

Polarization and Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism in Canada since 2015

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For some it was the honk heard around the world. For others, it was the start of a nearly month's long nightmare that saw the nation's capital occupied, borders shut down, and cities full of anti-science protesters taking over the streets. The so-called "Freedom 2022 Convoy" (herein "the Convoy") shocked many Canadians who were stunned to see their fellow citizens call for the overthrow of the federal government.

How did this happen in Canada? To those who participated, the Convoy was an outburst of patriotism, led by Canadians fed up with government tyranny and who were attempting to restore lost freedoms. For those who watched in disbelief, there was speculation that the Convoy was influenced by a foreign interference campaign, likely directed by Russia.¹

In reality, though, the Convoy was not a spontaneous outburst of supposedly freedom-loving Canadians outraged at government restrictions. Nor was it a devious plan constructed in the halls of government buildings in Moscow. Instead, Convoy was Canadian. It was – and is – the product of a polarized movement that has grown over the last decade, able to convince thousands of Canadians to give up ideas of politics as persuasion and policy reform, and instead embrace an anti-politics where change is only possible through revolution.

In thinking about polarization, and tracing the origins of the Convoy movement, this essay begins by examining the emergence of the conditions for these activities: social media tools and a transformation of the far-right into the "alt-right". The essay will then highlight how political events, including the candidacy and election of Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau, the arrival of Syrian refugees and reaction to m-103, a parliamentary motion to counter Islamophobia, contributed to the rise of a populist, anti-government movement in Canada that capitalized on pandemic fatigue and lack of political leadership.

Polarization and Social Media

Polarization (or "group polarization") may be understood as the tendency of a group to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of its members.² Polarization is sometimes confused with ideas about "echo-chambers" or "filter bubbles"³ which describe how a group cuts itself off from outside voices. However, "polarization" is more apt in that it notes how a group tends to eventually gravitate towards the most extreme views over time. In other words, these views are not cut off and fixed, but evolving gradually in their intensity.

With the advent of the internet, and especially the rise of social media platforms, polarization increasingly occurs within online like-minded communities.⁴ There is not the space in this essay to fully address the complex sociological aspects of how this works, but researchers have described it as "homophily" (love of the same),⁵ "selective exposure"⁶ or "preference bubbles."⁷ Essentially, these communities are created and strengthened by individuals who constantly feed on and seek out content that confirms their views in the virtual world. Often, this is driven by curated newsfeeds influenced by personal preference. Individuals tend to prefer and share content which confirms their "priors" and pre-existing beliefs.⁸

This tendency for individuals to share content they agree with contributes to the emergence

of like-minded communities online. For example, research examining friendship networks on Facebook found most to be ideologically segregated, with only 18%-20% of individuals' friends holding varied opinions.⁹ This suggests that users' Facebook newsfeeds may predominantly feature content that reproduces their beliefs and worldviews.¹⁰ Moreover, the quality of viral content in newsfeeds is often comprised of poor quality news, popularly referred to as "fake news" or "junk news,"¹¹ designed to provoke emotional reaction rather than to educate through substantive news coverage.¹² Designed to go viral, junk news stories that contain falsehoods are shared significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than conventional news stories.¹³ Researchers have also noted that when it comes to online sharing and behaviours, these like-minded communities value "winning" rather than being proven correct, and dominating the discourse through reproduction and spreading of a certain narrative rather than proving its accuracy.¹⁴

In Canada (and in the West generally) no group or movement has succeeded in exploiting this new reality of polarized, like-minded social media communities more than the far-right. Appealing to non-conformism, self-expression, transgression, and irreverence for its own sake, a changing far-right dominates a media ecosystem that rewards emotionally driven, edgy content in simplistic images – or memes – which build upon each other in layered meanings.¹⁵ While often these memes amount to inside jokes, anti-hate researchers note that in these polarized, online communities, such content can lead to "irony poisoning", or "the process by which individuals become entangled in layers of irony and the distinction between offensive (and often hateful) humour and sincere belief, [which] becomes blurred or non-existent altogether."¹⁶ In an environment where the most outrageous and shocking language and humour is rewarded, communities are drawn to memes around issues such as suicide, hopelessness, or Holocaust denialism. The challenge is when the messaging stops being received as a (poor taste) joke, and instead becomes understood as truth. And when these narratives are intertwined with longstanding antisemitic, Islamophobic, racist, and anti-government conspiracy theories that have a large following and literature, they become more potent.¹⁷

But how did the far-right in Canada, a group that, by the early 2000s, was seen as a largely small bunch of deeply troubled, violent, isolated skinheads, come to play such an important role online?¹⁸ While the far-right in Canada never went away, it changed, mirroring developments in other Western countries that made it more appealing for several reasons. First, to a large extent, the far-right changed its public focus from "race" to "identity". Many far-right actors and influencers began to present their fight in civilizational terms – that the West (Europeans and cultural Europeans) needed to defend itself in terms of attacks on "traditional" Western culture by its own internal critics, and – more crudely – from waves of immigration from non-Western countries. In an era where world politics were dominated through the prism of the "War on Terror", such narratives had more cultural resonance and popularity.¹⁹

