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The Extreme Right in Canada:

What it is, and what to do about it?

Prepared for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
by Barbara Perry
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Introduction

There is a growing recognition of the need to expand our knowledge and awareness of forms of extremism beyond those inspired by Islamist extremism. A 2015 report that I co-authored with Ryan Scrivens (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019) on the extreme right in Canada concluded that right-wing extremism (RWE) was largely off the radar of law enforcement, intelligence and policy communities; in many cases, there was a denial that RWE existed in Canada or that it threatened public safety or national security. Consecutive national threat assessments have also been largely silent on RWE, in spite of the dramatic rise in extreme right activity across North America from 2016 to 2021.

The threats to human life, to national ideals, and to democracy posed by this movement was brought into stark relief by the January 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol building by a mob of angry extremists. Groups like the Oath Keepers, The Base, the Proud Boys, the III%ers, even the Ku Klux Klan joined forces, urged by then President Trump, to "take back the steal," reflecting their misguided belief that the 2020 election had been rigged against him. And their Canadian compatriots cheered them on across social media venues, and staged "sympathetic" protests of their own in half a dozen cities across Canada.

This paper aims to provide a brief description of the contemporary RWE movement in Canada, together with consideration of several strategies that are emerging in an effort to counter the growth of RWE, while underscoring the need for multiple and multi-sectoral approaches.

Part 1: Understanding Right-Wing Extremism in Canada

There is no shortage of efforts to define what is meant by right-wing extremism. A team of scholars, for example, has adopted a broadly descriptive conceptualization of the term in the American context:

> … They are fiercely nationalistic (as opposed to universal and international in orientation), anti-global, suspicious of centralized federal authority, and reverent of individual liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes), and they believe in conspiracy theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty, that one's personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent (sometimes such beliefs are amorphous and vague, but for some the threat is from a specific ethnic, racial, or religious group), and in the need to be prepared for an attack by participating in paramilitary preparations and training, and survivalism (Adamczyk, Gruenewald, Chermak and Freilich 2014: 327).

This is perhaps an apt characterization of the movement in the U.S. but may not be as useful in the Canadian context, where there is less emphasis, for example, on gun rights or survivalism. Jamin (2013) sets out characteristics of RWE that may have more resonance in Canada:

- The valorizing of inequality and hierarchy, especially along racial/ethnic lines
- Ethnic nationalism linked to a mono-racial community
- Radical means to achieve aims and defend the "imagined" community

Perliger's (2012) list adds some elements:

- Nationalism
- Xenophobia, racism, exclusionism
- Traditional values
- Anti-democratic

Finally, Lauder's (2002) enumeration of core themes includes:

- Race/ethnicity as the foundation of social solidarity/nationalism
- Xenophobia, racism, especially anti-Semitism
- Illegitimacy of established regime of power

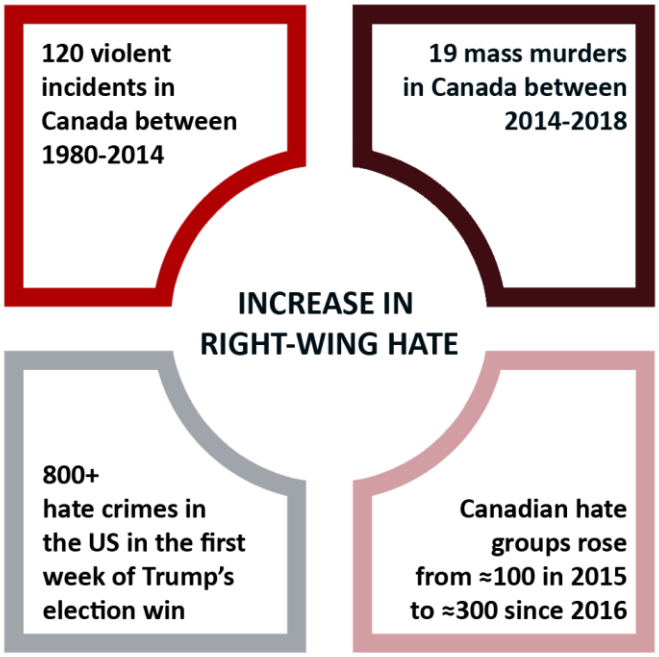
With these frameworks in mind, I suggest that RWE is a loose movement, characterized by a racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as non-Whites, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals and feminists (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019).

Violence from RWE Groups

In our 2015 study, Scrivens and I identified over 120 incidents of violence associated with right-wing extremists in Canada between 1980 and 2014, ranging from criminal harassment, to arson, to murder (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019). To put that in context, during the same period, there were just eight incidents associated with Islamist-inspired extremism.

