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THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN
ACTIVITY: CANADA
COUNTRY PROFILE

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Overview of the anti-lockdown movement	5
Alternative Media	5
Politicians	6
Violent Extremism	7
The Religious Right	9
Conclusion	10
End notes	11

INTRODUCTION

Almost immediately following the introduction of public health measures brought in under provincial emergency legislation, an anti-lockdown movement has emerged. Some of these organisations have a long-standing presence in Canada. Vaccine Choice Canada, for example, has its origins in the 1980s.¹ However, alongside it are new organisations and protest groups, challenging public health restrictions, lockdowns and vaccinations. This includes No More Lockdowns Canada, Hugs Over Masks, Nurses Against Lockdown (now merged into Canadian Frontline Nurses), Liberty Coalition Canada, and The Line.

While some of those engaging in these protest movements are individuals frustrated with the closure of their businesses and perceived harm to their livelihood, the most vocal and prominent “activists” are frequently supporters of the far-right, many of whom espouse anti-government, racist, antisemitic, Islamophobic, and other hateful views.

Indeed, many of those involved in current Canadian anti-lockdown activities were involved in earlier far-right anti-government and anti-immigrant movements. This includes Yellow Vests Canada (a pro-oil and pipeline group that quickly adopted antisemitic conspiracy theories concerning world government, the United Nations and immigration), the legacy and remnant groupings of the Canadian chapter of the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant Soldiers of Odin, as well as individuals inspired by far-right extremist narratives. The narratives and conspiracy theories propagated by these groups are supported by a number of far-right and alternative media outlets which seek to launder them into more mainstream, right-leaning publications.

Anti-lockdown activism should be understood as a movement of fractious groups and personalities. Although personality dynamics between leaders and influencers inhibit a more collaborative movement, links to the far-right raise serious concerns about the threat of violence and the implications of where this movement may be headed in the post-COVID era. For the purpose of this brief, we identify four key nodes that have influenced the anti-lockdown movement in Canada over the past 14 months: alternative media, fringe politicians, ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) groups, and elements of the religious right.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-LOCKDOWN MOVEMENT

Alternative media

A relatively well-established alternative media ecosystem is responsible for laundering and amplifying anti-lockdown narratives. These narratives are generated and recycled by online personalities who use videos and live-broadcasts to interview each other and dynamically address their followers. One of the best known of these figures is Chris Saccoccia, who goes by the name “Chris Sky”, who has effectively used social media to document his activism, such as cross-country tours,² hosting raves,³ attending protests,⁴ and handing out anti-mask cards.⁵ These views are amplified by far-right vloggers who livestream, or post videos on platforms such as YouTube and Bitchute. Plaid Army, for example, features a network of individuals who profess antisemitic views and other forms of hate speech; features and amplifies anti-public health measure messages; and ties COVID-19 conspiracy theories to far-right tropes, such as those involving George Soros and a secret Zionist “globalist” world government.⁶

Similarly, individuals associated with loosely organised networks fighting public health measures, feature their content on social media, including a series of locked Facebook accounts, or even creating their own media outlets. *Druthers*, which emerged at the end of 2020, is online and has also been distributed in parts of Canada, including at anti-lockdown protests. It is reportedly in partnership with Vaccine Choice Canada and features COVID-19 conspiracy theories, praises figures detained for violating public health measures, alongside anti-government narratives consistent with far-right groups such as ‘world government’ conspiracy theories.⁷

The narratives generated and shared by these movements, as well as prominent individuals within the movements themselves, are then featured in more established alternative media outlets, including *Rebel News*,⁸ *Western Standard*,⁹ *True North*,¹⁰ and the *Postmillennial*,¹¹ who feature their “reporting” or feature them as guests on their websites, live-streamed shows and videos. *Rebel News* has been particularly outspoken about fines, charges and arrests that have been leveled against anti-mask protesters. It has launched multiple

“campaigns” to support these individuals such as “Fight the Fines”¹², “Support the Legal Fight Against Trudeau’s ‘COVID JAILS’”¹³ and campaigns to support religious figures that have violated public health measures.¹⁴ These campaigns urge donors to give money to *Rebel News* so they can cover these stories or engage lawsuits “suing” the government over these measures. While he was with *Rebel News*, reporter Kean Bexte reported about being “detained in a COVID jail”.¹⁵ He has since branched out on his own media site featuring guests promoting “COVID hoax” conspiracy theories, against COVID-19 measures and calling for the release of those arrested for violating public health measures.¹⁶ *The Post Millennial* does not typically engage in campaigns, but posts articles that attack public health figures, particularly Dr. Anthony Fauci and the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as Canadian public health measures.



