

Canada's Yellow-Vest-Like Convoy Protests Trudeau's Green Agenda

By James Munson

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- Yellow-vest style oil patch protesters attack Prime Minister's green goals
- Protesters seek relief for oil, gas sector from environmental regulation

A convoy of trucks inspired by France's Yellow Vest movement arrived in Canada's capital Feb. 19 to protest federal environmental legislation and vent frustration over tough times in the oil patch.

The United We Roll campaign—which is being criticized for including groups with anti-immigrant views—is pushing to unseat Prime Minister Justin Trudeau over his government's handling of an oil and gas crisis in western Canada, a region with a long history of butting heads with Ottawa over energy policy.

The streets surrounding Canada's Parliament Buildings were closed for the convoy, made of dozens of transport and pick-up trucks. Some protesters made a five-day journey from Red Deer, Alberta, and parked just steps from Trudeau's office.

"It is time that Canada has a prime minister that is proud of our energy sector, that doesn't go to Europe to tell his famous friends that he's trying to phase out our oil and gas but fights for it," said Andrew Scheer, the leader of Canada's Conservative Party, during speeches after the convoy's arrival.

Convoy Numbers

Around 100 people participated in protests on the front lawn of Parliament Hill and 60 took part in the convoy, Joseph Law, chief of staff to the director of the Parliamentary Protection Service, told Bloomberg Environment.

A counter-protest of Indigenous and environmental advocates confronted the convoy members but there were no arrests, Law said.

The United We Roll movement was conceived to give voice to problems in the energy sector but has become a hodgepodge of grievances that include suspicion of a recent United Nations migration agreement and concerns over globalism, a term many experts consider a "dog whistle" for xenophobic and anti-Semitic views.

The convoy's leaders have had to respond to evidence in recent months that Canadian white supremacist groups had infiltrated its organization, leading them to eventually remove the term "Yellow Vest" from official materials and declare that they are supportive of inclusion.

France's Yellow Vest or Gilets Jaunes protestors, who rocked that country late last year with national street protests, also share an intolerant streak but are more closely associated with organized labor than Canada's convoy is, said Charles Smith, University of Saskatchewan political science professor.

Energy Politics

The Canadian contingent drew inspiration from the French protests because of their animosity over energy taxes, according to Smith.

Energy workers in Italy protested limits on offshore oil and gas exploration earlier this month while wearing yellow safety helmets.

The Canadian convoy has aimed its ire at Trudeau's national carbon tax and two environmental bills currently before Parliament, but Smith said their deeper goal is to unseat the Liberal Party from power federally.

The bill C-48 would make it impossible to build a crude oil pipeline from Alberta to British Columbia's north coast by banning oil tankers in the region.

The C-69 measure would change the federal impact assessment process for industrial projects by shortening timelines and adding transparency.

Many in the energy sector oppose the bill because it would also force regulators and companies to study more issues than the current law requires. It also would introduce new legal concepts like sustainability and climate change to impact assessments before projects could be built.

Balancing Act

Trudeau came to power with the goal of more smoothly balancing the competing interests of energy development, climate change, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, but the polarizing effect of the anti-establishment Yellow Vests has shattered confidence in his vision, said Monica Gattinger, director of the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa.

"Once a carbon tax becomes polarized along partisan lines, whether people support or oppose it becomes more about which political party they belong to and less about what the evidence says about the issues," said Gattinger. "That's quite troubling."

Both C-48 and C-69 could become law in weeks or months depending on how the Senate decides to amend them.

The carbon tax—which has opponents in Ontario and New Brunswick as well as western Canada—partially came into effect on January 1.

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