

Public inquiry begins into Trudeau government's use of Emergencies Act against far-right Freedom Convoy

Roger Jordan
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The public inquiry into the federal Liberal government's use of the Emergencies Act to suppress the far-right "Freedom" Convoy opened last Thursday. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau deployed the sweeping powers of the never-before-used act on February 14, following a weeks-long occupation of downtown Ottawa instigated and led by fascistic forces who wanted to overthrow the government and erect an authoritarian junta to dismantle all remaining anti-COVID public health measures.

If a relatively small group of far-right activists and outright fascists was able to dominate Canadian political life for close to a month it was due to the support they received from powerful sections of the ruling elite. The official opposition Conservatives, corporate media outlets and sections of big business instrumentalized the Convoy to press for the scrapping of all measures designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and push official politics far to the right.

The inquiry, led by former Ontario Superior Court Judge Paul Rouleau, is a requirement under the Emergencies Act. It will hear testimony for approximately six weeks from at least 65 witnesses, including Trudeau and seven other Liberal government ministers, representatives of multiple police agencies and downtown Ottawa residents who were terrorized by Convoy supporters. After testimony concludes on November 24, the commission will begin a policy review stage, which under the law must conclude with Rouleau issuing a final report in February, one year after Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act.

The Trudeau government's order-in-council establishing the commission cites the provision in the Emergencies Act that stipulates an inquiry must be held "into the circumstances that led to the declaration (of an emergency) ... and the measures taken for dealing with the emergency." It goes on to direct the commission to examine further issues, including:

• The evolution and goals of the convoy and blockades (established at the Windsor-Detroit Ambassador Bridge and other Canada-US border crossings), their leadership, organization and participants.

• The impact of domestic and foreign funding on the protests, including money from crowd-sourcing platforms.

• The impact, role and sources of misinformation and disinformation associated with the protests, including the role played by social media.

• The impact of the blockades, including their economic impact.

• The actions of police and other responders prior to and after the (emergency) declaration.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* described the readiness of powerful sections of the ruling class to incite and build up a violent far-

right extra-parliamentary movement as a new stage in the breakdown of democratic forms of rule in Canada. We warned that, absent the independent political intervention of the working class, however the far-right occupation of downtown Ottawa ended, it would be to the detriment of the democratic and social rights of working people and involve a sharp lurch to the right by the entire political establishment.

We opposed the Trudeau government's use of the Emergencies Act, explaining that while the far right was the target this time around, its invocation set a dangerous precedent that would be used in the future to legitimize state repression against the working class.

This analysis has been confirmed in spades. Trudeau's invocation of the Emergencies Act broke a "political taboo" in Canada on using emergency powers. The government declared no-go areas where anyone could be arrested without warning and sentenced to a prison term, froze bank accounts without judicial oversight, prohibited participation in public assemblies associated with "unlawful protests" and commandeered tow trucks and other equipment.

Meanwhile, Pierre Poilievre, who came to national prominence as the most vociferous advocate for the "Freedom" Convoy, has been elevated to the position of leader of the Conservative Party. He and his fellow Conservatives continue to champion the Convoy, promoting the far-right mob that besieged parliament and downtown Ottawa for 23 days as "patriotic" Canadians. They are seeking to use the inquiry to intensify their attacks on the Trudeau government, cynically and hypocritically posturing as defenders of civil liberties and democratic rights because they opposed the use of the Emergencies Act, just as they opposed the state's "violation" of individuals' "right" to infect people with COVID-19.

The New Democrats and trade unions bear chief political responsibility for the ability of Poilievre and other supporters of the fascistic "Freedom" Convoy and its egotistical social Darwinist pandemic policy to posture as the defenders of democratic rights. The social-democratic NDP provided the Trudeau government with the necessary votes in parliament to approve the invocation of the Emergencies Act, before agreeing one month later to a formal alliance with the minority Liberal government to keep it in power through June 2025. This alliance is based on support for Canada's major role in the US-NATO war on Russia, massive increases in military spending and "post-pandemic" austerity. The unions fully endorsed the Liberal government's resort to Emergency Powers and have worked tirelessly to suppress worker opposition to war, austerity, and the government's ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic, which has resulted in seven waves of mass infection and death and enormous economic hardship.

Thanks to the unions and NDP's suppression of all opposition from the left to the ruling elite's homicidal pandemic policy, the right wing and far right have been free to seize the political initiative. They have benefited from overwhelmingly favourable coverage in the corporate-controlled media. Many articles reporting on the public inquiry describe the "Freedom" Convoy's occupation of Ottawa as a "protest" or a "demonstration." This is a distortion of reality. The Convoy's leadership, consisting of known fascists and far-right activists, explicitly stated their readiness to use political violence to replace the government with a dictatorship and intimidate their political opponents. They did not engage in a "protest," but a conspiracy supported by powerful sections of the ruling elite to undermine and even overturn democratic forms of rule.

