| **Dialogue** | **Policing Right-Wing Extremism in Canada:** Threat Frames, Ideological Motivation, and Societal Implications |

Andrew Crosby

Carleton University, Canada
andrew.crosby@carleton.ca

Introduction

Far right-wing nationalist and white supremacist groups have become a focal point for national security and counter-terrorism efforts in Canada in recent years. In response to the Capitol riots in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021, the Canadian government designated the Proud Boys and other right-wing groups as terrorist entities under Canada's Criminal Code. Overall, the Canadian government listed thirteen new groups, four identified as "ideologically motivated, violent extremist groups" and nine Islamist groups (Public Safety Canada 2021).

The rise in right-wing extremist activity in Canada is increasingly documented in academic literature, thinktank reports, and news media. Research highlights the rise in right-wing anti-immigrant sentiment (Parent and Ellis 2014), an increase in hate crimes (Moreau 2021), and the proliferation of online racist activity in Canada (Davey, Hart, and Guerin 2020). In their examination of the rise of right-wing extremism in Canada, Perry and Scrivens (2019: 13) develop a sociological and cultural understanding of hate groups as operating within "a structural complex of relations of power," where hate is driven by a societal "network of norms, assumptions, behaviours and policies which are structurally connected in such a way as to reproduce the racialized and gendered hierarchies which characterize the society in question." The proliferation of hate groups is inevitable in societies built upon racist institutions of white supremacy and settler colonialism.

Through an examination of internal government records obtained via the *Access to Information Act* (ATIA), this article examines the rise of right-wing extremism as an object of security knowledge and analysis in Canada. Access to information research provides a unique window into the production of security knowledge and surveillance practices targeting domestic groups determined as threatening national security. For this article, I compiled a list of thirty-six disclosure packages numbering around 2,500 pages from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Public Safety Canada (PSC), and the Department of National Defence (DND). With this information, I investigate the expansion of surveillance practices targeting domestic extremism, the nexus between right-wing extremism and security institutions, the most recent expansion of extremist categories, and the conflation of political frames of threat. I then discuss how the conflation of types of domestic extremism serves to reproduce and reinforce settler-colonial state power.

Right-Wing Extremism: The Canadian Trajectory

Over the past ten years, Canadian national security and intelligence agencies have paid close attention to the rise of hate groups and anti-Muslim sentiment. Rostami and Askanius (2021) chart a similar trajectory in Sweden, suggesting similar patterns in Western democracies; see also Topinka, Finlayson, and Osborne-Carey (2021) and Millett and Swiffen (2021) who note that counter-terrorism actors have and continue to prioritize Islamist extremism over white supremacist violence. Canadian security agencies acknowledge, however, that hate does not exist in a vacuum. A 2017 CSIS Intelligence Assessment notes that right-wing extremism and violence in Canada has a long history, citing a 1784 race riot in Nova Scotia, legislated racial segregation in Ontario schools in 1849, violence against Asian communities, and, notably, the "range of discriminatory legislation targeting Canada's Indigenous population" (CSIS 2017: 61). A presentation produced by PSC (2017b) in the same year notes that right-wing extremism in Canada is characterized by growth and decline, in particular the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and fascist groups in the 1920s and 1930s and the proliferation of Nazi skinhead groups beginning in the 1970s as a response to Canadian immigration patterns. The report indicates that it was not until January 2017 that right-wing extremism was considered beyond a law enforcement concern to one of national security (PSC 2017b: 82). In January 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette, a right-wing extremist, killed six Muslim worshippers and wounded nineteen others in a mosque outside of Quebec City. Although Bissonnette was not charged with terrorism-related offences, the description of the attack as terrorism by political leaders served to shift public discourse around and the security intelligence approach toward right-wing violence, according to PSC (2017a: 169).

Between 2016 and 2019, CSIS and its Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC) produced a number of presentations, threat assessments, and comparative analyses pertaining to right-wing extremism (CSIS 2017, 2018b, 2019). An ITAC threat assessment in November 2018—"The National Terrorism Threat Level for Canada"—assesses five groups of potential terrorist actors. Among Sunni, Shia, and Sikh groups, and Canadian extremist travellers, "far-right and far-left groups" are listed (CSIS 2018b: 4). The report assesses both groupings as having similar violent tendencies, tactics, and recruitment methods. Both movements exist predominantly online, according to the report, with various strategies for rebranding and recruiting in the case of far-right groups and mobilizing in the case of far-left groups. Under "training," the assessment notes that "a small number of individuals espousing far-right extremist ideologies undergo private paramilitary training, while others are joining law enforcement or the [Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)] in order to gain access to training and weaponry" (CSIS 2018b: 5).

