



# What the Freedom Convoy Protests Reveals About Structural Racism in Canada

By Krista Stelkia

**THIS PAST WEEKEND** yet another “Freedom Convoy” rolled into Ottawa. This one ostensibly about veteran’s rights and motorcycles instead of transport trucks but with many connections and underlying themes in common, including racism. But it is the original “Freedom Convoy” protest - the one that illegally occupied Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, for over three weeks from January 22 to February 23, 2022 - that is of interest for what it revealed about structural racism in Canada.

The events that unfolded over the course of the protest and blockade represented an alarming wake up call to Canadians that the application of the law, degree of police enforcement and government accountability to its citizens in this country, can look very different based on the colour of one’s skin. But more, the response by police and government officials to the protestors magnified the degree of structural racism that exists within Canada, as the primarily white settler convoy was afforded far-reaching privileges; privileges rarely afforded to Indigenous, Black and racialized peoples.

Lawrence and Keleher (2004) define structural racism as “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people” at the expense of racialized people within our society (p. 1).

Structural racism is often the explanation for mounting inequities in the treatment of Indigenous or Black people within various systems including the health care, criminal justice, child welfare and education systems. However, what the Freedom Convoy protests showcased is the other side of structural racism, the one which reinforces privileges and unfair advantages for white settler society while systematically “disadvantaging” Indigenous, Black and other racialized people (Aspen Institute, 2016; Yearby, 2018).

## THE BENEFITS AND PRIVILEGES OF STRUCTURAL RACISM

The Freedom Convoy protests demonstrated that structural racism in settler-colonial Canada affords extreme privilege to white settler Canadians. Most predominantly and visibly, these privileges included lenient and preferential treatment by police which manifested in a lack of police action for weeks despite evidence of threatening behaviours, assaults, and hate crimes. Furthermore, despite the lack of enforcement and action, there was also widespread evidence of police support for the convoy which included videos posted on social media of police officers hugging protesters and verbally informing protesters they support their cause.

The leniency extended to protesters also included how police issued two warning notices over the span of a week for protesters to cease unlawful activity or potentially face arrest (Ottawa Police Service, 2022). The noticeably gentle reminder to Freedom Convoy protesters that they were actively participating in an illegal occupation and *may* face arrest is a benefit that structural racism provides to white settler members of society. Ample warning and notices of potential arrest is a privilege that is not often extended to many in our country who encounter police enforcement.

**The degree of white privilege that was on display at the protests showcased that the application of the law within our society is subjective. More specifically, the police and government response to the convoy has revealed a distinct inequality gap in the way our society treats some protesters at the expense of others.**

#### **WHAT IF: AN INDIGENOUS OR BLACK CONVOY?**

If those involved were from Indigenous, Black or other racialized groups, they would have been likely met with heavily militarized force involving massive arrest, excessive use of force, and even police-involved death. History is riddled with countless examples of police use of excessive force against Indigenous and Black protestors for peacefully protesting fundamental issues including Indigenous land sovereignty, murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, resource development, fishing rights, homelessness, police brutality, and more.

The actions of police, or lack thereof, witnessed at the Freedom Convoy protests starkly contrast how police have violently disrupted the 2019 Coastal Gaslink pipeline protests on sovereign Wet'suwet'en land where Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers were reportedly told by their commanders to "use as much violence toward the gate as you want" including the use of lethal force against unarmed Indigenous land defenders (Dhillon & Parrish, 2019). The militarized police violence, aggression, and willingness to use excessive and lethal force against First Nations on their ancestral land has been a historical trademark of Indigenous peoples' historical and continued experience with Canada's national police force.

The threat of police violence continues to be an experienced reality for Indigenous and Black peoples as both are overwhelmingly overrepresented in police-involved deaths in Canada. Since 2017, Indigenous peoples in Canada are more than 10 times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers than their white counterparts (Flanagan, 2020). In Ontario, a Black person is 20 times more likely to be shot and killed by police than their white counterparts (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). When it comes to protesting, research has found that peaceful protests involving all-Black protesters are perceived to result in a higher probability to end in police violence than protests involving more racially-diverse protesters (Peay & Camarillo, 2021).

