

Trip Report: Ottawa on Saturday, February 5

Anonymous

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We took the train downtown to avoid getting caught in the traffic jam of the protest itself. I've spent the ride alternating between preparing myself for what we're about to see by mentally going over all of the things I should expect to see and hear in the next few hours at the convoy protest and distracting myself by contemplating whether or not I like Ottawa's new transit system. I haven't been to downtown Ottawa since before the pandemic. I know what stop we're going to but it is unmistakable anyway, a wave of people dressed in Canadian flag capes, maskless and bearing protest signs prepares to dismount just as we do. I remember using a similar tactic to find the right subway stop to get to Zucotti Park in 2011. There are so many surface-level similarities between here and there that I can't help but feel a pang of the jealousy and perhaps even empathy with the protestors that I've been experiencing all week, watching their moment unfold and remembering moments where I have felt joy, camaraderie and anticipation of the kind that I imagine they are feeling this week.

The first thing I notice when we step out of the train is a tall white man wearing a Make America Great Again hat, waving the "Fuck Trudeau" flag that has been an important emblem of the right for the past few years. Obviously I hate his Trump hat but I am also reminded of how much I hate that the far right has taken a slogan as pure and good as "Fuck Trudeau" away from me, such that I can't insult the man who is perhaps my least-favourite Prime Minister in Canadian history without first stating that I don't support the far right. The second remarkable thing is two young families crossing paths as one walks toward the train and another away from it, the children jumping up and down as they walk and chanting "FREEDOM" so loud their voices are cracking. I can tell they've been doing this all day and the MAGA dude joins in with a boisterous "FREEDOM! FREEDOM!" and waves enthusiastically to the children.

I've been following this protest online all week and while I know online is where a lot of the protestors' banter happens I also knew it would feel different to be among them in downtown Ottawa. I wanted to see it for myself and get a sense of the "vibe," as well as gauge how obvious the presence of the far-right movement that I know spearheaded these demonstrations is. I'm here as an observer, not trying to fully blend in or infiltrate them in any way but also not provoking them. Obviously I can't get much from being there for one day, and I don't pretend or hope to be an expert on the freedom convoys, but I did hope that seeing it in person would help me formulate an opinion about it in a way that social media alone can't do.

There are a lot of flags and signs here representing various wingnut, nationalist, and right-wing causes, but the two most widely-shared symbols of this movement are clearly the Canadian flag and the absence of a face mask. The red and white is everywhere and many of the protestors have taken to draping themselves in it, parading around with a flowing maple-leaf cape. I don't really get it when the Canadian state is ostensibly the thing they're fighting but then again I never really "get" Canadian nationalism and this is nothing new – the same plethora of Canadian flags was the most common symbol at two important predecessors of this movement, the populist, Islamophobic "patriot movement" that emerged in opposition to Bill M-103 and the oil-and-gas-funded "Yellow Vests Canada movement.

The lack of face mask is a striking symbol that they all share and many of them have taken it beyond the protest, defiantly refusing to put their masks back on when they get onto public transit or enter the few businesses that remain open downtown. I'm not wearing one either and that's all it seems to take to blend into this crowd. On the train I imagine they find each other this way, sharing conspiratorial glances with others of their newfound community who have also woken up from the conformist, pro-restrictions stupor they imagine the rest of us to be in. In the streets I've heard of numerous passersby and counterprotestors being yelled at for wearing theirs, and I'm not at all surprised.

I know there is racism underlying this, because I know their organizers are rooted in the more overtly racist movements that paved the way for this one, but I don't think a naive passerby would necessarily notice it unless they happened to be in the right place at the right time. I have heard of people of colour being harassed by members of the convoy protest but that is definitely not most of their main activity most of the time and I don't see a single sign about immigration, race or colonialism the whole time I'm there. I did notice two overtly anti-semitic signs, mostly of the text-heavy "list of conspiracies" variety that I've also seen on conspiracy theorists at broad-based left-wing protests in the past. There are a number of right-wing symbols dotted among the crowd, including a surprising number of "Don't Tread On Me" flags, but no evidence of known Canadian far-right or neo-Nazi organizations out with their colours and symbols on display. Later on Twitter I notice somebody posted a picture of 6 members of the far-right patriot "Canada First" organization out in balaclavas in the streets that same day, but I didn't happen to encounter them in person. I had expected to see more evidence of the overt fascists of Quebec and Canada recruiting but I couldn't find it on Saturday. Maybe they're hiding or maybe the crowd was just too big for me to find them. There are a lot of white people here but it's definitely not a homogenous crowd, maybe not even a lot whiter than many of the environmental or other left-wing demonstrations I've been to in the past.