Synergy: Conservative Values and Security Institutions

Conservative and right-wing individuals and groups tend to share ideological and political affinities with security institutions such as the police and military. A 2018 military police criminal intelligence investigation—"White Supremacy, Hate Groups, and Racism in the Canadian Armed Forces"—found that fifty-three members were involved in hate groups or racist activities between 2013–2018, but that the number was likely higher (DND 2018c). The Canadian Forces National Counter-Intelligence Unit (CFNCIU) also assessed far-right involvement within the Canadian military, noting that right-wing groups "will always attract active and former military personnel due to their conservative values and para-military trainings" (DND 2018a: 20). A separate CFNCIU report notes: "The majority of RWE groups profess their goals as loyalty, honour, and defending the 'Nation' from outsiders. These qualities closely echo the military traditions, increasing the ease with which current DND/CAF members and veterans are being attracted to such organisations" (DND 2018b: 6). Ideological motivations demonstrate the political and cultural synergy between the far-right and security institutions such as the military and police. Yet, security institutions have signalled a move away from the application of political labels to domestic threats altogether.

Making Sense of the "Violent Extremism Terrorist Threat Landscape"

While ATIA legislation enables access to internal security files, open public reports can also be revealing, as demonstrated in Rostami and Askanius (2021) who examine public reports by the Swedish Secret Service. Recent reports published by CSIS indicate that Canada's security establishment is interested in moving away from political labels associated with right-wing and left-wing extremism in favour of more encompassing designations that focus on "motivation." The 2019 *CSIS Public Report* notes: "Given the diverse combination of motivations and personalized worldviews of recent mass-casualty attackers, the use of such terms as 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' is not only subjective, but inaccurate in describing the complexity of motivations" involved in extremist attacks (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2020: 13). This shift has seen the creation of three new categories comprising the "violent extremism terrorist threat landscape": Religiously Motivated Violent Extremism (RMVE), Politically Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE), and Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE) (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2020: 11). Within these new typologies, right-wing extremism in the form of "racially motivated" or "ethno-nationalist" violence is grouped under "xenophobic violence," which is one of four IMVE categories (the others being anti-authority, gender-driven, and other grievance-driven violence) (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2020: 13). Of further significance is the removal altogether of reference to "right-wing," "white supremacy," and "neo-Nazism" from the text in the most recent *CSIS Public Report* outlining Canada's threat environment (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2021). Although these new typologies of extremism attempt to render previous categories associated with right-wing or left-wing extremism obsolete, they continue a practice of conflating all radically different types of politics and activism under one heading of domestic extremism.

Ideological Motivation and Conflation of Extremism Threat Frames

A recent example of IMVE applied to left-wing protests is outlined in a "secret" CSIS email from March 2018 regarding the construction of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain expansion (TMX) pipeline. The email notes that "it is expected that there will be some significant opposition which could escalate into serious acts of ideologically-motivated violence" (CSIS 2018a: 8). An intelligence assessment is attached to the email outlining some of the parameters of the pipeline project and broad opposition from groups ranging from climate change activists to the dozens of First Nations consolidating the "Treaty Alliance against Tar Sands" (CSIS 2018a: 10). In a section titled "violent confrontations and resource development," the CSIS report focuses on Indigenous (Mi'kmaq) protests against shale gas exploration in New Brunswick in 2013 and the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota in 2016, both resulting in hundreds of arrests and property damage. Canada's security establishment frames environmental and Indigenous opposition to resource extraction as driven by "anti-petroleum ideology," according to a 2014 RCMP critical infrastructure intelligence assessment (which simultaneously labels the Mi'kmaq as "violent Aboriginal extremists") (RCMP 2014: 75, 87). The potential for violence driven by anti-petroleum ideology is compared alongside the mass killings in Oklahoma City in 1995 and Norway in 2011 perpetrated by far-right actors (RCMP 2014).

