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# Commissioned Paper: Social Cleavages Series Shifting Cleavages in Canada

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### Shifting Cleavages in Canada

Part of the Commission’s mandate is “to examine and report on the circumstances that led to the declaration of a public order emergency” including “the evolution and goals of the convoy and blockades, their leadership, organization and participants.” To this end, the Commission has solicited research from specialists who study shifting cleavages in Canada from different angles. All the specialists agree that members in the Convoy held a wide range of general and specific motivations for their participation, and represented a wide range of political views also.

The first three specialists prepared research notes for the Commission examining shifts in mainstream Canadian politics leading up to the Convoy. Because these notes are posted on the website together with this memo, they are summarizing briefly. The fourth specialist was asked to address the role of extremism in the Convoy. In the interests of efficiency, she directed the Commission toward existing co-authored work, and replied to follow up questions. Because this work is linked but not attached here, since the copyright lies elsewhere, we provide, for the ease of the public, a more detailed summary of the fourth scholar’s work.

Professor Frédéric Boily, of the University of Alberta provides a paper analysing a range of populist currents leading up to the Convoy, including economic and identity threats experienced by some convoy supporters. He notes the possible role of a shift in climate policy under the Trudeau government. Notably, Professor Boily remarks that vaccine mandates may not have been the core concern of many Convoy members, but served instead as an “ideological accelerant”.

Frank Graves, President of Ekos Research, provides a paper describing broad trends in Canadian public opinion pertinent to the rise of the Convoy movement. He notes that Canadians have shifted toward an Open/Ordered polarization, with about 2/3 of the population growing more open, while the last third retrenches. Graves provides a range of data on shifting levels of trust in government, the level of convoy support in Canada, and correlates including vaccination status, attitudes to visible minorities, support for Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine, etc.

Because some leaders of the Convoy were also supporters of Alberta separatism, in his paper, Professor Jared Wesley, of the University of Alberta, provides an analysis of the development of Western alienation over the past decade, and its diverse expressions in support for Alberta separatism and for the Convoy. Notably, while Professor Wesley finds that supporters of the two movements strongly overlap in terms of their demographic characteristics, and overlap in terms of leadership of the movements, support for *both* movements is less common.

While the first three papers examine shifts in mainstream politics leading up to the Convoy, a final paper addresses the role of extremism. In the interests of efficiency, Professor Stephanie Carvin of Carleton University directed the Commission toward research she had recently co-authored with Kurt Philips and Amarnath Amarasingam on extremist, anti-

immigrant, and anti-government elements within the Convoy.<sup>1</sup> For the ease of the public, we summarize this work in more detail here, since, due to copyright, the paper is not attached. Like the other specialists, these scholars emphasize the diverse ideological and political origins of Convoy membership. But they note that some convoy leaders have strong extremist ties. And the Convoy, they note, presented opportunities for right wing extremist recruitment. This is because conspiracy narratives provide novel opportunities for frame alignment, for example, tying anti-vaccine positions together with anti-climate action positions.

Carvin, Amarasingam, and Philips note that public health measures directly motivated some protesters' participation, including long established anti-vaccine activist groups such as Vaccine Choice Canada. These groups brought on side many Canadians whose lives or livelihoods were negatively impacted by COVID-19 public health measures.

But other leaders and participants in the Convoy had strong, pre-existing ties to extremist movements, including far right, anti-immigration and anti-government organizations. Writing just as the Convoy began, these scholars warned that even if a minority, the presence of extremist elements warranted vigilance around the possibility of violence. Some leaders present at the Convoy had explicitly advocated violence, both toward individual Canadians and against Canadian democratic institutions. For example, media recorded the presence among the Convoy protesters, of Romana Didulo, a QAnon inspired conspiracy theorist, who maintains a sizable social media following. Didulo has proclaimed herself to be the Queen of Canada.<sup>2</sup> And, in December 2021, issued orders to her followers that they should "shoot to kill" any medical professional who vaccinates a child.<sup>3</sup> Since being questioned by the RCMP, Didulo has backed away from direct calls to violence. She was one of several QAnon and other conspiracy oriented Convoy participants.<sup>4</sup>

Carvin and her co-authors argue that while it is false to describe all convoy supporters as driven by racist or extremist sympathies, the Convoy presented an opportunity for those extremists present to recruit new members. This is because extremist conspiracy theories connect diverse concerns of convoy participants in a single master narrative, enabling frame alignment for diverse worldviews. As Professor Carvin noted in response to questions: "extremists see an opportunity to mingle and recruit among a group that is already mistrustful of the government and science. [And] the anti-vaccination group has spent years being primed with conspiracy theories, both from abroad and domestic. It then makes sense for [extremists to recruit new followers by building] on some of these beliefs."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2022/anti-lockdown-mobilization-far-right-canada/> Unless otherwise noted, claims in this section are drawn either from the above article, or from comments Professor Carvin provided in response to queries on 7<sup>th</sup> July, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Leyland Cecco, "'Queen of Canada': the rapid rise of a fringe QAnon figure sounds alarm," *The Guardian*. August 23, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/23/queen-of-canada-qanon-rise-conspiracy-alarm>;

<sup>3</sup> Brett Popplewell, "What Happened in Ottawa? Separating the Discontent from the Darker Elements," *The Walrus*, March 3, 2022. <https://thewalrus.ca/ottawa-convoy/>

<sup>4</sup> Justin Ling, "5G and QAnon: how conspiracy theorists steered Canada's anti-vaccine trucker protest," *The Guardian*. February 8, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/08/canada-ottawa-trucker-protest-extremist-qanon-neo-nazi>

Carvin, Amarasingam, and Philips also noted that extremist groups may be expected to move together with new recruits from the anti-vaccine issue, to new issues. For example, as Carvin noted in response to later questions, Convoy members' protests in July of 2022 in support of Dutch farmers who reject environmental measures show how this frame alignment works to move followers to new grievances, by means of the conspiracy master narrative: A common extremist master narrative involves the conspiracy theory that the World Economic Forum is a "global cabal of actors controlling events or seeking to undermine the populations of the West." According to this conspiracy theory, both climate change action and vaccination are tools these elites use to "control the world and undermine our way of life." For this reason, many convoy supporters who may have begun as anti-vaccine activists may have come to see "The climate change agenda ...with both suspicion and outright hostility."

Together, these papers illuminate key aspects of the social and political context in which diverse streams of the Convoy emerged. The first three experts address shifts and novel cleavages in mainstream politics. The final expert addresses the role of extremism in the Convoy. The papers suggest points of convergence and frame alignment between groups who might have originally joined the Convoy with diverse purposes, but may have found their frames aligning. Understanding the role of general and specific democratic discontent, as well as the role of extremist elements in the convoy movement, is important for the Commission to fulfil its mandate, which requires that we examine "the circumstances that led to the declaration of a public order emergency" including "the evolution and goals of the convoy and blockades, their leadership, organization and participants." More generally, the papers suggest a variety of ways that Canada's politics may be moving away from traditional left-right politics, toward cleavages aligned for-against openness and for-against our current, federal, democratic system.