

*At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect*



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## Putting “emergency” in context: Leah Gazan on the introduction of the Emergencies Act

Introduction by Adele Perry and Kiera Ladner<sup>[1]</sup>

Speech by Leah Gazan (Members of Parliament, House of Commons of Canada)

### Introduction



A group of protestors at the Freedom Convoy in Toronto on Feb 5th, 2022. Copyright by GoToVan (2022). <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gotovan/51864362418/>

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On 20 February 2022, Leah Gazan, Member of Parliament for Winnipeg Centre, rose in the Canada's House of Parliament and delivered a powerful speech on the dangers posed by white supremacist organizing, represented most clearly by what was then an almost month-long occupation of downtown Ottawa by the self-styled "freedom convoy."

Gazan's speech, which we have reproduced in full here, is many things: a prescient naming of the rise of a new kind of right wing populism in Canada; a critique of federal, provincial and municipal inaction in the face of this, not to mention the noise, disruption and harassment of downtown residents in Ottawa and elsewhere; a call for continued care and action in response to a pandemic which is not over; a reminder to the minority federal government that third-party support for the Emergency Act was offered cautiously, and that parliamentarians like Gazan will watch for any sign of over reach.

The Emergency Act was passed on 21 February, with a vote of 185 MPs in support, and 151 in opposition. It was withdrawn five days later with the approval of the Governor General.<sup>[2]</sup> The extent to which Ottawa in February 2022 justified the introduction of the Emergency Act, or whether this Act will avoid the heavy-handed retraction of basic legal rights that characterized the use of its predecessor the War Measures Act.<sup>[3]</sup>

How history will remember and analyse the use of the Emergency Act in February 2022 remains to be seen. Gazan's speech stands on its own as an act of truth-telling, one that continues a long history of radical, generative politics from Winnipeg Centre and/or Winnipeg North Centre and articulates it in a changing context. The riding is not far from where the Red River Resistance of 1869-70 challenged the expansion of Canada's settler project in the name of Metis nationhood, governance, language and land rights. It is a little farther from the Stone Fort where the first of the numbered treaties was negotiated in 1871. Winnipeg Centre is farther east from where the Northwest Rebellion would be fought in 1885, and where the powers of Canada's federal government to crush and contain Indigenous resistance would be made clear.

The city of Winnipeg that was incorporated in 1874 worked hard to define itself as a settler space in the decades that followed. It was within It was the context of an ambitious, settler city that an earlier generation of Winnipeg Centre MP's used their platform to offer a vision of radicalism that was both within and outside of modern, settler Canada. From 1921 until his death in 1942, the riding was often represented by James Shaver Woodsworth, socialist, cleric, writer, and leader of the Winnipeg General Strike.<sup>[4]</sup> With a brief break in the mid-twentieth-century,

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Stanley Knowles represented the riding from 1942 until 1984, bridging the history that saw the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation renamed the New Democratic Party. Cyril Keeper was elected to represent Winnipeg Centre in 1984, becoming what was likely the tenth Indigenous person elected as an MP anywhere in Canada.<sup>[5]</sup> Judy Wasylycia-Leis was elected in 1997, and served until 2004. She was the first woman to represent the riding, a fact that reminds us that expectations of women's increasing presence in federal – and provincial and municipal – politics are belied by a process of change that is at best uneven and at worst glacial.<sup>[6]</sup> Electoral politics have also been and remain a complicated space for Indigenous people, whether as voters or representatives.<sup>[7]</sup> Winnipeg Centre is unusual among southern, urban ridings in that it has been represented by at least three Indigenous MPs: Keeper, Robert Falcon Ouellette (2015-2019), and Gazan (2019-present).

Gazan's speech carries these long histories of radical, Indigenous and women's politics that have, in one way or another and at one time or another, come to rest in Winnipeg Centre, and also takes them in distinctly new directions. Gazan's mother was Lakota-Chinese and a survivor of Canada's assault on Indigenous families and communities; her father was a Dutch Jew and Holocaust survivor. Gazan describes herself as "a descendant of genocides from different parts of our globe."<sup>[8]</sup> In her February 20 speech Gazan spoke about local inequalities, tracing her lineage to Idle No More but and its challenge to a Canada build on a sustained colonialism and white supremacy, and separating her western Canadian politics from those of right-wing, white supremacist organizing, whether in Winnipeg Centre, Ottawa, or Cypress Hills.

In this speech, Gazan speaks from these histories, and from the particular context of Winnipeg Centre. This riding includes the Forks from which this project draws its name. This is a place that is home to long histories of protest and activism, and a lived present of both poverty and possibility. We are honoured to reproduce Gazan's speech in full here.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Speech

Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member of Parliament for Windsor West.