Figure 1. Example of Rebel News story

POLITICIANS

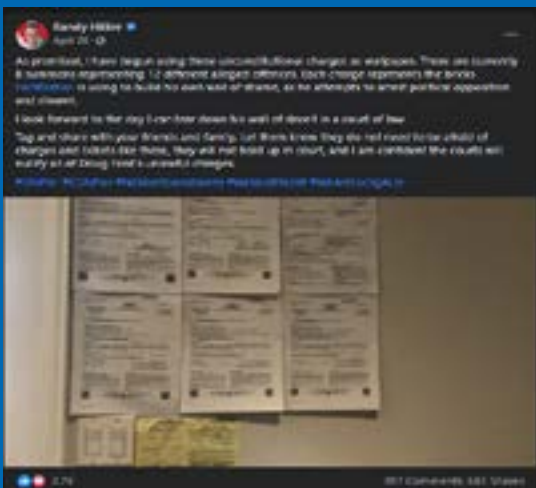
As with the media, from the onset of the coronavirus *pandemic* dangerous conspiracies and misinformation have plagued Canadian politics.¹⁷ Despite officially mandated public health advice and provincial legislation, a handful of current and formerly elected leaders have brazenly defied and collectively oppose public health orders, such as lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, mask and social distancing requirements, and vaccination campaigns. Amongst some of the most vocal critics of public health measures include the current leader of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC) Maxime Bernier, MPP Randy Hillier, MPP Derek Sloan, the Christian Heritage Party of British Columbia’s (CHP) leader Laura Lynn Tyler Thompson, and Calgary’s mayoral candidate Kevin J. Johnston.

Maxime Bernier was recently arrested by RCMP for failing to follow Manitoba’s mandatory self-isolation upon entrance to the province and contravening a provision of the Public Health Act by attending a large, unsanctioned rally. Despite officially cutting his “Mad Max Manitoba Tour” short following his arrest, over two hundred Manitobans gathered at the last tour stop anyways.¹⁸ Bernier has now received tickets in Peterborough ON, Niverville MB, Regina and Saskatoon SK for violating public health orders and organising illegal gatherings for anti-restrictions rallies. Earlier this past May, Bernier attended an anti-mask protest in Montreal and promoted the event on his official Facebook account¹⁹ before turning to Twitter declaring CTV Montreal’s article on the protest as “fake news”²⁰ and appearing in a livestream with conspiracy theorists Samuel Grenier and Daniel Pilon.²¹ As a result of the protest, authorities were forced to shut down Montreal’s biggest COVID-19 vaccination site and reschedule all the vaccination appointments that day.

Both independent MPP for Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston, Randy Hillier, and independent MPP for Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Derek Sloan, were removed from the Conservative Party’s caucus for disrespectful behavior. Since their removal, Hillier and Sloan have attended several rallies protesting COVID-19 lockdowns and frequently criticise public health regulations on their official social media platforms. In a unanimous vote, Kingston’s city council, in addition to the Town of Perth, the Township of South Frontenac, and Loyalist Township, has formally condemned Hillier for his unethical and harmful behavior during the pandemic.²² Hillier and Sloan both were charged with attending a large religious gathering in Aylmer, Ont. under the Reopening of Ontario Act.²³ To date, Hillier has received numerous fines with eight court summonses for violating the Reopening Ontario Act.²⁴

On the west coast, former PPC candidate, current CHP BC leader and far-right podcast host Laura Lynn Tyler Thompson spoke fervently at Vancouver’s anti-lockdown protest misrepresenting the severity of COVID-19, declaring that “the real virus is fear” and demanding Canadian’s freedom.²⁵ She frequently amplifies popular COVID-19 conspiracies on Twitter and Periscope and often praises MP Sloan and Bernier for their efforts in fighting for Canadians.²⁶

