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The 'Freedom Convoy' and the First Nations' experience: setting the record straight

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Isg Senator Mary Jane McCallum and Grand Chief Arlen Dumas

Throughout the short history of settler colonialism in our country of Canada, First Nations have endured various types and degrees of genocide at the hands of **federal** and provincial policy. Despite the hardships unduly faced, our people never looked at overthrowing or overriding government. Although First Nations continue to advocate for their right to autonomy as accorded them through treaties with the Crown, we would never subscribe to treason within our own country.

How, then, did this conversation of usurping or dissolving the government enter into the one-sided conversation of "freedom" displayed by the "Freedom Convoy" protesters and why is there so much support from various government officials? This is an interjurisdictional health crisis that is made more complex by the international considerations of truckers coming across the border at land crossings. As such, solutions and responsibilities must involve both levels of government working together. The health and well-being of our citizens should not take a backseat to partisan posturing.

"Whether it's beheading the statue of Queen Victoria in Manitoba ... whether it's burning churches, whether it's wearing blackface, whether it's Hezbollah flags or Nazi flags, we all condemn this." These remarks, made by **Candice Bergen**, the interim leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, are an attempt to deflect the issue, inconceivably and once again, onto First Nations by tying in protests led by First Nations. The catalyst, activity, and intent of Indigenous protests are vastly different from the current convoy's protests being held across the country and the two have nothing in common. To attempt to link or intertwine the two is a great disservice to First Nations, as well as a demonstration that there exists a fundamental lack of knowledge and awareness of the ongoing reality of First Nations in Canada as we continue to try to heal and flourish, despite the barriers we must face.

In a further attempt to use the ongoing convoy protests as a wedge between First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadians, there has been rhetoric linking these protests to the history of blockades by First Nations across Canada.

First Nations have had no other recourse than to use blockades. They have been deployed as a last resort after a long and complex history of oppressive policy and **legislation** that has its roots in colonialism and the Indian Act—an oppressive piece of **legislation** that dictates much of the lives of First Nations in Canada. The First Nations' experience is not one shared by these protesters. The hardships faced are not the same. The oppression endured is not the same. Let us not confuse these issues lest we continue to further harm First Nations by demeaning and devaluing their historical and ongoing lived experience.

It is also worth noting that not all protests are met equally by the law. Blockades utilized by First Nations are frequently met with the brutality and full force of armed police and the **RCMP**. However, as occurred with Louis Riel and the Mohawks at Oka, there have also been bigger stands for self-determination and self-governance. We salute them for their strength and determination in standing strong for the right reasons.

Yet the ongoing protests, with the stated goal of overriding government, are being met with a more passive police response. Why has the rule of law been applied unevenly in these two instances? Protesters blowing horns all day and night and not allowing people to sleep is a form of torture against vulnerable residents. Sleep deprivation is traditionally used by torturers around the world. This is not freedom of expression.

From the remarks marrying First Nations' protests with what is occurring in Ottawa, to the different responses these protests are met with, we must acknowledge that racism will always live, insidiously, among us. Yet, First Nations will not be intimidated into silence or idly accept false narratives thrust upon us. We will continue to give voice and speak out. We are not alone and we thank our allies who stand beside us, for we know that peace is always best for this great and magnificent country called

Canada.

Senator Mary Jane McCallum (Manitoba) and Grand Chief Arlen Dumas is chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC).

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