An even more dramatic illustration of the risk posed by this movement are the mass murders that we have witnessed in Canada between 2014 and 2018. In this time period, 19 people were killed by lone actors animated by some thread of right-wing extremist ideologies. In 2014, Justin Bourque shot and killed three RCMP officers. His behavior was shaped by an anti-authority and anti-police stance derived from his right-wing views. In January of 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette killed six Muslim men at prayer in Quebec City. A frequently posted photo of him shows Bissonnette sporting a "Make America Great Again" hat, a reflection of his admiration for Donald Trump, and other right-wing populists such as France's Marine Le Pen.

Finally, Alek Minassian's van attack in Toronto took 10 lives. Minassian is an adherent of the misogynistic arm of the movement, Incel, or Involuntary Celibate. For him and his "brethren," women's increasing freedom and empowerment represent unacceptable threats to masculinity and the right that it implies to control women's bodies. While this sentiment is privileged within the Incel movement, it has long been a core principle of the broader far right-wing ideology (Blee and Yates, 2017).



Where is the RWE movement?

The RWE movement is spread widely across Canada. When we published the 2015 report, we conservatively estimated that there were over 100 active groups across the country, with particular concentrations in Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and BC (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019). Since approximately 2016 we have seen dramatic growth in the numbers, visibility and online/offline activism associated with the extreme right. In the ongoing updated study of RWE (with Ryan Scrivens and David Hofmann), we have documented closer to 300 groups currently active. This includes new groups (e.g., Proud Boys, La Meute), and new chapters of already existing groups (e.g., Blood and Honour, PEGIDA). PEGIDA, for example, was struggling to gain any traction to its Islamophobic platforms in 2013 and 2014, but by 2018 had a national chapter, at least four provincial chapters, and a handful of city chapters (e.g., London, Ontario).

Shifting approaches

The stereotypical image of extreme right-wing actors is that of the young, male, black-jacketed skinhead. No doubt there remain elements of the movement that do correspond to this traditional guise. Members of La Meute, Atalante, and Blood and Honour, for example, do not make any effort to soften their image. But these "shock troops" are now supplemented by those who would refer to themselves as the "alt-right" – the "intelligentsia" of the movement. In truth, there is little to distinguish the narratives of the so-called alt-right from the traditional extreme right. The messaging is the same – the west is losing its distinct Euro-culture, thanks to the misguided emphasis on multiculturalism and open immigration.

It is largely only the framing of the message that is slightly different – more palatable and less extreme in rhetoric. Rather than use the coarse language of race and racism, the alt-right speaks of cultural loss, or preservation of "Canadian values." It's much harder to find fault with this coded language in isolation; it is the cumulative effect of their strident critiques of diversity policy, of immigration trends, of globalization, as examples, that reveals the exclusionary core of their ideology.

Consistent with these shifts is a corresponding increase in the use of the Internet as a tool both for recruitment and community building within and across nations. The hate movement has received a valuable gift in the form of the Internet. Since the birth of the Internet in the 1990s, radical right groups – and individuals who identify with such beliefs – have used the Internet as an alternative form of media, both to publicize messages of hate, and recruit and connect with like-minded others within and beyond domestic borders (Perry and Scrivens, 2016).

Part 2: Challenging right-wing extremism

In light of the rise of right-wing extremism, strategies specifically aimed at these groups are crucial. In our 2015 report on right-wing extremism (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019; see also Scrivens and Perry, 2017), we explored an array of such interventions, taking our cue from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), which has established itself as a global leader in research and praxis around RWE. Their 2014 report, "On the Front Line" (Ramalingham 2014), is an invaluable guide to global best practices around countering RWE. Among the approaches they describe are diverting people from getting involved, responding to and countering hate speech, and pushing public agencies to act (Scrivens and Perry, 2017).

Diverting people from getting involved

According to the timeworn adage, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This is an apt reminder that, in countering RWE, the most effective strategies are proactive rather than reactive. The goal should be to inhibit recruitment to extremist groups. Early intervention is key. Fortunately, a number of organizations across the globe – especially in the United Kingdom – focus explicitly on diverting individuals from getting involved in hate movements in the first place. This is done by engaging directly with individuals on a number of difficult issues, promoting dialogue that addresses the grievances that underpin racist or intolerant views. For example, the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network is a global organization that counters extremist narratives and prevents the recruitment of 'at risk' youth. Made up of former violent extremists and survivors of violent extremism, AVE utilizes the lessons, experiences, and networks of those who have experienced extremism first-hand. Here the aim is to undercut RWE groups' ability to contact and recruit young people.