Calgary’s mayoral candidate Kevin Johnston faces numerous criminal charges in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario for causing public disturbances, hosting illegal gatherings, assault, criminal harassment, civil contempt, and hate crimes. He was recently denied bail due to a “high risk to re-offend”.²⁷ Further, Alberta Health Services were granted a restraining order against Johnston after threatening to harm AHS employees in a podcast for enforcing public health restrictions.²⁸



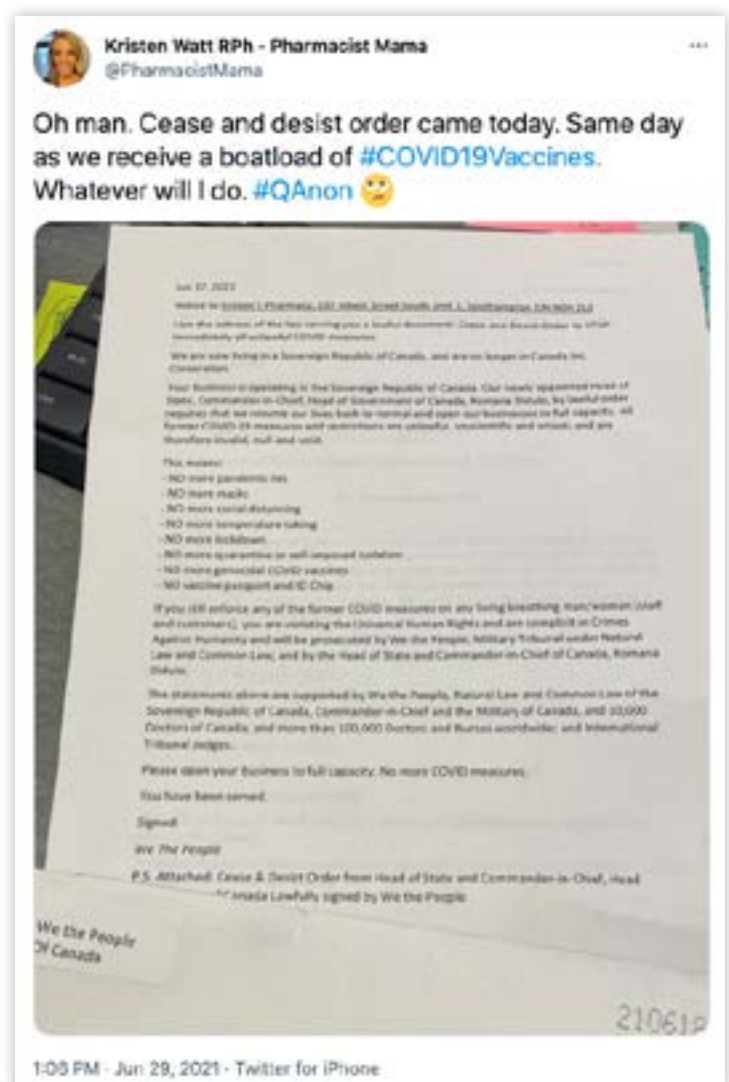
VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Individuals involved in the far-right in Canada have moved quickly to link themselves to anti-lockdown and anti-public health measure movements in the early months of lockdown, creating “a pandemic of hate”.²⁹ In Canada, far-right extremism is considered by the government to be a form of ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE)³⁰ – but one that is difficult to describe. There is no one core set of beliefs or narratives that easily describes the ideology behind these movements. However, while there may not be coherence, there is a shared framework of beliefs, ideas, concepts, and literature that cuts across far-right groups which make it possible to identify actors within this ideology. A description of this mix of ideas has been suggested by Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens:

“ **A loose movement, animated by a racially, ethnically, and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is typically framed in terms of White power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as non-Whites, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals and feminists.**”³¹

It is likely that many (if not most) far-right movements have latched on to COVID-19 conspiracy movements to lure anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists to their cause.³² This includes adapting their propaganda and attending anti-lockdown protests and events.³³ However, it is also true that there is an affinity between far-right and anti-lockdown/anti-vaccine narratives. Far-right groups are presenting the pandemic as evidence of a global conspiracy theory, although different movements disagree over what the goals of the alleged conspiracy are.³⁴

While it is not possible to list all actors in this space, the following actors provide an indication of the interchanges between anti-lockdown activists and the far-right/IMVE.