It was huge on Saturday. Police on Friday reported “about 350” protestors downtown on Friday and said nothing about numbers on Saturday but there were definitely thousands. The success of the trucks themselves as a space-claiming tactic for this group can not be understated. Every street in and out of the area around parliament is blocked by large vehicles, adorned with signs and flags and with protestors inside the cabs, honking the horns and smiling and waving at their crowd, many of whom are carrying “Thank You Truckers” signs and reserving their biggest shows of enthusiasm for encounters with the actual trucks. Even on days where their numbers are lower it is difficult to imagine what police or counter-protestor tactic would successfully undermine their control on the blocks surrounding parliament hill. There are a lot of them on and in front of the hill, where a sort of “main stage” has been set up on the back of a truck for speakers and announcements, but they have the whole neighbourhood. Several blocks away a park acts as a logistics hub, people are set up there with free food, firewood and other supplies. All of the streets in between and in fact much of downtown are actively part of the protest zone, filled with people yelling and chanting and the ubiquitous sound of truck horns that has drawn so much of the attention of local counter-protestors.

I passed by the main stage several times and every speaker I heard was an anti-vaccine advocate of some sort. It’s actually quite boring – blah blah ivermectin blah blah conspiracy blah blah toxic chemicals in your arm. I can’t tell if many of them are even listening to the speakers and in the streets away from the stage the only chant I hear is “Freedom!” so it’s very hard to tell if people there are all or mostly anti-vaxxers, but I would imagine a lot are. Down the road another loudspeaker blasts classic rock and an equally large group have created a dance party, waving their conspiracy-touting signs and Canadian flags and chanting “freedom” as they dance ecstatically together in the -25 degree weather. I’ve never seen our side get so successfully pumped up in such large numbers in such shitty weather.

I imagine that every conspiracy theorist I’ve ever encountered in the region is here, plus many more. I am used to seeing such people alone in a crowd but it is a bit disturbing to notice just how many of them there actually are now that they’re all in one place. There are signs and pamphlets everywhere about every wingnut conspiracy I’ve ever heard and even some that I haven’t – microchips in vaccines, THE JEWS, lizards, you name it. One sign tells me that a triad of weasels are working together to control the population with the vaccine chip: the Trudeau government, the mainstream media, and the Public Service Alliance of Canada. I hope somewhere out there a PSAC member is proud to be elevated to such a high status. I had intended to talk to more people but literally every conversation I overheard was about a known conspiracy – 3 guys behind me talking about 5G and China, a woman explaining The Great Reset to her school-aged children, a Francophone father telling his kids that masks are bad for their lungs. At the end of the day on the bus home I psych myself up to ask two protestors behind me to explain their movement to me, only to give up when I hear them whispering to each other about how much more needs to be exposed about chemtrails. I am struck by an obvious point that I hadn’t really contemplated before, that a lot of very normal-looking people with families, jobs and nice smiles are in fact followers of some of the conspiracies I think of as the most irrational and impossible to believe. I assume this has increased a lot since the pandemic but I can’t prove it.

I suspect a lot of the growth of this movement is happening among people who did not show up and would not have shown up for right-wing movements of the past but are simply genuinely tired of Covid restrictions. At one point I saw a group of children with cute signs bearing the outline of a truck filled with lists of the things they’ve missed since 2020 – soccer, seeing my

friends, smiling at my grandmother, choir practice. My heart sinks as I imagine what worldviews these kids are encountering at what may well be many of their first protest. I empathize so hard with their desire to engage in normal, playful, collective activity after two years of pretending to be satisfied with zoom calls, masked conversations and freezing-cold outdoor meetups. I hate that so much of the left acts as if these concerns are not even a thing, telling people that if they care at all about vulnerable, elderly and disabled people they must simply suck it up and get on with it. One sign reads “This is existence, I want to live.” Me too, man, 100%. If only it were true what the theorists of this movement say, that actually Covid is only a cold, the government has inflated the death toll and all we need to do to find an end to the pandemic is take the red pill, pull off our masks and dance in the streets again. If I squint really hard I can almost see what they’re seeing, they’ve been locked inside for so long and the truckers are the first with the courage to actually speak up and say enough is enough, we need to go out there. If it weren’t for the right-wing racists directing the movement, not to mention the millions of actual deaths due to Covid-19 that no amount of good vibes and lies will prevent, it would make a lot of sense.