Another initiative that is centered on diverting people from engaging getting involved in extremism is Life After Hate (LAH). This non-profit consultancy and speaker agency provides organizations – such as governments, military, international security and intelligence, policy makers, law enforcement officials, and the private sector -- with the information needed to implement long-term solutions to counter all types of violent extremism and terrorism. An important feature of LAH is its core members – they are reformed extremists. A key member and motivational speaker, Tony McAleer, is a former extremist, and one of Canada's more notorious members of the RWE movement. He shares messages of hope and compassion to a range of audiences, addressing issues around violence and extremism, and offering proactive solutions to divert individuals from entering a life of hate.

Responding to and countering hate speech

Counter-narratives need to target RWE and potential recruits 'where they live,' reflecting the interests and day-to-day realities of those directly involved. This is best done through social media and other similar forms of communication. The most recent Canadian initiative to respond to hate speech, Project SOMEONE (Social Media Education Everyday), is a multinational and interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners who are dedicated to countering online hate speech, discrimination, and radicalization through pedagogical practices: educating youth, educators and the public about the patterns of online hate. An important purpose of this initiative is to build an online portal of educational material that is designed to promote digital knowledge and critical thinking skills.

There are also legal and technical avenues that can be used to limit both the dissemination and reach of hate speech and incitement, especially online. Most western nations have attempted to respond to cyberhate and related Internet phenomena through legal regulation and 'take-down' approaches. Elected officials have passed new laws to address online extremism, police agencies have trained open-source analysts, and intelligence officers monitor the online activities of extremists of all stripes.

There is another way to use the law to challenge RWE. In the last 20 years, Richard Warman, a Canadian human rights lawyer and activist, has dedicated an enormous amount of his time, energy, and resources

to monitoring the activity of some of Canada's most notorious and vocal white nationalists, and frequently pursuing legal suits against them. His efforts have focused primarily on hate propaganda found on the Internet, with an emphasis on the activity of the far-right. He also initiated several successful complaints against some of Canada's most notorious white nationalist activists. Efforts of individuals like Warman can be effective in challenging hateful narratives online.

Ending violent behaviour and fragmenting movements

Our 2015 study revealed that leaders in the RWE movement are tough and charismatic, but are often unable maintain group cohesion (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019). When they can sustain leadership over time, they usually become known to the police, which in turn can weaken their position within a group. Our findings suggest that a crucial way for law enforcement officials to manage the threat of the far-right is to target their leaders. Doing so is likely render these unstable groups even more unstable, thus fragmenting whatever group cohesion they already have.

Additionally, many individuals seek comfort in the initial appearance of group solidarity, but find that it is transient and temporary. One-to-one interventions, then, are also a logical response to the far-right, pursuing "softer targets" in the movement and building with rapport with them. In order to extend the gap between them and the movement, interventions should highlight the consequences of their actions, followed by helping them to identify a different life path and supporting them to achieve it.

Exit programs across western nations offer individuals with structured routes out of extremist movements. In short, these programs attempt to challenge the belief structures and behavioural aspects of radicalized individuals, offering them pathways out of extremist groups and back into conventional society. According to Ramalingham (2014), these strategies target three processes: group dissolution, disengagement, and de-radicalization. Indeed, an entire industry has grown up around de-radicalization. Across the western world, government agencies and NGOs alike have implemented novel strategies around counter- and de-radicalization (e.g., the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), and the Center for Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV)).

Managing threats to public order

As noted early in this paper, the activities of the far-right have not generally been monitored or taken seriously by law enforcement or intelligence communities; rather, there has been a tendency for officials to deny or trivialize the presence and threat. That terrorism associated with RWEs is largely absent from the public agenda in Canada is evident from even a cursory review of the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC) website.

Its list of Terrorist Incidents, while international in scope, includes only one right-wing terrorist incident: Anders Breivik's horrific attacks in Norway in 2011. It was not until 2019 that any RWE or white supremacist organizations were added to the list of Terrorist Entities (Blood & Honour and Combat 18).

More recently, in February of 2021, The Proud Boys, The Base and Atomwaffen were also added to the list in the wake of the January 6 "insurrection" in Washington D.C.

Additionally, successive *Reports on the Terrorist Threat to Canada* published by Public Safety have been largely silent on the threat posed by RWE groups. Rather, the focus has been almost entirely on Islamist inspired extremists. Where extreme right groups and individuals are mentioned at all, it is generally only to dismiss them as "not ideologically coherent" and thus, not a significant threat. The 2018 report devoted the most space to date to far right extremism – 5 paragraphs across the 35 page document – yet still concluded that "while racism, bigotry, and misogyny may undermine the fabric of Canadian society, ultimately they do not usually result in criminal behavior or threats to national security" (Public Safety Canada, 2019: 8).