There are other examples that conflate environmental and Indigenous activism with right-wing violence. A CSIS briefing presentation in 2017 on the extreme right-wing landscape in Canada is almost entirely redacted; yet one slide addressing the "changing face of right-wing extremism" contains the headline of a *Foreign Policy* article penned by Jamie Bartlett: "The Next Wave of Extremists Will Be Green: Militant Environmentalism is coming, And we aren't ready for it." An equally perplexing example is contained within an RCMP publication addressing "Youth Online and at Risk" (PSC n.d.). In a section addressing website content and radicalization, a paragraph discusses social media posts by left-wing activists during the G8/G20 protests in Toronto in 2010 that distorted police action and justified vandalism, followed by a paragraph on newsletters and zines. This second paragraph is accompanied by an image of "an insurrectionary zine for young readers" featuring Kanellos the Athens Riot Dog. The zine, according to the RCMP, portrays the dog as part of the struggle against law enforcement that is attractive to younger

audiences. What is peculiar about these two paragraphs is that they are seamlessly nestled between a paragraph on Wahhabi and Salafi-Jihadist groups and a paragraph on suicide bombings (PSC n.d.: 39).

A final example worth exploring surrounds the trial of white farmer George Stanley for the murder of Colten Boushie, a young Indigenous man from the Cree Red Pheasant First Nation, in Saskatchewan in 2016. In a "top secret" classified email thread and report, an assessment is made regarding "threats <u>to</u> Indigenous people's [sic]" with the subject line "Indigenous issues in Canada" (CSIS n.d.: 1; emphasis in the original). The assessment was requested by the Director of CSIS for an upcoming meeting on "Aboriginal issues" (CSIS n.d.: 5). The director's executive assistant deemed the question of possible threats *to* Indigenous peoples as coming "right out of left field" (CSIS n.d.: 5).

The section on threats to Indigenous peoples is entirely redacted. However, the following section on "right-wing extremism" notes that "while the primary focus of the extreme-right in Canada currently is the perceived threat from Islam, there are those in the broader milieu who continue to focus their hate on Canada's Indigenous peoples" (CSIS n.d.: 3). Produced surrounding Stanley's trial (and acquittal) in 2018, the email notes that "The shooting generated significant online hate (from all sides) when it occurred" (CSIS n.d.: 3). The following section on "potential for violence" focuses exclusively on the potential for violence emanating from Indigenous peoples, despite a long, documented history of white, racist violence against Indigenous peoples. The CSIS email then discusses various unrelated instances of Indigenous activism and land defence efforts, including opposition to fish farms in British Columbia. The email report notes that the Canadian government has actively engaged with reconciliation initiatives with Indigenous peoples, and lists some examples, yet continues to face significant opposition over resource development projects (CSIS n.d.).

Despite the presence of heavy redactions and potential missing pages from this disclosure, the email report provides an interesting window to understand security intelligence production surrounding domestic extremism threats in Canada. Although this report was produced as a result of a request to assess threats *to* Indigenous peoples, CSIS operatives forego addressing right-wing violence and hate to instead focus on Indigenous activism and opposition to resource extraction on their lands. This incident is one example that speaks to a set of larger concerns associated with the expansion of counter-terrorism policing tools and resources raised by other authors in this issue (Millett and Swiffen 2021; Parker 2021), who also caution that racialized communities bear the brunt of these measures.

Conclusion

The response to Canada's listing of right-wing groups as terrorist entities in January 2021 has included cautious concern. Civil liberties advocates and critics of Canada's counter-terrorism apparatus have highlighted the inconsistencies of the listing procedure and problems associated with conflating violent far-right organizations alongside charities and other groups struggling for self-determination. An open letter penned in response to the 2021 terrorism entity designations notes that "the entrenchment and expansion of problematic anti-terrorism tools threatens to further intensify racism, rather than alleviate it" (Kanji and McSorley 2021). A survey of internal security intelligence documents lends some credibility to and expands this concern, as we have seen how easily left-wing and Indigenous activism are integrated into threat assessments of right-wing violence.

Canada is a settler-colonial state built upon the foundational pillars of white supremacy, racial capitalism, territorial acquisitiveness, and the attempted elimination of Indigenous peoples (culture, political/legal authorities, and claims to land). A young, affluent country that relies on these ongoing processes for its wealth and stature, the institutions of white supremacy required to construct and develop the Canadian state permeate social, political, and economic life (see Millett and Swiffen 2021 for the role of law and whiteness in reproducing the settler state). It is inevitable then that far-right, white-nationalist, and racist groups seemingly thrive in this settler-colonial landscape. While perhaps not surprising, this article has endeavoured to shed some light on colonial policing methods (see also Jiménez and Cancela 2021), security knowledge production, the framing of threats around right-wing extremist groups, and how forms of left-

wing activism and Indigenous decolonial struggles are conflated with far-right, white-supremacist violence. Equating environmental and Indigenous activism with hate crimes and white-nationalist terror is not accidental, however, and serves to reproduce settler-colonial state power by criminalizing challenges to its wealth and legitimacy.