Second, the aesthetics of the far-right changed – from skinhead tattoos, boots and braces to polo shirts, khakis, and coiffed hair, much of the movement gave itself a more professionalized look. The Proud Boys embraced black and yellow Fred Perry polo shirts and Generation Identity/ID Canada members were far more likely to be seen in sportscoats than leather jackets. This new clean-cut aesthetic had much greater appeal and made the far-right, increasingly styling itself as the "alt-right", seem less-threatening to mainstream society. Additionally, the new look made it easier to be a part of the movement. Whereas members of Blood and Honour and Combat 18 would cover themselves in Nazi imagery, including swastika tattoos, those who wanted to be part of far-right groups could dress in regular attire – making it easier for them to participate in

mainstream culture. Members of the new alt-right could keep their day-jobs, but meet-up with like-minded individuals, or engage in trolling online, on their own time.

To be sure, not every far-right group followed this aesthetic evolution. Groups such as the Soldiers of Odin (SoO and its many, many splinter groups, such as the Wolves of Odin and Canadian Infidels) appear to model their look on motorcycle gangs, especially the Hells Angels, down to wearing patches on their leatherjackets. This biker image mirrored SoO's attempts to portray itself as community defenders, although the communities they were interested in protecting were largely white and, crucially, non-Muslim. Although these groups are typically small and suffer from a great deal of division and infighting, they were joined by other Western-chauvinist, anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Muslim groups such as PEGIDA (the German acronym for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the West), Atalante Québec and Le Meute (French for "the pack"). These groups organized using both social media groups, but also in-person meetings and rallies that often-featured low-level violence.²⁰

Finally, this period saw a rise in hate-entrepreneurship with the growth of self-styled anti-jihad activists, such as Americans Frank Gaffney and Pamela Geller, and Canadian Thomas Quiggin, which exploited the public fear of Al Qaida after 9/11 and whose Islamophobic content helped to shape and strengthen the framework of civilizational war utilized by the alt-right and anti-immigration groups listed above.²¹ These views were mirrored and amplified with the emergence of a Canadian far-right media ecosystem which published unfounded and sensationalist stories about "creeping Sharia", uncontrolled migration among other alt-right content. This includes Rebel News and True North Canada. While these outlets have launched the careers of alt-right influencers such as Faith Goldy, Gavin McInnes, and Lauren Southern, they increasingly face competition from less formal but influential livestream commentators such as David Freiheit (Viva Frei), Kevin J. Johnston (Freedom Report) and the Plaid Army network, which produce near-daily content and earn money through crowdfunding and live-donations across multiple streaming platforms.²²

Trump, Trudeau, Migrants and M103

As the above section makes clear, by 2015, these factors began to combine in ways that created the infrastructure and movements that made it easier for polarizing narratives to take hold in a small but energetic segment of the Canadian population.²³ Junk news and conspiracy theories, created, spread, and amplified enthusiastically and opportunistically by far-right influencers and entrepreneurs, began to be consumed by groups of like-minded social media communities. Essentially, by 2015, Canada saw the creation of an infrastructure which rapidly facilitates the amplification of far-right and extremist narratives, emphasizing and rewarding noise over news.

Into this mix we can add four political developments which galvanized a response that would eventually lead to the Freedom 2022 Convoy: The candidacy and Presidency of Donald Trump, the election of Justin Trudeau, the arrival of Syrian refugees into Canada, and the anti-Islamophobia parliamentary motion, M103.

The candidacy and subsequent election of Donald Trump, which began with the demonization of Mexican and central American migrants and amplified other racist and toxic views, has been noted as a turning point for hate movements in Canada.²⁴ Trump's attitude and defence of ethno-nationalism resonated with groups such as the Proud Boys and helped to galvanize growing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim movements. Media's amplification of Trump's opinions

through their reporting rewarded his polarizing language and behaviours. Using his platform, Trump facilitated the emergence of an environment to declare such views shamelessly and loudly, effectively creating permission to hate, impacting communities – and nations – well beyond the United States.

Indeed, Trump’s profound effect on the Canadian right should be unsurprising. Researchers note that American politics, issues, and cultural debates have an outsized influence on Canadian politics, and this is particularly true of the far-right.²⁵ A 2020 study found that Canadian Twitter users retweeted 10 tweets from US-based users for every tweet retweeted from a Canadian user.²⁶ A 2021 study found that Canadian far-right extremist accounts mentioned the US more than Canada and, in 2020, Canadian RWE discussed Canadian politics only 3.1% more than American politics.²⁷

