

Transportation  
policy  
briefing

pp. 17-27

Michael  
Harris

p. 10

Trudeau  
'COPs out'  
on world  
climate  
stage

p. 12

Reconciliation  
Council  
needs  
to be a  
commission

Exclusive  
news  
inside

Rose  
LeMay

p. 7



# THE HILL TIMES

THIRTY-FOURTH YEAR, NO. 1977

CANADA'S POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPER

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2022 \$5.00

EXCLUSIVE FEATURE: PART III

## Hate MPs get: social media regulation, better police coordination key to resolving increasingly toxic political environment, say experts

There's no easy solution to confront the uptick in threats and harassment directed towards Parliamentarians. MPs, Senators, and insiders talk about what can be done to change the tone.

CHELSEA NASH &  
MIKE LAPOINTE

MPs and experts say there is no way to completely eradicate the worsening harassment and hate experienced by Parliamentarians and other public officials, but by taking a multi-pronged approach, the situation could be improved.

Continued on page 32



Freedom Convoy supporters carry and wear "F\*ck Trudeau" flags along Metcalfe Street on Feb. 12, 2022. Over the last five to seven years, hate and harassment have spread into relatively obscure constituencies, and MPs are now facing this all the time. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

NEWS

Ford-CUPE feud portrays Tories as 'black-hearted accountants,' an image which could harm federal Conservatives

BY ABBAS RANA

Some federal Conservatives are concerned that Ontario Premier Doug Ford's ongoing labour dispute with CUPE education workers is negatively portraying federal Conservatives, and putting them at a disadvantage in the upcoming Mississauga-Lake-shore byelection, say some Conservatives.

"The strike and the notwithstanding clause is going to create a perception that these Conservatives are black-hearted accountants," said one veteran Toronto-area Conservative, who spoke to *The Hill Times* on a not-for-attribution basis to speak their mind. "This is going to be a serious problem for us in this byelection."

Another Toronto-area Conservative source who is following the byelection closely echoed the same view. Both sources said this is the third time in a general or a byelection since 2018 that the Ford's Progressive Conservatives have hamstrung their federal cousins, given most Ontarians do associate the provincial and federal Conservatives.

Continued on page 36

Publications Mail Agreement #40068926

94922 81130 1

## Exclusive Feature: Part III

# Social media regulation, better police co-ordination key to resolving increasingly toxic political environment, say experts

There's no easy solution to confront the uptick in threats and harassment directed towards Parliamentarians. MPs, Senators, and insiders talk about what can be done to change the tone.

Continued from page 1

Multiple experts suggest strategies to combat hate and harassment include better regulation of social media, improved co-ordination and awareness among law enforcement, and improved public education about how the political process actually works—including for disaffected Canadians and young Canadians who are more susceptible to extremism.

Michael Wernick, former clerk of the Privy Council Office, said that years ago, only the most prominent politicians with national profiles were the targets of threats and violence.

But over the last five to seven years, hate and harassment have spread into relatively obscure constituencies, and MPs are now facing this all the time.

"It's not just MPs, but it's public health officials, judges—there's a broader threat to the state here," said Wernick. "But certainly if you go after politicians, you can drive them out and really damage your democracy."

Non-affiliated British Columbia Senator Larry Campbell, who spent decades working as an RCMP officer starting in the early 1970s and who later became British Columbia's chief coroner



A line of gas cans sits on Wellington Street in front of the Prime Minister's Office on Feb. 9, 2022, as the Freedom Convoy's occupation of downtown Ottawa entered its third week. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade



Cyber-security expert Emily Laidlaw says there is a need for governments to introduce legislation to standardize social media moderation policies. *Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn*

A recent shakeup of Twitter following Elon Musk's \$44-billion deal to purchase of the social media platform—after which he promptly fired half of the staff—has raised questions about content moderation at a fractious time.

Many of the MPs interviewed for this series pointed to social media as a reason for increasing instances of hate and harassment.

"I'm of the view that social media platforms must be held accountable for the traffic that takes place on their networks," said Wernick. "The days are long gone where they could just say, 'We're just a pipe.'"