Let me start by saying that we should not be having this debate today. The fact that this legislation is being contemplated, let alone invoked, is a failure of leadership at all levels of government to respond adequately to clear threats to national security and our very own democracy.

These threats are posed by con men and white nationalist leaders, including Pat King, an avowed white supremacist, who was quoted as saying that “the Anglo-Saxon race” has “the strongest bloodlines” and that “unless we fight back, we will be all speaking Hebrew”, a man who, according to *Moose Jaw Today*, appeared in a video receiving support from the member of Parliament for Cypress Hills—Grasslands; B.J. Dichter, known for his Islamophobic rants during the 2019 election as a candidate for the People's Party of Canada; and James Bauder, part of Canada Unity, who produced and proposed a memorandum of understanding demanding that the Governor General and the Senate rescind public health measures or force the government to resign en masse, which is a violation of our Constitution and a direct attack on our democracy and our institutions. In addition, there is the infiltration of former security experts, military personnel and police who have been key strategists in this illegal occupation, including an intelligence expert for the Canadian centre for intelligence and security studies and a former RCMP officer who was part of the Prime Minister's security detail.

This is a colossal failure of national security and the complete failure of the government to keep not only Ottawa but the whole country safe from a well-organized, well-funded extremist movement. We should not be here, but the reality is that we are here. While we are here, it is important for us to tell some hard truths about what is happening to our country and to our democracy.

When I say I am concerned about the health of our democracy, I do not only mean at a surface level. Yes, I am alarmed that we were not able to meet in this place on Friday and to do our work that people elected us to do, but it goes much deeper than that. I am concerned that an illegal occupation, supported in part by anonymous foreign funding, has brought our nation's capital to its knees, while smaller occupations throughout Canada, including in Winnipeg Centre,

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have subjected residents to days of sonic torture and harassment. I am concerned that neighbours are turning against neighbours and even family members are turning against family members. This division is being fuelled by the current government and members of the official opposition. I am deeply concerned that instead of acting responsibly in the middle of a national crisis, some members of the official opposition are openly fanning the flames, cheering on an occupation whose leaders have expressed a desire to overthrow the democratically elected government of this country.

What we have witnessed over the last weeks is not a peaceful protest nor is it even a protest. I have been a part of movements for justice, including Idle No More, that have sought to advance human rights and real reconciliation. These movements are based in love and a respect for people and mother earth. There were no guns, threats of overthrowing the government, killing police officers and messages of vile hate. There is no comparison between Idle No More and an occupation that has featured widespread harassment of residents and workers; threatening of journalists; firearms hitting Coutts, Alberta blockades; and self-appointed leaders who have spewed racist and xenophobic hate.

I am also a strong supporter of public health measures, mandates which have been demonized by the official opposition members, that save lives. They have been particularly important in protecting people with disabilities, those with compromised immune systems and folks with underlying conditions.

We cannot forget those who are most at risk from COVID and the omicron variant as we begin easing restrictions, nor health care workers throughout this country who have sacrificed everything to save lives.

The real divide in this country is not between those who are pro-mandates and anti-mandates; It is between the wealthy elite and everyone else. We can look at what has happened during the pandemic. Essential workers have kept our communities going, serving food, taking care of seniors and loved ones, looking after our kids and healing the sick, and at the same time, some of the largest corporations have made a killing while treating these very same workers as disposable. We can take Loblaws, owned by Galen Weston, a billionaire whose family is the third richest in Canada. Loblaws saw a 26% increase in its profits, in its latest quarter, to \$431 million, yet it still refuses to bring back the \$2-an-hour pandemic pay increase it snatched away from its workers in June 2020. At Amazon, owned by Jeff Bezos, the third-wealthiest person in the world, two of their Brampton warehouses were ordered to close because of major COVID

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outbreaks due to a lack of safety precautions and working conditions that one worker likened to a hell, with minimal personal protective equipment and virtually no social distancing.

This brings me back to the illegal occupation. I have said it before, and I will say it again: This convoy is a fraud. Its lead organizers claim to represent workers, human rights, peace and love, but are, in fact, deeply hostile to the working class and have direct and close ties to hate groups. It is a dangerous movement that has been allowed to get out of control by a federal government that failed to pay attention and certain official opposition party members who not only supported but fuelled its fire, and the minimization of the threat we are faced with, the radicalization of individuals into white nationalist movements. It is backed by members of the ultra-wealthy, including Elon Musk, the richest man on earth, who will not let his workers form a union; Donald Trump, the disgraced former President of the United States and someone who was praised by the interim leader of the Conservative Party; and a number of wealthy Canadian elites who have made five-figure donations to this illegal occupation.



