

Globe and Mail OPINION

## How truck convoy supporters like Pierre Poilievre have weaponized 'freedom'

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If you watched any of federal Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre's video announcing his candidacy for the leadership of his party, you might have discerned a theme: freedom

Variations of the word were used nine times in his three-minute performance. If he is elected leader and is ultimately successful in becoming prime minister, Mr. Poilievre promised, among other things, to make Canadians the "freest people on earth," with "freedom to make your own health and vaccine choices, freedom to speak without fear."

"Freedom over fear," he recently tweeted.

This is not by accident, of course.

Freedom is a word that gets bandied about a lot these days, but has mostly been co-opted by the alt-right, both here and in the U.S. During the last federal election, People's Party of Canada leader Maxime Bernier, the far-right's current standard-bearer in this country, was [greeted](#) with chants of "freedom, freedom," at his campaign stops.

Freedom, as an ideology, has been appropriated by the Make America Great Again (MAGA) wing of the U.S. Republican party. There is a strong MAGA fan base in this country, apparently with prominent supporters such as Candice Bergen, the new interim leader of the federal Conservative Party of Canada. Undated photos circulating on social media appear to show Ms. Bergen sporting a camouflage MAGA hat.

MAGA hats and Trump signs have been ubiquitous at the Freedom Convoy occupation in Ottawa, which has attracted donations and political support from the U.S. One man rode a horse through the downtown streets carrying a flag emblazoned with the word "Trump." The word 'freedom' could be found on most signs being touted by the protesters. For many, it's a word that has become code for white-identity politics and the far-right's weapon of choice in the culture wars.

Mr. Poilievre has been a strong advocate of those gathered in Ottawa, meeting with them and helping get their message out.

He's been less vocal about the lawlessness that has taken place or the harm that the encampment has caused to commerce and downtown residents. It would appear that the presumptive favourite to win the Conservative leadership isn't prepared to jeopardize his relationship with potential supporters in the name of law and order.

This, undoubtedly, will be remembered.

Freedom, of course, has not always been a concept usurped for selfish, malicious purposes. It's been a rallying cry behind great triumphs such as the end of slavery and the civil rights movement. But others have believed freedom is about protecting property rights, even if that has to occur at the diminishment of democracy.

More recently, political leaders, and others, with an unprecedented megaphone in the form of the internet and social media, have used the call for “freedom” to promote bigoted, racist and anti-democratic ideas.

As Elisabeth Anker, a professor of American studies at George Washington University and author of *Ugly Freedoms* recently wrote in *The New York Times*: “Today, more and more, laws, caucuses, rallies and hard-right movements use the language of freedom as a cudgel to erode democratic governance and civil rights; these laws expand the creep of authoritarianism.”

Don’t forget that the organizers of the Freedom Convoy have called for the overthrow of the federal government as well as the rescindment of all COVID-19 mandates across Canada.

Which brings us back to Mr. Poilievre and his courtship of these folks.

As a strategy, it does offer a fuel line of support for his leadership bid. The social conservative wing of the party would certainly applaud his freedom mantra and may be seduced into thinking that, in Mr. Poilievre, they have someone who will promote their controversial wish list (see: ban on abortions). Moreover, the freedom cry will be welcomed by the party’s grassroots in rural Western Canada, a faction that is increasingly bitter and angry.

Whether Canadians more generally will feel comfortable with Mr. Poilievre’s adoption of language associated with Mr. Trump and the worst elements of the Republican party (Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Marjorie Taylor Greene et al) is highly doubtful. Poll after poll has shown little appetite in this country for Mr. Trump’s divisive, anti-media, autocratic style of leadership.

It’s also unclear how well Mr. Poilievre’s tactics will go down with moderates within the CPC – Red Tories who don’t have the slightest interest in extending empathy to those associated with the type of disorder we’ve witnessed in the capital for more than 10 days now.

With his wooing of the protesters, Mr. Poilievre is taking a massive gamble. Then again, as it was once written, freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.