As Emily Laidlaw, Canada Research Chair in cybersecurity law at the University of Calgary, pointed out, however, social media is a tool. The tool itself is not propagating hate, but it does offer a method of communication that enables messages of hate and toxicity to perpetuate with ease, anonymity, and with more potential for amplification.

As Farber pointed out, "back in the day, if [people] wanted to spread their racist or bigoted message, they had to stand at the corner of Bank [Street] and Sparks Street, and they had to hand out little leaflets."

Laidlaw is noticing a connection between hate and harassment online and real world threats and/or acts of violence.

"Is it causal? No. But there's certainly a connection. And the fact is, that when people experience this hate and these kinds of threats online, I mean, it's not a separate place. This is a real experience, and they're threatened in that real world. At any moment, they can go around the corner, and worry that some individual is going to hurt them, or hurt their family," she said.

While some MPs have taken to blocking or muting those who are engaged in harassing or hateful

and the inspiration behind *Da Vinci's Inquest*, told *The Hill Times* that he's been "horrified" by what he hears from MPs about the hate they get.

"I've been in the Senate for over 17 years, and it's like watching a snowball go down the hill," said Campbell. "I would say in the last five, six years, that it's grown."

According to Statistics Canada, Canadian police reported the highest number of criminal incidents motivated by hate—2,669 incidents—since such data was first collected in 2009. The first year of the pandemic saw a surge of police-reported hate crimes, with a 37 per cent increase over the previous year. While there are no such statistics for the harassment and/or hate facing

parliamentarians, anecdotally, it appears MPs are facing similarly increasing instances of hate, harassment, and threats.

Many of them noted an upswing in harassment with the pandemic, and later, the Freedom Convoy, when anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-public health restriction protesters descended on Ottawa, causing chaos for nearly a month. That group of people flew "Fuck Trudeau" flags, described politicians who endorsed vaccines and mask mandates as "traitors," and threatened to overthrow the federal government if they did not repeal vaccine requirements—many of which were under provincial jurisdiction.

"COVID certainly was a game-changer," said NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.), who described being a target of paranoia and conspiracy theory during that time.

"It's a lot harder to deal with people who think you're an agent of some kind of worldwide cabal, than someone who disagrees with your position on the carbon tax or the gun registry," he said.

As noted by anti-hate experts, much of the harassment and hate—though certainly not all of it—does come from the far-right, and that was the group that was the loudest during the convoy occupation of Ottawa.

Bernie Farber, chair of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, said "there is no magic formula" to resolve the increasingly hateful political environment.

But, he suggested three pillars of intervention that would be helpful, including public education, improved police resources, and good law.

"We do have to have a plan. This is now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People have more access to weapons than they ever had before ... but it's not so much the bad guys having weapons that worry me. It's the racist philosophies out there, the hateful philosophies that worry me the most, and it's the manner in which they are promulgated," he said.

## Holding social media platforms accountable



Non-affiliated British Columbia Senator Larry Campbell, who spent decades working as an RCMP officer, chief coroner for British Columbia, as well as mayor of Vancouver, says he's been "horrified" by what he hears from MPs about the hate they get. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade



Former clerk of the Privy Council Michael Wernick, pictured on Feb. 21, 2019. Wernick says the hate and harassment directed towards MPs and other public officials constitutes 'a broader threat to the state.' *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Continued on page 33

## Exclusive Feature: Part III

Continued from page 32

speech against them, Laidlaw warned against this strategy.

“One of the issues is that the idea, of say, blocking or muting, is only in a circumstance where the speech is just something that you don’t want to see or hear from. It’s a very different thing when we’re talking about threats,” she said. If people are muting those perpetuating harassing or hateful rhetoric against them, they run the risk of not seeing when a credible threat is made.

In instances where there is a real threat, Laidlaw said people can contact the social media moderation team directly and ask them to remove the offending post. The challenge there, however, is it’s a one-off solution, but doesn’t tackle what is becoming a systemic problem.

Another problem with relying on social media companies to moderate themselves is that there’s always somewhere else for people to go. If they get banned from one platform, for instance, there are other platforms that will happily host them.

Instead, Laidlaw said regulation to hold social media companies to their obligations is the way to go.