A counter-protest in response to the Freedom Convoy in Winnipeg. Copyright by Sharon Johnson (2022)

I ask members: Would real working-class movements be supported by such people? Of course they would not be. The public cannot let those with wealth and power distract them from the real reasons their lives are getting harder. They cannot let anyone shift the blame away from their corporate landlord who refuses to make essential repairs, from their boss who freezes their wages while inflation eats away at their paycheque, or the credit card company that takes federal money while charging them exorbitant interest rates. We must fight against all forms of oppression, inequality and inequity, and that takes a functioning democracy.



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I also want to say to members of the government that we will be watching carefully. If there is any hint of overreach or any indication that these measures we are debating today are no longer necessary, we have been clear that they cannot count on our support. Our party fully supports the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's call for review of what has happened, and we expect a thorough and full public inquiry to identify systemic gaps in governance and policing that have resulted in this crisis.

Equally as important, we will be holding the government accountable to help countless individuals in Canada who were struggling before the pandemic and are finding life even more difficult almost two years after it began. This suffering is causing alienation and despair, which is fuelling the rise of extremist and anti-democratic movements. As we move beyond this illegal occupation, we must shift our focus to raising the living standards of millions of people, so we can replace that despair with hope. We will never stop fighting to make lives better, and we will never stop fighting to defend our democracy.

### Acknowledgement

The original speech was delivered on February 20, 2022. We thank Leah Gazan and Peyton Veitch for permission to reproduce. We also thank GoToVan and Sharon Johnson for permission to feature their photographs.

### About the Author



#### **Leah Gazan MP**

Leah Gazan is the NDP Member of Parliament for Winnipeg Centre. As a community leader, educator, advisor, and media contributor, Leah Gazan has been deeply engaged with issues and organizing in Winnipeg's core for nearly three decades and has spent her life advocating for human rights on the local, national, and international stage. She is currently the NDP Critic for Children, Families, and Social Development, as well as the Deputy Critic for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship. Leah is also known as a prominent local organizer, including being one of Winnipeg's leads during Idle No More and co-founder of the #WeCare campaign, aimed at building public support to end violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-spirit.

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Leah is a member of Wood Mountain Lakota Nation, located in Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory.



### **Adele Perry**

[Dr. Adele Perry](#) is director of the Centre for Human Rights Research and distinguished professor of history and women's and gender studies. She is a historian of colonialism, gender, race and western Canada in the 19th and 20th centuries. From 2003 to 2014, Perry held a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair and she is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and past president of the Canadian Historical Association.



### **Kiera Ladner**

Political scientist [Dr. Kiera Ladner](#) holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous politics and governance. Her research project on constitutional reconciliation examines the potential for political reconciliation between Indigenous nations and the settler state, given the long history of injustice, discrimination, oppression, domination, regime replacement and the (attempted) destruction of nations. Dr. Ladner has also developed [Mamawipawin](#) – a space for community-based research with Indigenous Peoples.

## Notes

[1] Thank you to Shayna Plaut and Cassie Dong for their work on this.

[2] See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-event-feb23-1.6361847>

[3] On this, see Dominique Clement, "The October Crisis of 1970: Human Rights Abuses Under the War Measures Act," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2008, pp. 160–86, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.42.2.160>.

[4] On Woodsworth, see *Human Welfare, Rights, and Social Activism: Rethinking the Legacy of J.S. Woodsworth*, ed. Jane Pulkingham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

[5] This is from the list available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_indigenous\\_Canadian\\_politicians#House\\_of\\_Commons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_indigenous_Canadian_politicians#House_of_Commons), accessed 17 March 2022.

[6] <https://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/women-politics/>, accessed 23 February 2022.

[7] See Chadwick Cowie, "A Vote for Canada or Indigenous Nationhood? The complexities of First Nations, Metis and Inuit Participation in Canadian politics," *The Conversation*, 1



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November 2021, <https://theconversation.com/a-vote-for-canada-or-indigenous-nationhood-the-complexities-of-first-nations-metis-and-inuit-participation-in-canadian-politics-169312>. Information for Winnipeg Centre and Winnipeg North Centre can be found at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winnipeg\\_North\\_Centre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winnipeg_North_Centre)[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winnipeg\\_North\\_Centre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winnipeg_North_Centre)

[8] “Tragedies and Triumphs: Canadian family history,” 21 July 2017, <https://www.therecord.com/life/2017/07/21/tragedies-and-triumphs-canadian-family-histories.html>

[9] Watch the original video of Leah Gazan’s speech on [YouTube](#) or [Twitter](#)