



FAR-RIGHT POPULISM IN CANADA: FROM M103 TO THE OTTAWA OCCUPATION

Date: March 17, 2022

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On March 17, 2022, Mr. Evan Balgord, Executive Director of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, presented *Far-Right Populism in Canada: From M103 to the Ottawa Occupation* at the March Digital Roundtable event, hosted by the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS)-Vancouver. The key points of discussion included the connections between different far-right movements in Canada and how grievances and beliefs on conspiracy theories can serve as the groundwork for radicalization and participation in far-right movements. Mr. Balgord's presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Mr. Balgord highlighted the connective nature of the far-right movement in Canada, despite it calling itself different names over time, and the shifting focus of their grievances. He discussed the connection between the anti-Motion 103 (M103) protests, the Yellow Vest Canada movement, and the main organizers of the Freedom Convoy. Mr. Balgord touched on the influence that individual content creators and their audiences have in these contemporary movements and potential paths forward to protect the future of politics and democracy.

Question and Answer Period

During the questions and answer period, Mr. Balgord discussed ways to put up roadblocks to the fundraising efforts of the far-right. In addition, he touched on

ways to equip the youth with tools to recognize and appropriately deal with radicalization efforts.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Mr. Balgord presented the continuity of the far-right movement in Canada and discussed the connective tissue linking the anti-Muslim protests that occurred around 2017 in response to M103, and how this set the groundwork that grew into the Ottawa occupation in 2022. While M103 was aimed at condemning Islamophobia, its passing resulted in the pushback and demonstrations which claimed the motion served to criminalize any discussion about Islam or what was being called radical or militant Islam. Despite what the protestors claimed, it quickly became clear that the demonstrations were racist in nature.

Mr. Balgord pointed out that when the anti-M103 movement started losing traction, the far-right needed something new to center their grievances on. They coopted the Yellow Vest movement from France and used insurrection, anti-Muslim, anti-Islam, and the hanging of politicians as a driving force. The main actors, Pat King, Tamara Lich, and James Bauder, who were involved in Yellow Vest Canada and the attempted 'United We Roll' convoy, are the same actors organizing the Freedom Convoy. During the time of the Yellow Vest Canada movement, the far-right movement was still based primarily on militia or biker style right-wing groups that would temporarily come together for events or protests, and the content creators were not the main organizers in the anti-Muslim protests of 2017. Subsequently, the emphasis moved away from groups and towards unified movements of individuals that ran things — content creators and their audiences.

Mr. Balgord noted that while people within groups such as the far-right, right wing extremism, or far-right populism — those involved in the Ottawa occupation — might have a wide variety of grievances, they are unified by a common goal: the undemocratic change of power. Those in the far-right populism movement distrust traditional authority, science, and journalism. They also want to redefine what it means to be Canadian, which amounts to denying equal rights and citizenship to people who do not look like them nor agree with them.

The Freedom Convoy and the COVID-19 conspiracy movement brought together a range of conspiracies that began with a dislike of mandates but eventually

spanned into a distrust of traditional authority and science, appealing to those who want an undemocratic change of power. Further, Mr. Balgord noted that many participants have more extreme grievances, like a dislike of Jews, Muslims, or Trans individuals. The movement pivots to utilize different grievances and amasses people as it goes, uniting followers with a common goal and protecting those who follow the movement's agenda. Individuals that are already primed to distrust government and mainstream media will more easily accept new conspiracies, making it easier to radicalize them. Mr. Balgord acknowledged that not everyone in the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa is racist, violent, or seeks an insurrection, but asserted that many of the leaders of the movement are racist and Islamophobic.

Mr. Balgord observed that the anti-Muslim movement in Canada has grown from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands over the past five years. The movement is gaining more political legitimacy as the convoy becomes more mainstream and members of the Conservative party openly embrace it. Mr. Balgord reflected on the weight and concerning nature of members of a mainstream political party, having openly endorsed a movement that calls for the murder of their opposition. Mr. Balgord also observed that the perceived support from the police, through certain community policing tactics and actual monetary support for the convoy coming from some law enforcement, emboldens right-wing movements. The right-wing movement within the Freedom Convoy poses several categories of threat with the potential to produce lone actors with a clear target. Mr. Balgord also noted that the broad nature of the grievances involved makes the situation unstable and hard to monitor, while eroding trust in politicians and law enforcement.

While Mr. Balgord expressed his concern for the future of politics and the threat towards our democracy, he suggested that real solutions come from the community. Large scale public condemnations serve to expose the 'real' extremists because they no longer have the cloud cover to hide among those on the borderline of the movement. The far-right may provide easy answers to difficult questions, but politics in Canada needs to provide better answers to avoid those feeling disenfranchised from accepting a poisoned pill.

Mr. Balgord concluded by suggesting several paths forward, such as more regulation on social media to target hate at the outset, rather than responding to it once it has already occurred and done damage; reinstating section 13 of the Human Rights Act to allow victims to hold perpetrators accountable for defamation towards their group; amending the criminal code to make it clearer

that certain symbols, like the swastika and the Confederate flag, are in violation of section 319(2) and represents the willful promotion of hate propaganda.

Mr. Balgord suggested that there is opportunity for the tide to turn as serious actors and organizers come together to ask: what next?

Question and Answer Period

In response to a question about effective ways to counter the fundraising efforts of the far-right, Mr. Balgord suggested that roadblocks to their success can be put in place by deplatforming individuals, as well as targeting advertisers to shut down revenue from those outlets. Deplatforming individual content creators can discourage them as they are unable to reach people on mainstream media.

Mr. Balgord expressed that the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa has sparked the desire to have convoys elsewhere, both internationally and in other regions of Canada. It is hard to rewrite the narrative to make participants of the Freedom Convoy rethink their actions and how it impacts Canadians because they have distrust for anything that comes from outside their circle of creation.

In response to a question about how to immunize people against the underpinnings of far-right movements that attempt to radicalize people, Mr. Balgord expressed the importance of teaching young people the history of fascist insurrections and how democracies fall. Further, he mentioned that the toolkit *Confronting and Preventing Hate in Canadian Schools*, produced by Mr. Balgord and his colleagues at the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, helps identify when a young person is being groomed by a white supremacist group. This toolkit works to build safe communities by providing tools for adults and youth to help prevent this occurrence and aiding them on how to respond appropriately if it is happening.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Many of the main actors from the Yellow Vest Canada movement are the same individuals who are organizing the Freedom Convoy — Pat King, Tamara Lich, and James Bauder.
- The Freedom Convoy and the COVID-19 conspiracy movement brought together a range of conspiracies that began with a dislike of mandates, but it also spanned into a distrust of mainstream institutions that have the potential

to become more extreme, like a dislike of Jews, Muslims, or Trans individuals.

- Not everyone in the Ottawa convoy is racist, violent, or seeks an insurrection, but many of the leaders of the Freedom Convoy movement are racist and Islamophobic.
- The anti-Muslim movement has grown from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands over the past five years.
- Paths forward include increased regulations on social media, reinstating section 13 of the Human Rights Act, and amending the criminal code to make it clear which symbols are considered hate propaganda.

Question and Answer Period

- The fundraising efforts of the far-right can be disrupted by deplatforming influencers from mainstream social media and disrupting advertisers.
- It is challenging to convince convoy participants to rethink their actions because they are inclined to distrust anything that comes from outside their circle.
- In order to protect youth from being radicalized by the far-right, more emphasis can be placed on teaching youth the history of how democracies fall and equipping them with tools to recognize attempts or early stages of radicalization.



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