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‘I’m real, not you’: Roles and discourses of trans exclusionary women’s and feminist movements in anti-gender and right-wing populist politics

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative inquiry concerning the rise in visibility, relevance, and power of trans exclusionary women’s and feminist movements in Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) between 2015 and 2022.¹ It focuses on two case studies concerning trans rights: the successful campaign for Bill C-16 in Canada, and failed reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in the UK. In both cases, key streams within trans exclusionary women’s and feminist movements increasingly engage in collaborative action with right-wing populist-centered anti-gender coalitions, which include right-wing religious, conservative, and right-wing extremist actors, from approximately 2016. It argues that a key role of women’s and feminist actors in these coalitions is to help legitimize, amplify, and give meaning to anti-gender and right-wing populist appeals and, therein, the politics of exclusion they promote. This occurs in part, it is argued, through symbolic appeals concerning authenticity and the non-materiality of trans lives; the promotion of narratives concerning conflicts in rights; and the provision of strong imagery, narrative, and emotional appeals concerning threat. These broad developments have had various important effects. In the UK, the combination of so-called ‘radical’ as well as ‘traditional’ actors within anti-gender coalitions, has been critical in challenging progress towards trans and broader (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Intersex, and Queer) LGBTIQ+ rights. In Canada, although anti-gender movements have enjoyed less policy success during this period, women’s and feminist actors have helped popularize and provide legitimacy to wider coalitions.

Keywords

Anti-gender politics, Right-wing populism, Trans rights, Feminism, Social movements, United Kingdom, Canada

¹ This article uses the term trans exclusionary women’s and feminist movements to denote the broad set of actors who engage in campaigns contesting trans rights, through appeals to feminism, or women’s rights or protection. It does not use the term trans exclusionary radical feminist, because not all these actors belong to a radical feminist tradition or identify as feminists.

Introduction

Anti-gender politics represents a diverse set of efforts to frame the feminist theory of gender, and human rights-based and evidence-based discussions around gender and LGBTIQ+ equality, as expressions of a sinister ‘gender ideology’ (House, 2022). Academic literature over the past decade demonstrates the profound impact of anti-gender politics on churches, social movements, political parties, and states, particularly since the 2010s (Paternotte, 2023). Few contexts have been left untouched by its effects (Corrêa, Paternotte, & House, 2024). Key texts acknowledge how the idea of ‘gender ideology’ functions as an empty signifier (Mayer & Sauer, 2017) into which various causes and symbolic appeals can be linked together. Key targets have included sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality, children’s rights, and measures against hate speech and discrimination (Kuhar & Paternotte, (Eds.), 2017; Corrêa (Ed.), 2020). It is well-established that anti-gender mobilizations are, in many instances, linked closely to right-wing populist politics (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018); they often fuel and are fueled by one other, providing mutual ‘opportunistic synergy’ (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). These are forces and processes that, across various cases, also intersect with those of de-democratization (Corrêa & Parker, 2020).

From 2020, researchers have begun to document increased involvement of women’s and feminist actors in anti-gender and wider regressive politics in various contexts from the mid-2010s, often with particularly negative impacts on trans rights. This includes, in the US (Lorber & Greenesmith, 2021), Spain and Italy (Obst, 2020; Bojanic, Abadía, & Moro, 2021), Japan (Shimizu, 2020), Brazil (ABIA et al., 2021; Benevides, 2021), and Sweden (Alm & Engebretsen, 2020: p.51). In the UK, researchers have also documented convergences between trans exclusionary women’s and feminist actors and right-wing conservative and religious groups, and with racist and colonial constructions of difference and threat (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020). These dynamics draw on deeper trends within Anglophone radical feminist social and intellectual movements, notably those equating trans people with allegations of violence against (cisgender) women, appropriation of (cisgender) women’s bodies, and artifice, which date to the late 1970s (ibid: pp.682-684).

More broadly, it is not unusual for radical feminist social movements, with whom trans exclusionary feminist groups have historically overlapped (particularly in Anglophone contexts), to form alignments with right-wing conservative and religious actors. In the US, for example, this has been the case in the 1980s around issues of pornography, and in the mid-1990s around issues of child abuse, and violence against women (Whittier, 2018). Feminist scholars of right-wing movements have also forged a rich toolkit for understanding how some women’s rights or protection actors may be mobilized to support far-right, military authoritarian, and nationalist outcomes (e.g., Blee, 1991; Gonzalez-Rivera & Kampwirth (Eds.), 2001; Farris, 2017). