convoy are simply the wrong tribe. They clearly don't support the great project of "building back better", and worse, they're the wrong class. These are unrepentantly working class people who at least superficially look like the sort of people who voted for Donald Trump in the United States.

All of this could be forgiven, or at least dismissed if not for one problem: they are being heard. These are not the sort of people who are supposed to attract attention or win hearts and minds. These are the people who in the natural order of things bring the coffee and sandwiches to the town hall while the People who Matter give speeches - and then stack up the chairs afterward.

Yet these people and their supporters have repeatedly thwarted the government at all levels. They have captured the attention of the world. They have raised millions of dollars - only to have it taken from them, and then done it again. Having had their donations seized not once, but twice, they are raising millions of dollars for a third time. You can't do this without a substantial degree of grass-roots support.

Most big protests and demonstrations take place during the summer, because people don't want to show up when it's cold outside. It's the middle of February, and the streets are thronging with supporters every day.

This drives the People who Matter crazy, because they're being outmaneuvered by a bunch of nobodies with "unacceptable views". But they don't understand what they're up against. These are not indolent students and professional indigents murdering time by protesting for a few days over the summer holiday. These are farmers and small business owners who were under pressure even before the protest began.

Independent truckers were already under threat from relentless vertical integration by the big box retailers who increasingly operate their own fleets; by the exploitation of foreign workers to undercut operator rates; and by the remorseless increase of fuel prices and carbon taxes.

The drivers at this protest understand that their survival was in doubt to begin with, and that they certainly won't survive the punitive measures promised by the Ontario government.

They are joined by restauranteurs and other small business owners who have been squeezed to the brink of ruin by an unending sequence of arbitrary and punitive lockdowns and restrictions for the past two years; and by farmers who are being throttled by punitive carbon taxes.

These are highly organized entrepreneurs who have been trained to adapt by surviving two years of exceptional adversity. These are also people with very little left to lose, and everything to gain from standing firm in their protest.

These aren't important people, but from the degree of support they have inspired, it's clear that to a lot of equally ordinary Canadians, they are people who matter very much indeed.