Nonetheless, there are a handful of police services that have taken the lead on combating hate crime and extremism in Canada. We found that the Sûreté du Québec clearly keeps a watchful eye on the diverse RWE groups in that province (Perry and Scrivens, 2015; 2019). Edmonton police are also vigilant in their treatment of RWE, putting pressure on them to the extent that they have successfully "beheaded" some of the most active groups through arrests, or even through surveillance that has gently encouraged activists to move on to other cities. Finally, RWE marches and demonstrations in cities like Montreal, London, Calgary, and Vancouver are closely monitored by law enforcement, particularly in the interests of minimizing the likelihood of violent exchanges between RWE and anti-racist activists. The aim is to deter far-right supporters from attending such events, as well as ensuring that demonstrations do not inspire fear within the community, inflame tensions between the far-right and anti-racist activists, for example, or lead to violence.

Supporting and empowering victims

The inclusion of affected and frequently targeted groups in relevant conversations on community security is key to the creation of safe spaces and to effective community and victim services more generally (Ahmed 2016; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016; Jacoby 2016). In short, communities and their members want to be heard and to have a voice in policies, practices, and initiatives that affect them. Policymakers need to recognize that anti-hate/extremism initiatives must also be informed by those in the best position to understand what is needed – members of targeted communities themselves, including those who have actually experienced targeted violence. Otherwise, governments run the risk of developing counter-productive initiatives or strategies that are far removed from the experiences and informed insights of affected individuals and communities.

A number of effective civil society organizations have emerged globally and domestically to address the needs of affected communities by acting as a voice for victims of targeted violence. As strong advocates of the Jewish community, B'nai Brith is one such organization. It intervenes in courts on behalf of targeted minority groups, forms important strategic alliances with Canadian NGOs, and develops Holocaust educational programs in schools across the nation, to name but a few initiatives. The organization also offers an Anti-Hate Hotline, whereby victims can call 24/7 for frontline counseling and

assistance. B'nai Brith's annual audit of antisemitic incidents also provides information on hate crime as well as hate groups.

Raising awareness of the problem

In an environment infused with discourses focused on radical Islam and violence, it has become a daunting challenge for community members, anti-racists, and academics to highlight the presence of the extreme-right in Canada. Consequently, an important first step in confronting the RWE movement is to convince the broader community that it constitutes a threat and, in short, to get RWE on the public agenda.

As a starting point for such initiatives, many NGOs engage in ongoing monitoring of hate incidents and hate groups globally, regionally and nationally. Among these are Human Rights Watch (HRW), Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), B'Nai Brith, and the National Council of Canadian Muslims. The readily available reports that are published by these agencies provide an overview of the demographics, distribution and, to a lesser extent, dynamics of hate crime. However, few people seek out such information, so the key is to find ways to expand the audience by "pushing out" the information. Social media has become crucial to a much broader capacity to share information. Most anti-hate organizations like those noted above are very active on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other interactive sites. Use of these platforms will continue to be key to engaging an otherwise uninformed public.

Pushing public agencies to act

A subsidiary component of many of the anti-racist/anti-hate initiatives noted above is their role in challenging public officials to take a public stance against RWE. Contemporary conservative politics that espouse anti-immigrant rhetoric and practices can lend legitimacy to hate mongers in Canada. Collectively, those interested in social justice have a responsibility to continue to pressure government leaders to refrain from exclusionary language and practices. Emerging research consortiums – like the Canadian Network on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS) – have an important role to play in nurturing and publicizing work in the area.

A promising new federal initiative emerged in Canada in 2017: the Canada Centre on Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence (CCCEPV). With a five-year, $35 million budget, the Office is intended to "provide leadership on Canada's response to radicalization to violence, coordinate federal/provincial/territorial and international initiatives, and support community outreach and research" (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police 2016). CCEPV has brought with it a broadened understanding of "radicalization" that is inclusive of RWE.

It is particularly important that we embark on these diverse strategies in an interactive and collaborative way. The cumulative impact of a multi-pronged anti-extremism approach cannot be overestimated, which is a recurring theme in the current literature around countering violent extremism (e.g., Macnair and Frank 2017), and should in fact inform our approach to countering hate in all contexts.

To that end, it is critical that there are multi-agency efforts coordinated around acknowledging and responding to the radical right. The violence and divisive rhetoric associated with this movement are shaped by, and in turn shape, the communities around them. The motivations for the formation of RWE beliefs derive from the confluence of multiple social processes and institutions.

It is imperative, therefore, that countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts not only be seen as a law enforcement or intelligence issue (Cohen 2016; Selim 2016) -- it is a social issue (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016; Jacoby 2016; Macnair and Frank 2017). Law enforcement officials must partner with various anti-extremist and anti-hate community organizations and human rights activists to share both knowledge and ideas for change. Policy makers, law enforcement, and community-based organizations should redouble their collaborative efforts in enhancing and/or developing the sorts of initiatives identified here. The choices are not either/or; rather, multiple programs operating at the level of the individual, the group, and the broader social context can and should operate simultaneously.

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