THE WAR ON WOKE AND THE (HOMEGROWN) BACKLASH AGAINST DEI IN CANADA

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U.S. President Donald Trump's outright assault on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is one of the hallmark features of his second presidency. The first barrage of executive orders – issued in the early days and weeks after his January inauguration – terminated all federal DEI programs, suspended public servants in those offices, revoked President Lyndon B. Johnson's executive order from 1965 that prohibited discriminatory hiring practices for federal contractors, recognized male and female as the only two sexes, and threatened to investigate private sector DEI initiatives for compliance. A second wave pledged commitments to "ending radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling," "keeping men out of women's sports," "eradicating anti-Christian bias," "designating English as the official language of the United States," and "restoring truth and sanity to American history."

Though only a few of President Trump's executive orders primarily focus on DEI, his administration's anti-DEI agenda permeates many of his directives, initiatives, threats, and reprimands. DEI's undoing in the United States has been a long-term strategy of conservative activists seeking to reverse the legislative victories of the civil rights movement,

who, until recently, had taken their fight against voting rights and affirmative action to the courts. Project 2025, a policy agenda devised by a coalition of conservative organizations, called for ending DEI programs, policies, and mandates across a range of federal departments and ancillary contracts, rules, regulations, and grants. Nearly all the recommendations from conservative activist Chris Rufo's (2025) Counterrevolution Blueprint, which recommends that "the U.S. should strip left-wing racialism from the federal government and recommit the country to the principle of color-blind equality," were implemented within the first two months of the second Trump presidency. The United States Department of Education launched an "End DEI" online portal for members of the public to report "concerning practices" of DEI in local schools and school districts with a press release that quoted Tiffany Justice, the co-founder of the right-wing organization Moms for Liberty, which has successfully advocated for book bans and against LGBTQ rights across the country (USDOE 2025). In a matter of months, President Trump has accomplished what Republican activists have sought for decades.

This is not simply a backlash against progressive social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, both of which gained prominence during the first Trump administration. Instead, it is a conservative counterrevolution, and at its core is the belief that certain political institutions have been ideologically captured by the left. "Ideological capture" is a process that conservatives believe has taken decades. It accelerated during the Obama presidency, undoubtedly because of what the first Black President represented to his supporters and detractors alike, and was cauterized while Joe Biden sat in the Oval Office. The underlying claim concerning ideological capture is that "left-wing race, gender, and woke ideology" is deeply embedded in the "deep state" of the federal public service, especially in policy areas pertaining to health and human services, education, the arts, justice, and labour; that higher education is a bastion of left-wing intolerance where liberals guard and control the task of indoctrinating the next generation of elites; and that "radical woke ideology" permeates all government business, from the procurement of contracts and the funding of research to foreign aid to the mundane daily tasks of government bureaucrats, such that extraordinary state action is required to undo and reset American institutions so they are stripped of the system of left-wing patronage.

The effects of this iteration of conservative redesign are predictable, because we have been here before; this is a 21st-century version of 19th- and 20th-century patterns. When Black Lives Matter gained widespread support in the summer of 2020, some argued it was a Third Reconstruction (Joseph 2022). Much like the period of Reconstruction following the U.S. Civil War, and the civil rights movement's challenge to racial segregation in the 1960s, this was a moment of upheaval, in which Black Americans and their allies demanded a new, more inclusive and egalitarian formulation of American democracy. And just as before, these movements for and moments of racial justice have now been overthrown by a revival of the period of Redemption, in which regressive forces deploy the power of the state to rewrite American history, resuscitate racial and gendered hierarchies that were damaged but not destroyed, and revert to a deeply unequal status quo.

In Canada, we are beginning to witness direct spill-over effects from the tsunami of anti-DEI attacks from the executive branch. Canadian researchers with American-funded grants have been asked by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget if their work is connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion, includes issues related to climate or environmental justice, or whether it takes "appropriate measures to protect women and to defend against gender ideology" (Friesen 2025). In addition, rumblings in Corporate Canada suggest that there is pressure to align business priorities with Trump's anti-DEI crusade, or to otherwise rebrand, roll back, or eliminate DEI programming (Thompson 2025; Williams 2025).