1:05 PM - Jun 29, 2021 - Twitter for iPhone

Anti-government

Sovereign Citizen/Freeman-on-the-Land movements, who refuse to be governed by “human laws” because they believe they have not consented to them, have been known to attack and sometimes kill police officers, judges, and government employees in defence of what they see as their rights.³⁵ More of a movement than an organised group, Sovereign Citizen theories have been used by individuals and a few business establishments protesting lockdown/public health measures. This includes restaurants in Vancouver and Toronto which used sovereign citizen rhetoric and “legal” arguments to fight (unsuccessfully) the closing of their restaurants after repeatedly violating public health measures.³⁶

Individuals influenced by anti-government extremism have mobilised to violence. In July 2020, Corey Hurren crashed through the gates at the Prime Minister’s current residence (Rideau Hall), while carrying firearms and multiple rounds of ammunition. At his trial, he admitted doing so for the purpose of arresting the Prime Minister, hoping his actions would be a “wake-up call” and a “turning point”.³⁷

In 2021, some adherents of the QAnon conspiracy appear to be following Romana Didulo, a woman in her 50s based in British Columbia who claims to be the Queen of Canada, who is encouraging attacks against health care workers and institutions involved in the vaccination campaign. Many of these individuals have sent out “cease and desist” notices, demanding that they halt vaccination efforts and lockdown procedures.³⁸ While the group seems to adopt many sovereign/freeman-on-the-land tactics, Didulo claims to be a secret ruler of Canada, promoting mass executions of those she perceives as traitors as well as other violent rhetoric.³⁹ She is also being amplified by American QAnon influencers.

White Supremacists/Neo-Nazis

Extremist groups have been organising in Canada, spreading conspiracy theories and seeking to emulate protests seen in the United States.⁴⁰ Many individuals and movements associated with White Supremacy and neo-Nazi views have promoted protests against public health measures and vaccinations on their social media feeds.

It is common for far-right and neo-Nazi symbols to be seen at “freedom” or anti-lockdown events.⁴¹ For example, the Canadian National Party, led by Travis Patron, is an openly antisemitic neo-Nazi registered fringe political party in Canada⁴² and members have been observed at anti-lockdown rallies.⁴³

Within this movement, two further groups that may be taking advantage of the pandemic to spread their propaganda, recruit or even subvert other movements. The Canada First movement, modeled explicitly after Nick Fuentes’ “America First”, seeks to subvert Canadian conservative movements towards anti-immigration and white supremacist policies.⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ These “Groypers” seek to infiltrate mainstream political movements, particularly conservative ones, for the purpose of subverting them. At first, Canada First/Groypers celebrated the closing of borders to non-Europeans during the early stages of the pandemic. However, when the pandemic restrictions and lockdowns began to affect them directly, they then incrementally moved towards and embraced denialism. They also push a toxic masculinity in that “real men” don’t wear masks because “masks represent fear”.

THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Since the implementation of public health restrictions due to the pandemic, the religious right has become increasingly controversial as church leaders across Canada continue to host large, unsanctioned gatherings despite public health mandates. Preying on pandemic fatigue and growing public frustration with government restrictions, a small handful of religious leaders have used COVID-19 conspiracies to further their agendas of hatred, bigotry, and racism.

Pastor Artur Pawlowski of Street Church in Calgary, Alberta presents an example of anti-lockdown activity driven by the religious far-right and has captured media headlines on multiple occasions for his disregard for public health mandates and Islamophobic and homophobic views.⁴⁶ Early this year, Pawlowski organised Edmonton's "Walk for Freedom" rally to protest lockdown measures where four police officers were assaulted; many in attendance are affiliated with known hate groups, including "Soldiers of Odin" and "Urban Infidels", and carried tiki torches as they marched.⁴⁷ Politicians Laura Lynn Thompson and Kevin J. Johnston were also in attendance.⁴⁸