References

Canadian Security Intelligence Service. 2020. *CSIS Public Report 2019*. Ottawa, CA: Public Works and Government Services Canada.
———. 2021. *CSIS Public Report 2020*. Ottawa, CA: Public Works and Government Services Canada.
Davey, Jacob, Mackenzie Hart, and Cécile Guerin. 2020. *An Online Environment Scan of Right-wing Extremism in Canada*. Toronto, CA: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
Jiménez, Aitor, and Ekaitz Cancela. 2021. Surveillance Punitivism: Colonialism, Racism, and State Terrorism in Spain. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 374–378.
Kanji, Azeezah, and Tim McSorley. 2021. *Open Letter Re: Anti-Terrorism & White Supremacism*. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd2ENeC6WtsPl5MT8WdLIPAysaDom227ZiKDdIWSYOv6rAf0w/viewform [accessed February 23, 2021].
Millett, Kris, and Amy Swiffen. 2021. Right Wing Extremism as Terrorism and the Law's Relation to Violence. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 364–368.
Moreau, Greg. 2021. *Police-Reported Hate Crime in Canada, 2019*. Ottawa, CA: Statistics Canada.
Parent, Richard B., and James O. Ellis III. 2014. *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*. Waterloo, CA: Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society.
Parker, Zac. 2021. Immaterial Support: Whiteness, Stings, and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 354–358.
Perry, Barbara, and Ryan Scrivens. 2019. *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*. Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan.
Public Safety Canada. 2021. Government of Canada Lists 13 New Groups as Terrorist Entities and Completes Review of Seven Others. News release, February 3. https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2021/02/government-of-canada-lists-13-new-groups-as-terrorist-entities-and-completes-review-of-seven-others.html [accessed February 23, 2021].
Rostami, Amir, and Tina Askanius. 2021. State Surveillance of Violent Extremism and Threats of White Supremacist Violence in Sweden. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 369–373.
Topinka, Robert, Alan Finlayson, and Cassian Osborne-Carey. 2021. The Trap of Tracking: Digital Methods, Surveillance, and the Far Right. *Surveillance & Society* 19 (3): 384–388.

Access to Information and Privacy Disclosures

CSIS. N.d. Indigenous Issues in Canada. Email. Access to Information request #2018-21.
CSIS. 2017. Right-Wing Extremism in Canada: A Preliminary Assessment. Intelligence Assessment. Access to Information request #2018-762.
CSIS. 2018a. Kinder Morgan – TMX. Email, March 6, 2018. Access to Information request #2018-21.
CSIS. 2018b. The National Terrorism Threat Level for Canada. Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre. Access to Information request #2019-207.
CSIS. 2019. The Extreme Right-Wing Landscape: International Perspective – Canadian Connections. Intelligence Assessments Branch. Access to Information request #2019-487.
DND. 2018a. The Militia Movement, the III%, and the Threat to DND/CAF. Canadian Forces National Counter-Intelligence Unit. Access to Information request #2019-1579.
DND. 2018b. Right-Wing Extremism in Canada: DND/CAF Perspectives. Canadian Forces National Counter-Intelligence Unit. Access to Information request #2019-1579.
DND. 2018c. White Supremacy, Hate Groups, and Racism in the Canadian Armed Forces. Military Police Criminal Intelligence Section. Access to Information request #2018-1844.
PSC. N.d. Youth Online and at Risk: Radicalization Facilitated by the Internet. RCMP. Access to Information request #2017-181.
PSC. 2017a. Learning from Recent Homegrown Extremism and Terrorist Plots and Attacks: GCTF Initiative to Address Homegrown Terrorism – Launch Event. Access to Information request #2019-51.
PSC. 2017b. Right-Wing Extremist Groups: National Security Considerations. National Security Operations Directorate. Access to Information request #2019-51.
RCMP. 2014. Criminal Threats to the Canadian Petroleum Industry. Critical Infrastructure Intelligence Assessment. Access to Information request #2016-1140.