“We absolutely need legislation that regulates precisely what the obligations of social media platforms should be. And I think that these platforms have a duty to be responsible corporate actors, and Canada has a duty to set down precisely what those obligations should be,” she said.

“It’s not just having a fully developed content moderation system, but it is accountability for their recommender systems, for their advertising structure, for their transparency about their role,” she said. “And we need something other than a court as the avenue through which to hold social media accountable, because that’s just not realistic.”

Laidlaw acknowledged that of course it’s important that social media companies adhere to the idea of freedom of expression, and because of that, it can sometimes be difficult to assess “speech at the margins.”

But, “a lot of the worst harm is illegal... it’s threats. It’s hate speech,” she said.

Laidlaw said the more difficult challenge when dealing with hate speech and threats online “is actually the conditions that then made those individuals okay with posting [that].”

Legislation to address online harms would only target the social media companies’ responsibilities, not the individuals who are themselves engaging in perpetuating hate and harassment.

“There’s a lot of other issues going on that [are] causing the kind of harms that we’re talking about,” she said.

“I think that everyone rolls their eyes every time you say, ‘Well, the answer to this is really multiple strategies all working together. But the issue is that’s precisely the only way to solve this. And it will never be perfectly solved. But we can at least decrease the harm and better

protect politicians and others,” she said.

## Better political education needed

Improving public education is one way to stem the promulgation of hatred. For Farber, a big concern is the manner in which children pick up hateful philosophies, he said.

“Our best defence comes in two places. It comes in schools and in education, where we have decent forms of anti-racist education, where we educate teachers about recognizing the signs of young people being drawn into hate groups, and to stopping it even before it starts. That’s number one,” he said.

Speaking to *The Hill Times* as the convoy was ongoing in February, the director of the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism at Ontario Tech University, Barbara Perry, said education is key.

The far-right, she said at the time, “is still a fringe.”

“There’s a larger proportion, more folks, obviously, who are consuming these narratives, and it may be influencing their positions, but in terms of the extreme right itself, it still is a fairly—relative to the population—a small movement,” she said.

Changing the minds of those on the far-right who are knee-deep in conspiracy theories is not necessarily a reasonable solution, she said.

“It’s really about building resiliency and the capacity to resist recruitment amongst not just youth and young adults, but adults, middle-aged adults as well, who we’re seeing more and more as part of the movement,” she said.

Perry suggested providing counter narratives to those coming from the far-right, but also said it’s about acknowledging the grievances, concerns, and anxieties that people are experiencing and that are perhaps driving them to far-right narratives.

“You’re not going to change their mind with reason, facts, science—they reject all of that,” she said.

While anti-racist education is one aspect, civic education is another area to be improved upon.

Following the Freedom Convoy, Campbell said he engaged in a long discussion with an individual who was wondering why, as a senior Senator, he and the Governor General were not meeting with protesters regarding their demand to take over the government.

“It took me about three long emails for him to understand how things work, and I was astounded,” said Campbell. “This guy was not stupid, he wasn’t impolite, he just wondered why, now that the protesters are there, why we weren’t taking down the government.”

Ultimately, part of the problem is that many people do not understand how the political process works, he said.

“They don’t understand how bills work, they don’t understand how the Senate relates to the

House of Commons,” said the Senator.

## Improving policing solutions

Farber said there’s a need for police to have active, dedicated anti-hate units.

“I’ve been singing this song for a long time,” he said. Farber noted there are some police forces that have units dedicated to bicycle theft, but not to hate crimes.

“We don’t have a dedicated unit based simply on understanding the most pernicious form of human behaviour, and that is hatred towards your fellow human being,” he said.

“Unless authorities begin training units dedicated specifically to understanding criminal hatred, we don’t even have the tools to deal with what’s going to happen in the future,” he said.

Laidlaw disagreed with this approach, particularly when it comes to online hatred.

“A criminal law approach is time intensive, and it’s reserved for the most extreme cases,” she said.

“And it doesn’t really, on a day-to-day basis, deal with the wider problem that we’re seeing. I mean, it wouldn’t matter. If we resourced police officers more tomorrow and provided them with training, it’s still not going to put even a tiny dent into what is happening to politicians out there,” she said.