However, domestic events played a role in further polarizing the Canadian far-right, including the election of the Trudeau government in 2015. Campaigning on a renewed foreign policy, Trudeau was seen as a puppet and conduit for plans to destroy Canadian sovereignty by a shadowy, globalist elite. In particular, Trudeau’s promise and subsequent action to allow 35,000 Syrian refugees into Canada seemed to confirm conspiracy theories related to the so-called “Great Replacement” theory – or the idea that a (usually Jewish) cabal is attempting to undermine the white populations of the West – circulating on social media.²⁸ By early 2016, this resulted in a series of immediate attacks on Syrian refugees and Canadian Muslims, pepper spray, graffiti, the emergence of “street patrols” by groups like the SoO, attacks on Mosques, and eventually the emergence of anti-immigration rallies by groups held by PEGIDA, SoO and Atalante Québec.²⁹

A truly galvanizing moment, however, was the response of far-right groups and networks to M103, a non-binding Parliamentary motion by member of Parliament Iqra Khalid which called on the Canadian government to condemn Islamophobia and all forms of religious discrimination. Following a 2017 attack on the Quebec City Mosque, (itself inspired by conspiracy theories that Muslim hordes were coming to invade and destroy Canada) the motion received increased attention. However, the motion soon set off a wave of protests across the country because of the belief that the motion was an attack on free speech and promoted radical, militant Islam or Sharia.³⁰ It electrified online, far-right networks into a movement which began monthly protests outside of provincial legislatures and city halls throughout 2017.

Although the M103 furor eventually faded, it created an energetic network stemming from both social media and in-person events, which soon found inspiration in new places. The first of these was the Yellow Vest protests in France, which began as a movement protesting the cost of living. In Canada, however, the Yellow Vest movement was focused on anti-Muslim, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories.³¹ While the movement attempted to portray itself as being pro-oil and gas, it was ultimately centered on the UN Global Compact on Migration – a non-binding international agreement on the treatment of refugees.³² Believing that the Compact was a gateway to a loss of sovereignty, and the begging of a wave of uncontrolled (mostly Muslim) migration, the movement once again took to protesting outside of city halls and on highways across the country. In early 2019, the movement spawned the “United We Roll” Convoy, which was attended by only a few hundred individuals, but also received the support of conservative politicians.³³ Finally, by mid-2020, this anti-government and often conspiracy-driven movement found new purpose in opposing pandemic health measures, calling for an end to all mandates.³⁴ And as frustration and desperation among the Canadian public grew after two long years of

shut-downs, the “freedom” movement, which disguised its beliefs under a call for a return to normal, found a new audience – especially as Canadians were forced to spend more time online.

Conclusion

The so-called 2022 “Freedom Convoy” was neither a spontaneous uprising of patriots nor a foreign interference plot: it was the result of a growing Canadian far-right movement that made itself more accessible in terms of image and approach, exploited new social media tools and found a new permissive environment in the wake of Trump’s election campaign. While the movement was disparate, it often found common-cause in its anti-immigration, anti-government, Islamophobic and conspiracy-driven beliefs, many of which with antisemitic origins. Importantly, until 2022, this movement – while vocal – was limited by its own internal dysfunction, driven by personality conflicts and infighting. Moreover, many of the narratives that the movement centred upon were largely unintelligible to the wider Canadian public: waving an anti-United Nations Flag at City Hall while wearing a high-visibility vest does not translate into coherent political message to those who do not spend their time in polarized, online like-minded communities that are steeped in their own layers of meaning.

Where the 2022 Freedom Convoy found success was in the fact that after two years of seemingly endless pandemic lockdowns, with no plan to move forward from political leaders, they offered a vision of hope and a future – even if it was the most radical – in calling for the removal of all restrictions. Their plan was no plan – but in the absence of political leadership, it no doubt appealed to a large-enough subset of the population that made the movement viable. The framing of the Convoy around pandemic measures, disguising the anti-government motivations put forward by its leadership, was then championed by a far-right media ecosystem, which eagerly amplified the narrative that this was an outburst of Canadians that had simply had enough of the Trudeau government. And public testimony and documents at the 2022 Public Order Emergency Commission clearly shows that police forces simply did not understand the forces that had been gathering for nearly a decade, and possibly some members were sympathetic to its cause.³⁵

Today the Freedom Convoy movement has once again returned to a state of disarray. Many of its leaders are facing criminal charges and infighting has returned. But the circumstances and factors contributing to the Convoy highlighted in this essay remain. While Canada may not see its cities blocked by trucks anytime soon, the movement which has thrived on conspiracy theories, xenophobia and anti-government sentiment will find new ways of organizing. And it continues to encourage people to eschew the idea of politics as convincing for a model that compels through trucks, horns, and anti-democratic revolution. This will continue to place strain on our political institutions, creating and amplifying distrust in our democratic system. Already it has led to a surge of verbal and physical threats to politicians, potentially driving individuals out of politics, or reducing the amount of contact legislative members can have with the public out of safety concerns. Most concerning, the narratives amplified by these groups have already inspired individuals to violence, including the 2014 Moncton Shooting, the 2015 Halifax Mall Plot and, as noted above the 2017 Quebec Mosque Attack. In this way, dealing with the fallout of polarization in Canada, and its impact on the far-right will be one of the most important challenges for policymakers in the decades ahead.

Endnotes

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