When Trudeau declared a public order emergency leading to coordinated action involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), the military and Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to disperse the Convoy, big business was ecstatic. Although sections of the ruling elite had been more than happy to whip up the "Freedom" Convoy as a battering ram against popular support for anti-COVID public health measures, they turned sharply against the Convoy after supporters blocked the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor, disrupting hundreds of millions of dollars of daily trade with the United States.

Evidence has since come to light demonstrating the extent to which the Trudeau government came under international pressure to act as border blockades developed in Windsor, Ontario, and several western provinces. After Trudeau spoke with US President Joe Biden on February 11, the White House released a statement saying, "The Prime Minister promised quick action in enforcing the law and the President thanked him for the steps he and other Canadian authorities are taking." Minutes from a February 12 meeting of the federal government's Incident Response Group were released by the Federal Court in August as part of a legal challenge against the government's use of the Emergencies Act. Although they were heavily redacted, the minutes note, "The Prime Minister confirmed that he has been speaking with a number of international partners and they are all expressing concern about Canada and our ability to handle it."

Sentiment in Canada's ruling elite, or at least significant sections of it, regarding Trudeau's use of emergency powers have shifted in the intervening eight months. As the public inquiry opened, the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, published an editorial questioning the need for the Trudeau government to have used emergency powers and denouncing it for having "polarized" the situation by pointing to the Convoy's far-right character. "With temperatures running high from coast to coast, the government chose to raise the rhetorical temperature," exclaimed the *Globe* in an editorial that failed to mention once the role played by the Conservative official opposition in inciting and instrumentalizing the menacing occupation of downtown Ottawa and the environs of parliament. "From the start of the start of the blockade ... (the government) almost immediately characterized the people who showed up on Parliament Hill, many only for an afternoon, as white supremacist, swastika-waving War Memorial desecrators. It said that the protest, and anyone sympathetic to it, was not just mistaken, but beyond the pale."

The *Globe*, as its sympathetic portrayal of the far-right Convoy underscores, is not interested in the defence of democratic rights. Rather it and other establishment voices are providing muster for the Conservative campaign to use the Emergencies Act to flail the

government. If they are doing so, it is because the ruling elite is losing confidence in the Trudeau government's capacity to enforce with sufficient speed and vigor its program of imperialist war and aggression abroad and class war at home. The growth of the class struggle, which is increasingly developing in the form of a workers' rebellion against the corporatist trade union apparatuses, is creating apprehension in the minds of the financial oligarchy as to whether the Liberal/NDP/trade union alliance can maintain control over the political situation. Powerful sections of the ruling class are cultivating reaction and increasingly outright fascist forces so as to prepare a preemptive strike against the growing popular opposition to austerity, inflation-driven real wage cuts and war.

Criticism of the Trudeau government's response to the Convoy has also come from the hard-right governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan, whose premiers, respectively Jason Kenney and Scott Moe, were, like Poilievre, strident Convoy advocates. The Alberta and Saskatchewan governments obtained intervenor status at the public inquiry and on its opening day made statements through their lawyers condemning the invocation of the Emergencies Act and alleging that they were "blindsided" by Trudeau's decision to declare a public order emergency.

They were joined by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), which was directly involved in law enforcement operations against the Ottawa occupation and the Ambassador Bridge blockade. Lawyer Christopher Diana told the inquiry that the OPP believed there was "sufficient legal authority" to deal with the Convoy without the invocation of the Emergencies Act. This marked a major shift from the position taken by the OPP, whose commissioner Thomas Carrique stated in March that "we could have not been as effective as we were" without the Emergencies Act.

An indication of the strong support for the far-right within Canada's police forces and military was given in documents released in the leadup to the inquiry. An internal threat advisory from the RCMP obtained by CBC News revealed that the leadership of Canada's federal police force was concerned officers sympathetic to the Convoy would provide its leaders with insider information about operational plans. "The potential exists for serious insider threats," the February 10 document stated. "Those who have not lost their jobs but are sympathetic to the movement and their former colleagues may be in a position to share law enforcement or military information to the convoy protests."

More evidence of this nature is sure to come to light from the inquiry's hearings and document releases in coming months. Above all, what will emerge ever more clearly is that far from being an event that ended with the dispersal of the Ottawa occupation, the "Freedom" Convoy remains a live issue that the most reactionary political forces are utilizing to destabilize the government and increase their influence over all aspects of political life.



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