On several separate occasions, Pawlowski has been ticketed for organising an anti-mask protest without a permit, failing to wear a face covering, and promoting and attending an illegal gathering.⁴⁹ In one self-recorded video, Pawlowski repeatedly calls Calgary police officers and Alberta Health Services officers "Nazi psychopaths", "Communists", and "Gestapo" before urging viewers to "join the fight [because] we need numbers".⁵⁰ At time of writing, he is undertaking a tour of the United States to garner sympathy for his cause, to network among the religious right and to use his story as a way of bolstering far-right myths about Canadian lockdown measures in the US.^{51 52}

Pastor James Coates of Edmonton's GraceLife Church is another example of religious, anti-government opposition in Canada. Coates was ticketed and charged for violating public health capacity limits, social distancing, and mask requirements; he then spent 35 days in jail for refusing to accept the bail provision requiring him to comply with public health mandates.⁵³ Coates attempted to challenge the charges as unconstitutional in court before a provincial judge dismissed the application, arguing that his Charter-protected rights to religious freedom and freedom of expression had been violated and that the health risk of COVID-19 was exaggerated as a part of an agenda to transform the nation.⁵⁴

One Ontarian church has proven their defiance as the Church of God's Pastor Henry Hildebrandt has received over \$400,000 in fines thus far with additional fines pending, found in contempt twice, and had the church's doors padlocked for violating Supreme Court orders to comply with the Reopening Ontario Act.⁵⁵ Hildebrandt has instructed his congregation, with some services totaling over 400 attendees, to ignore public health mandates, claiming the pandemic is fictional.⁵⁶ Aylmer, the town where the church is located, has been identified as a hotspot prone to outbreaks.⁵⁷ Hildebrandt, alongside Randy Hillier, Derek Sloan, Laura Lynn Thompson, and Maxime Bernier, collectively organised an anti-lockdown rally in Ottawa this past Canada Day in addition to frequent collaborative protests held by Hildebrandt, Hillier, and Sloan.⁵⁸

Manitoba-based Pastor Tobias Tissen of the Church of God Restoration is currently on the run from police after a warrant was issued for his arrest for repeatedly violating public health mandates.⁵⁹ The church may face fines up to \$1 million dollars for holding in-person services despite local capacity restrictions.⁶⁰ Some in-person services had over 200 people, most unmasked, in attendance, and Tissen has argued that he cannot stop people from attending church as that is in "God's jurisdiction", not his.⁶¹ To date, Tissen has not been apprehended and continues to travel across Canada speaking at anti-lockdown protests and sermons.

CONCLUSION

As noted throughout this paper, anti-mask, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movements in Canada are commonly propagated by the far-right, as well as alternative media echoing far-right talking points.

While some of these movements pre-date COVID-19, it is clear that far-right movements have quickly adapted to the pandemic, creating their own groups or seeking to co-opt and/or subvert others. The question remains, where is this movement headed? There are at least two competing trends: On the one hand, the far-right in Canada does not have the popularity of their US or even European equivalents. In addition, the far-right in Canada is notoriously fractious. Movements and groups are consumed with interpersonal and inter-group dynamics that prevent a larger more cohesive movement from emerging.

On the other hand, anti-mask, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movements have had nearly 18 months in which to network, reach new audiences, and test messaging to improving their outreach. Once COVID-19 disappears or its impact becomes sufficiently minimal, some individuals involved in these movements may return to their regular lives. Others, however, now fully networked with these movements on multiple social media platforms, may continue to stay in touch with extremists as they move to the next issue. What that next issue is, however, is not clear. It may be a return to previous right-wing extremist preoccupations: the promotion of anti-immigration, Islamophobic and antisemitic views, policies and violence.

However, new dynamics are at play. The rise of a youth-driven Groyper movement in Canada suggests these battles will be waged through the prism of culture wars and “taking Canada back” from progressives, socialists, globalists, etc. (A similar “wingism”/“Rightwingism” movement among far-right youth in Quebec exists, but with a nationalist/separatist bent particular to that province⁶²). In addition, the propagation of a post-Trump presidency QAnon movement, and those who seek to tie those conspiracy theories to anti-government extremism may pose serious public order, if not national security challenges.⁶³ Finally, it is likely that, as with previous eras, the Canadian far-right will continue to be influenced by both American and European movements.

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