**It is clear that when Indigenous and Black peoples peacefully protest, they are viewed by settler society as a threat to national security and must be addressed hastily and with unbridled force, including the use of lethal force.**

#### **LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY: A FUNDAMENTAL DESIGN IN STRUCTURAL RACISM**

The response to the Freedom Convoy illuminates a fundamental design of structural racism, in which there exists two invisible systems of justice within our society, one for white settler Canadians and one that Indigenous and Black peoples experience. This is revealed and magnified in the double standard of police actions against white protesters vs Indigenous and Black protesters.

The limited police action during the Freedom Convoy translates into a lack of accountability to address perpetrators of harm, violence, and disruption. More directly, the inequitable treatment of Indigenous and Black protesters compared to the visible lack of action by police and government to address Freedom Convoy protests is an indicator of structural racism that unfairly privileges the voices and actions of settler society. Some may argue that the arrest

and detention of Pat King without bail represents some form of accountability but in my view it resembles a far too common approach of making an example of “a few bad apples.” This tactic deviates attention and focus from the very systems that continue to uphold white supremacy. This notion of punishing a select few is far too common in a state of structural racism. Therefore, while the arrest and detention of Pat King may represent a small gesture of accountability for the Freedom Convoy events, it hardly addresses the bigger issue of significant police leniency towards Freedom Convoy protesters throughout the three weeks of illegal occupation (one illegal occupation upon another).

All of this against the backdrop of a lack of meaningful action to hold state actors accountable for either failing to protect against settler violence or, on the contrary, excessive use of force. There is a recent historical record to draw on here. For example, the failure by police to protect Mi'kmaw lobster harvesters from settler violence in 2020 is the epitome of how violence against Indigenous peoples and property is not viewed as valid and serious enough to warrant police action. For Indigenous peoples, the lack of protection from police comes as no surprise given the ongoing and historical legacy of policing in Canada by the RCMP which was designed to control, contain and criminalize Indigenous life from the inception of the force (Toronto Abolition Convergence, 2020). Therefore, the failure of the police to protect Indigenous interests is a fundamental design element deeply embedded into Canada's national force.

This manifestation of failing to hold state actions accountable for harm against Indigenous peoples is also seen in other critical domains within Canadian society including in the child welfare system, criminal justice system, and healthcare system. Within healthcare, Indigenous health scholars and community advocates consistently call for greater accountability to hold medical professionals accountable for their indifference and lack of care to provide medically-necessary services to Indigenous peoples. The cases of Brian Sinclair and Joyce Echaquan are stark reminders that Indigenous peoples do not receive the same treatment within the healthcare system that is often extended to settler society.

**The Freedom Convoy protests remind us that there remains a clear double standard when it comes to basic equitable treatment within Canadian society. For Indigenous peoples, the overapplication of force and over-policing when defending basic human rights issues is the contrary and polar opposite to the response when it involves white settler society.**

The unequal administration of the law and lack of accountability are clear indicators of structural racism that must be addressed.

#### **ASSESSING THE INEQUALITY GAP**

The Freedom Convoy protests have magnified the high degree of structural racism that exists within Canadian society. The lenient treatment of Freedom Convoy protesters that occurred over the first three weeks of the protest is in stark contrast to countless experiences of peaceful protests conducted by Indigenous, Black or other racialized protesters who were met with police violence, aggression and even death.

The over-policing of Indigenous and Black protesters while under-policing predominantly white protesters, including far-right white supremacist groups, is a fundamental structural racism issue that must be addressed and brought forward as a priority for national discourse. It is important to address the inequality gap that exists between the treatment of Indigenous peoples and settlers, not only in protests but also in many other sectors of our society. We must continue to critically assess and mitigate the ways our systems work to uphold privilege to white settler society at the expense of Indigenous, Black and other racialized peoples and hold the police and government accountable for adequately addressing these fundamental structural injustice issues.

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