In the afternoon we check out a counter-demonstration organized primarily, it seems, by residents of downtown Ottawa who are sick of noise, traffic, and acts of hateful speech, harassment and bullying on the part of some of the protestors. Countering the trucker protest before it becomes a full-blown neo-fascist revolutionary movement is so, so important but I honestly felt zero affinity with this counter-protest in particular. Most of the signs were either calling for more police, complaining about inconveniences like sound and traffic, or making fun of the demonstrators for being unvaccinated and/or stupid. “Honk if you failed civics,” “Self-driving trucks can’t spread covid,” “Ottawa police act now,” “Make Ottawa boring again.” A lady with a wordy sign about how vaccine mandates save lives mistakes me for a member of convoy protest and chastises me for apparently being illiterate, “Did it take you a few minutes to read that one, honey?” I have a graduate degree and no business being this personally offended but I feel a surge of rage at downtown liberal elites who think the problem is that these people just didn’t go to school long enough. We leave before it’s over, just as some of the protestors are engaged in a verbal standoff – antis chanting “Go home dipshits” while convoy protestors chant back “We still love you! Love! Love!” and the police form a stronger line between the two crowds.



I think the trucker convoy is a protest. I disagree with those who say it is a siege, an insurrection or any other overblown term, and think those ideas are coming mainly from Ottawans outraged that someone could be this loud and this annoying for this long. I would absolutely organize and participate in a demonstration exactly this loud and annoying if it were for a different cause organized by different people, so I don't really see any merit in those concerns and definitely don't think that being very noisy or very annoying somehow makes this more than a protest. There have always been liberals calling us terrorists too when we take up space, or claiming that our airhorns are weapons and they're under attack by our refusal to leave. It is an "occupation," in the sense that the Occupy Movement was an occupation, ie it seeks to take up space as a protest tactic and seeks to create a container for like-minded people to come together, encampment style. Like many protest movements there are revolutionary elements within it that would like to see it escalate into something much more. That could happen – it is a really big and successful protest and a lot of the people there seem very inspired and committed. But it hasn't happened yet. It should be stopped before it does that, ideally by grassroots resistance and not by police repression.

I have a lot of disjointed thoughts about this and could probably write several long essays about it if I had the time and faith in my own understanding and authority to do so. For today I'm going to be content with sharing my experience and some broad themes of questioning that I'd like to follow up on, in no particular order:

1. Freedom is a very real and very important goal, and Covid restrictions genuinely constrain people, often in ways that are genuinely unethical. I do not support vaccine mandates, even though I do support encouraging people to get vaccinated in other, less coercive ways. Unlike the right, we know that real freedom will only be attained collectively, that it isn't about simple individual choice. Refusing to wear a mask when a friend or neighbour asks you to do so for their own health is a busted understanding of freedom. But I do think the world has become even less free since the pandemic, that governments have gained new kinds of powers and new forms of surveillance. In Canada I think they're also enjoying a new level of defeatism, pacification and obedience displayed by a large segment of the population who can't imagine a solution to the problem of Covid-19 that is any more complex than simply doing whatever the government says to do and shaming anyone who doesn't.
2. People are always going to believe things that are false. Conspiracy theories are annoying as hell but they provide easy answers and are super compelling. Nobody is going to feel compelled by being called an idiot. We need better ways to counter misinformation than petty bullying and overstated blame.
3. I have no doubt that if this protest became a revolutionary movement it would absolutely be a fascist one. The elements of it that want to depose the Prime Minister would install someone much, much worse. There is no hope for common cause with this thing but we need to find creative, probably new ways to counter it. It does not make sense to treat these protesters as potential comrades (at least as a group), but it will not work to treat them as we have treated known, overt neo-Nazis either. What are some ways we can counter this movement that go beyond (but might still include) shaming its potential recruits and threatening their events with physical violence?

4. What is up with the police here, actually? On the one hand it's true they have not tried much to remove the protestors (although it looks like this might change in the next few days), and the success and good vibes of the protest is in part the result of a near-total lack of repression, partly due to the whiteness and politics of the protestors. On the other, the Ottawa Police are probably not lying when they say they don't have the training or resources to move this thing. It's not because there are too many protestors, it's because of their tactics, particularly the trucks. How is it possible that there is no plan to prevent the police from losing control of PARLIAMENT HILL this easily? What are the things we can learn from this and what new understandings of the Canadian state should this give us?
5. What do we want to do about Covid now that is clear that vaccines are a tool and not an end? How will we cautiously resume riskier activities while still showing care, empathy and protection to those vulnerable to the virus? Anti-vaxxers are wrong about vaccines for sure but they are not the whole (or even the main) problem and we can not escape the fact that the virus is likely here to stay. If the virus never ends we will have to dance in the streets together one day again anyway. It does not make sense to tell everyone to simply endure a shittier life indefinitely. The freedom that many of the convoy people are talking about is a boring version of freedom because many of them do not care at all about people dying of Covid, but those of us who do care will still have to find ways to live.

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