

At public inquiry, Ontario police intelligence chief tries to cover up “Freedom” Convoy’s fascist politics

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In testimony last week before the Public Order Emergencies Commission of Inquiry, Pat Morris, head of the Ontario Provincial Police’s intelligence bureau, went out of his way to cover up the far-right politics of the “Freedom” Convoy.

Led by Court of Appeal Justice Paul Rouleau, the public inquiry is a legal requirement following the Trudeau government’s invocation of the never-before used Emergencies Act to end the Convoy’s 23-day occupation of downtown Ottawa.

The intelligence bureau of the Ontario Provincial Police deals with running informants, internet surveillance, and covert operations directed mainly against the working class and left.

Morris’ Oct. 19 testimony was itself a carefully scripted intelligence intervention. One that was aimed at promoting the lie that the Convoy was no threat to democracy, covering up how significant elements of the ruling class and repressive forces of the state encouraged the development of a far-right extra-parliamentary movement, and further augmenting right-wing pressure on the Justin Trudeau-led federal government.

If Morris’ testimony could be summed up in a few words, it would be the old refrain of the beat cop at a crime scene: “Move along, nothing to see here!”

According to Morris, while “everybody was asking about extremism” during the Ottawa occupation, “we weren’t seeing much evidence of it.” He accused Trudeau and his Liberal government of “politicizing” the Convoy. This is an extraordinary absurdity. First, because the Convoy participants themselves loudly proclaimed their violent hostility to the government and Trudeau personally. Second, and more importantly, because the only reason the Convoy achieved national prominence was because it was incited and built up by the official opposition Conservative Party and a significant section of the ruling elite. These were the forces who “politicized” the Convoy so as to intimidate the public into accepting the end of all public health measures to stop the COVID-19 pandemic and otherwise push politics far to the right.

Morris—clearly giving vent to his own politics and those of much of the police and security forces charged with ending the illegal Ottawa occupation—rejected as “hyperbole” any criticism of the Convoy’s far-right politics, which included an explicit call from its instigators for the overthrow of the government and its replacement with an authoritarian junta. He muddled the waters by dismissing straw man “explanations” and used Canadian nationalism to cast any analysis of the extensively documented right-wing politics of the Convoy leaders as a smear.

“When I read accounts,” declared the OPP intelligence chief, “that the state of Russia had something to do with it, or that this was a result of American influence, either financially or ideologically, or that Donald Trump was behind it, or that it was un-Canadian, or that the people participating are un-Canadian, that they were not Canadian views and they

are extremists, that’s problematic.” As proof, Morris went on to tout the “large degree of support” the Convoy supposedly enjoyed.

All this is a lie. The Convoy was organized by a small core of a few hundred hardened far-right activists, as the biographies of its leading figures testify. Even at its largest weekend demonstration, the Convoy mobilized at most 10,000 to 20,000 people in Ottawa. Its strength came not from popular support, but from the fact that key sections of the ruling elite—the Conservatives, the right-wing media and parts of the state security apparatus—patronized and instrumentalized it.

Elements within the police, intelligence apparatus, and military were involved in organizing and funding the Convoy, including “Police on Guard for Thee” and “Mounties for Freedom.” The largest single donation to the Convoy came from a shooting range that describes itself as a “proud supporter and employer of Canadian military and police.”

The would-be-dictator Donald Trump and key allies in his Jan. 6, 2021 coup plot like Texas Senator Ted Cruz publicly endorsed the Convoy almost as soon as the occupation of Ottawa began. Hundreds of police officers donated money to on-line funding campaigns. Officers posed for smiling photographs with Convoy members.

The federal Conservative Party ousted Erin O’Toole during the Convoy’s first week of besieging parliament for being insufficiently supportive of it and replaced him, on an interim basis, with Candice Bergen, who had urged her colleagues to support the occupation of downtown Ottawa so as to make it “Trudeau’s problem.”

The hard-right provincial governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan also gave the Convoy their full-throated support, at least until the blockades of the Canada-US border began to seriously impact Canada’s economy. Ontario’s Progressive Conservative government took a two-faced stance, with Premier Ford repeatedly expressing his sympathy for the far-right protesters’ anger over anti-COVID measures and maneuvering to force the Trudeau government into having to take political responsibility for clearing Ottawa’s streets.

Morris was not seriously questioned about any of these associations.

His testimony was quickly seized upon by the *National Post*, *Toronto Sun* and other right-wing media voices to resurrect the Conservatives’ claim that the far-right activists were “patriotic Canadians,” whose opposition to science-based anti-COVID public health measures gave voice to the suppressed sentiments of ordinary “working Joe’s.” “The claim that the protesters were violent insurrectionists... has simply been falsified,” gloated a *National Post* column.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rather, Morris’ testimony shed further light on the growing and widespread support for far-right politics within the police and national security apparatus—an apparatus that is being given and allowed to accrue ever greater powers by all sections of the political establishment.

Project Hendon: a new tool for state spying on the left.

Morris' testimony did, however, contain one significant revelation concerning a hitherto unknown police-state spying operation.

Morris revealed that the OPP had established an intelligence dragnet in 2019 called "Project Hendon" to spy on and disrupt First Nations protest groups and their left-leaning sympathizers. First Nations protests swept Canada in 2019 as activists blocked rail lines and roads in British Columbia and in Tyendinaga, Ontario, to protest BC's Coastal Gas Link pipeline, which would traverse the traditional lands of the Wet'suwet'en people. Hendon had the full cooperation of CSIS, the Canadian state's secret police, the RCMP, the Department of National Defense, and police departments across the country.