In early 2019, Wernick provided testimony to the Justice

Committee where he noted his “worry about my country right now” and his concern for where Canadian politics is headed.

“I worry about the rising tide of incitements to violence when people use terms like ‘treason’ and ‘traitor’ in open discourse,” said Wernick at the time. “Those are the words that lead to assassination. I’m worried that somebody is going to be shot in this country this year during the political campaign.”

But how to resolve the issue of worsening hate and harassment isn’t simply a question of security, he said—which is difficult to provide for 338 MPs, 105 Senators, and thousands of judges, all of whom are spread across the country.

Part two of *The Hill Times’* three-part series last week ex-



University of Ottawa professor Nomi Claire Lazar is not particularly optimistic that ‘things are fixable.’ Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn

## Survey results: what can be done to combat hate and harassment in federal politics

In a poll by Forum Research for *The Hill Times*, all sitting MPs were asked about their own personal experiences with hate and harassment and what they thought needed to happen to quell the toxicity. Not all agreed to have their name published, but some did. These are some of their responses.

Liberal MPs John Aldag (Cloverdale-Langley City, B.C.) acknowledged there is no easy answer, pointing out that any potential solutions “will be controversial.”

Liberal MP Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, N.B.) said politicians must be held accountable for their own role in perpetuating toxic politics.

“As Parliamentarians, we must deal in facts and truths, avoid hyperbole and polarization,” said Atwin. “We also need to go after misinformation and hate speech in a more concrete way. We need to build trust in our institutions, our democracy and our elected leaders,” she said.

Liberal MP Ken Hardie (Fleetwood-Port Kells, B.C.) took a square shot at the strategy behind the development of social media algorithms, which give “prominence to negativity and anger.”

“There needs to be work done with those who own and operate social media platforms to change this ... short of regulations preferably ... and a shift made to dialogue and finding common ground,” he said.

Independent MP Kevin Vuong (Spadina-Fort York, Ont.) said “currently, what is deemed disinformation is defined at an individual company basis, as well as what is considered the appropriate response and action.”

“This inconsistent approach is opaque and unclear. It is further exploited by bad actors to further advance conspiracy theories of bias and favouritism,” wrote Vuong. “We need a transnational definition and co-ordinated response that will hold industry (e.g. social media platforms) to a shared standard that is transparent and consistently applied.”

One MP who did not want to be identified said there was a need for more education on ideologically motivated violent extremism, as well as “more education on what is conspiratorial and patently false

information versus information that can be trusted.”

Another noted the need to “improve the level of discourse,” and “take online harassment seriously.”

In a response provided in French, one MP said that “hate in all its forms must be reduced” and that “among the best ways to reduce it are transparency and truth.”

“If people feel like their elected officials are lying to them and/or hiding information from them, then those people feel like they’ve been betrayed, discredited, etc.,” wrote the MP. “These negative feelings lead to others and it snowballs.”

They added that elected officials who take the time to listen “[for real!] to citizens, to validate their feelings with them, to validate the information they have and [don’t have] would make citizens feel not only listened to, but also respected.”

“Respect calls for respect,” they wrote.

With recent upticks in hate incidents, one MP called for “more co-ordination and sharing of threats and incidents toward multiple MPs, security available for spouses/children, calling out political messages that deliberately stoke fear/hatred/disinformation, and accountability and consequences for perpetrators.”

They also called for a stronger acknowledgment that “harassing an elected official is a unique kind of offence that requires a response even if it does not reach the threshold of criminal activity (i.e., driving around an MP’s home revving truck engines is not a crime, so police do nothing, even though in certain contexts it is clearly intended to intimidate).”

“There needs to be something between doing nothing or calling 911, i.e., extra police patrols, warnings, documentation, tracking patterns over multiple events to see if there is escalation or possible links between otherwise unconnected and seemingly minor incidents, etc.”

“There need to be processes to protect personal information of MPs (like home addresses) which now are available to the public during elections by law,” they said.

One MP also suggested Canadian politicians stop “importing issues from the United States for political gain, especially when not relevant in the Canadian context.”

Finally, the MP said being able to “‘agree to disagree’ and have respectful discourse” is an important part of contending with these issues.