

National Reality Check?

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

As police began to clear members of the so-called 'Freedom Convoy' from the heart of our nation's capital, a notification on a social media channel popped up, alerting me that a long-time connection was on their way to the heart of Ottawa.

Given the fact this had been going on for the better part of three weeks, I had to question what their motivations were in heading up there at the eleventh hour.

Was it to make one last 'stand' in the alleged name of our freedom? Was it just to say they had been there, only to stand back and watch the kudos from like-minded friends and acquaintances on social media?

Was it a way to swoop in at the last minute just in case the Government caved to their lengthy and never seeming to be set-in-stone list of demands? Probably not, so the kudos angle seems the most likely explanation.

The comments duly trickled in as the two-person convoy motored to join the remainders. By the time they got there, the inevitable social media broadcast began.

At first, the video was just a showcase of cacophony: people milling about, the din of white noise drowning out anything intelligible. The only thing that could be clearly heard was a rousing rendition of 'O Canada' as the 'protestors' shuffled about Bank Street.

The video's host began some colour commentary after the first few bars and said, and I'm paraphrasing here, that it was just a sea of 'love' and positivity out there.

Aside from the fact that most of these videos proclaiming peace, light, and whatever else the talking points might be almost invariably feature a group of people in the background literally singing Canada's praises, some of the images in the background accompanying the soundtrack told a slightly different story.

Personally, I couldn't quite square the circle of this connection belting out an officially-designated song of the Great White North with an upside-down Canadian flag

flapping in the winter breeze behind their head.

Now that the cleanup is underway in Ottawa, the country can begin to look back forensically on what has transpired. Some are following the money, some are following the individuals, some are trying to suss out just who the 'few' bad actors were who came along and diluted what was, some argued, a very clear message.

Protests are a dime a dozen in our nation's capital ' and in the capitals of pretty much any nation that enjoys freedom. And yes, readers, we still do enjoy freedom despite the fact some circumstances presently require ' and long before COVID required ' people to don protective masks and/or be vaccinated.

But this one, as I am sure people on any side of this debate will agree, was something different.

The anger ' and I am not saying the anger was anything but genuine ' was off the charts, alternate views were presented as alternative realities, and any opportunities to have productive discussions or discourse quickly went out the window.

These discussions appeared to be unwanted, but they were needed ? and oh so necessarily.

I was struck by the fact that participants and supporters kept pushing the line that these protests were peaceful despite placards surrounding them with messages that there were anything but; that the desecration of the National War Memorial's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was one rambunctious person who got carried away when persons on the ground removed fencing around the landmark, the most potent symbol of the people who fought and died for the freedoms they claimed to be protecting, to continue the desecration; that there was peace and love in the air as participants sang, honked their horns, and performed all manner of noise throughout the night, driving everyday Ottawans to distraction; that their efforts were to help bolster businesses negatively impacted by mask mandates when their actions led to the (hopefully) temporary shuttering of many businesses in Ottawa and to small, independent business owners losing untold thousands in revenues in the process; that they were there to fight for the rights of all Canadians, but remained largely silent on the challenges to freedom still being experienced by First Nations and BIPOC Canadians.

In my opinion, many of the participants needed a swift reality check, but does ?reality? matter less now here, as it sadly seems to in the United States? That's a question that will need a longer-term examination to answer, but, if anything, I hope what we experienced through the ?Freedom Convoy? will be a reality check for Canadians at large.

Throughout the duration of the occupation, as the lived experiences shared by people who call Ottawa home became ever more present on our radars, many people said of Canada, ?This isn't who we are.?

The problem is, ?This isn't who we are?? is the go-to whenever something happens that doesn't fit into the national image many of us have bought into.

This isn't who we are when a convoy all but takes our nation's capital hostage.

This isn't who we are when families are struck down on a leisurely walk all because of the colour of their skin or their country of origin.

This isn't who we are when a gunman opens fire in a place of worship.

This isn't who we are when our First Peoples lose access to clean drinking water.

Maybe that's why many people seem to have sadly lost interest in the thousands of unmarked graves associated with Residential Schools after the initial discovery of 215, then 500, and then topping 700. Nobody said, ?This isn't who we are,? in that instance as history is hard to ignore. Perhaps it was an uncomfortable reality that simply didn't jive with the comforting idea of national identity in which we often like to blanket ourselves.

While the protest may have led to Provincial governments to waver under pressure, and the potential of lost votes, in accelerating their timelines on when to drop masking rules and other public health measures, those at the Federal level still, at press time, remain firmly in place.

Was the ?convoy? successful? I will leave that up to you.

But, if it prompts an examination of just ?who we are? as Canadians or what we aspire to be, perhaps that's a silver lining that can be grasped.