Testified Morris: "In 2019 the OPP witnessed a significant amount of protest, dissent, some of which caused us reasonable grounds to suspect that some of those issues would engage in criminal activity, or illegal activity that would have a public safety impact... The rationale for Hendon was to deal with large-scale protest matters that impacted public safety...there was activity going on, with the umbrella of 'Shut Down Canada'... there was activity that activists would engage in to have a negative impact on the Canadian economy, and the Canadian democratic system."

First Nations blockades and the Convoy were both handled under Project Hendon, but they were treated very differently.

Internal RCMP documents referred to the removal of First Nations protestors in BC as "sterilizing the site," echoing the fascist, racist rhetoric of many leading members of the Convoy. The RCMP cleared the Wet'suwet'en protest dressed in military fatigues, brandishing weapons and violently arresting 14 people on Jan. 7, 2020. The Mohawk blockade of the Canadian Pacific rail lines at Tyendinaga, Ontario, established in 2019 in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en protest was handled with similar brutality on Feb. 27, 2020.

Despite the fact that the reason for Hendon's establishment ceased to exist nearly three years ago, Hendon took on a life of its own. Just what were "Hendon operations" spying on in the intervening two years? The bourgeois media and the inquiry are silent on this question.

This pre-existing, and heretofore unknown program against left-wing social opposition was subsequently deployed with far less enthusiasm and near zero effectiveness against far-right elements with whom significant elements of the police are in political sympathy.

On Jan. 21, 2022, the OPP began to disseminate "Hendon Reports" concerning the Convoy to various provincial police departments. Teleconferences were held daily starting on Jan. 24 with more than 300 participants in police departments across the country. There were so many participants on these calls that Morris admitted not all of the participants could be identified.

Police were "concerned about the disruption of traffic on Canadian highways and the disruption of the business of government," according to Morris. The Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit, Michigan, was blockaded. A blockade at Coutts, Alberta, was raided and assault weapons were seized from right-wing militants. Yet in the same breath Morris declared, "Apart from stages, music, etc. we could see no specific plans..." Morris asks us to believe that emergency police conference calls with 300+ participants were set up to discuss plans for the equivalent of an outdoor rock festival without a street permit!

OPP reverses its position on threat posed by "Freedom" Convoy

The OPP has changed its tune since early February. Then it identified the Convoy as a "national security threat."

In March, in testimony before House of Commons Public Safety and National Security Committee, the OPP averred that the federal Government's use of the Emergencies Act helped them to "be effective." OPP Commissioner Thomas Carique "told the standing committee the act gave police important tools to help dismantle the protest, including the

ability to keep people out of certain areas, freeze bank accounts and more," reported the *Toronto Star*.

The OPP's shift has been so stark that this week the same committee took note of the OPP's "wildly different" Convoy threat assessments from last February and March and unanimously demanded that it provide an explanation.

The OPP's attempt to legitimize the Convoy and the efforts of a powerful faction of the ruling class to use fascist forces as a political bludgeon to push government policy and politics sharply right serves to discredit the Trudeau government. However, it is aimed, above all, at the working class.

With the outbreak of the US-NATO war with Russia, in which Canadian imperialism is playing a prominent role, and the upsurge of working class struggles at home, shown most clearly by the developing confrontation between the Ford government and a quarter of a million education workers, the financial oligarchy is hurtling to the right.

Pierre Poilievre, who came to national prominence as one of the Convoy's most fervent advocates within the Conservative Party, now leads the official opposition. Danielle Smith, a far-right "Alberta First" operative, has emerged as head of Alberta's hard-right United Conservative Party government.

The big business Trudeau Liberal government, which has used its close partnership with the trade unions to implement the agenda of big business, is under relentless pressure to prove to finance capital that it has the political steel to repress an increasingly militant working class that is straining to break free of the stultifying grip of the unions.

Last week, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland announced that any new social spending programs would need to be funded by cuts to existing ones, signaling a new "age of austerity." The Canadian state has only one new spending program in mind: imperialist war. Canada's Chief of Defense Staff Wayne Eyre has demanded that the entire Canadian economy be placed on a "war footing" in order to wage war on Russia in Ukraine and prepare for war with China. Such a policy will require the ruthless suppression of the working class, and a forced reduction of its living standards, tasks for which the fascistic forces mobilized in the "Freedom" Convoy are being cultivated.

It is the trade unions and their allies in the social-democratic NDP that are providing the likes of Poilievre with a political opening. By partnering with the Liberal government and big business at every turn to keep the working class under control, they create conditions in which a Conservative Party that is increasingly metamorphosing into a far-right formation, like the Trump Republicans, can cast itself as Trudeau's most determined opponents. This includes cynically posturing as the defenders of "civil liberties" against "the authoritarian government overreach" represented by vaccination mandates and the use of emergency powers against the Convoy.

The NDP and Canadian Labour Congress supported the Trudeau government's invocation of the Emergencies Act, setting a precedent that will be used in the future against the working class and entrusting the defence of democratic rule to the police and state security services that are themselves at the centre of the attack on the democratic rights of working people.

Just one month later, as Trudeau's Liberals oversaw the enforcement of the "Freedom" Convoy's program with the dismantling of all remaining COVID public health measures, the NDP, with full backing from the trade unions, took the next logical step and agreed to a formal governmental alliance with the Liberals. In the name of "stability," the NDP is pledged to keep the minority Liberal government in power through June 2025 as it wages war in Ukraine, massively hikes military spending, and imposes—to use Trudeau's words—"fiscal responsibility" and inflation-driven real-wage cuts.



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