But Canadians are not simply reacting to the happenings south of the border. A rising tide of homegrown, locally inflected, inextricably Canadian anti-DEI sentiment is already upon us.

The Freedom Convoy, which seized downtown Ottawa in January and February 2022, was an early symptom of a peculiarly Canadian politics of grievance. Initially a protest against the COVID-19 vaccine mandates, the convoy was galvanized by an appeal to freedom from government overreach and an intense hatred of then-Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The Canadian Anti-Hate Network's (2022) reporting on convoy organizers also revealed histories of Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism and incitements to violence. The convoy was an early and extreme outburst that represented a wider sentiment – the "left" had gone too far, not just in its approach to managing the pandemic, but also in its concessions to "social justice warriors," its weaponization of cancel culture, its haughty elitism. According to a report commissioned by the Public Policy Forum, young Canadians identified COVID-19 vaccines and public health policies as the most polarizing issue in the country, followed closely followed by politics and the role of government, race and racism, human rights, equity and access issues, and gender and sexual identity (Ling 2023, 24).

A more specific targeting of DEI was bound to follow. In November 2024, the Standing Committee on Science and Research heard from several professors about how DEI narrows the talent pipeline seeking federal research funding. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre agreed with controversial culture warrior Jordan Peterson's claim that racism had been imported to Canada from the United States, arguing that Canadians should abandon hyphenated identities and must "put aside race, this obsession with race that wokeism has reinserted." The Conservative Party's campaign strategy in the April 2025 election was to increase the salience of those issues that define the so-called culture wars (Kaufmann 2024), though the resignation of Trudeau, whom Conservatives dutifully dub as "woke," threw a wrench in those and other campaign plans.

Because the backlash was incubated elsewhere but bred in Canada, it is both inflicted with Canadian cultural moorings and facilitated (or obstructed) by Canadian political institutions. Take the nature of ideological polarization, a key battlefield in any contemporary manifestation of the culture wars, as an example. In the United States, the vast literature on affective polarization suggests that the growing emotional, social, and political distance between political party elites and their supporters can make it more challenging to build bipartisan

consensus and lower trust in political institutions and democratic processes (Shah 2025). Democratic norms such as institutional forbearance and mutual toleration (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) emerge from the tension between conflict and consensus, and democratic institutions must enable political elites to balance the former while building the latter. Unlike Americans, however, there's mixed evidence that Canadians are becoming more ideologically polarized. Richard Johnston (2023) demonstrates that while Canadians' feelings toward political parties have become more polarized, these sentiments are not necessarily negative. Moreover, the way that ideological partisanship has become akin to a form of identity politics in the United States simply doesn't resonate in the Canadian context.

When Trump took office in 2016 and popular scholarship scrambled to explain white working-class resentment (Hochschild 2016; Vance 2016; Metzl 2019) and the tide of right-wing populism that swept the globe, public support for immigration and multiculturalism remained consistently high in Canada. Often referred to as "Canadian exceptionalism," political scientists argued that Canada avoided the trend that led to Brexit and the election of President Trump because of geographic happenstance, distinct immigration, citizenship, and multicultural policy regimes, and the configuration of the electoral system (Banting and Kymlicka 2010; Bloemraad 2012, Triadafilopoulos and Taylor 2021).

The consensus surrounding Canadian exceptionalism is now fracturing. International students were somehow scapegoated as bearing responsibility for the country's housing affordability crisis as it came into sharp public focus in 2023. The Liberals responded to public pressure by capping international student visas and reducing immigration targets. Although President Trump's more recent call for Canada to become "the 51st state" and the tariffs he has imposed on Canadian imports are deeply unpopular with the vast majority of Canadians, only 45 per cent of Canadians dislike his executive order that bans anyone who is not biologically female at birth from participating in women's sports and approximately 76 per cent of Conservative voters and 49 percent of Liberal voters like the decision (Kishchuk 2025).

Trump's attacks on Canada's economy and sovereignty have, at least temporarily, unified Canadians and bolstered Liberal support ahead of April's election, in which the Mark Carney-led party won a minority mandate with a slim advantage over the Conservatives in the national popular vote. Only time will tell the extent to which the war on woke – whether homegrown or borrowed from the United States – will turn anti-DEI backlash into regressive public policies.

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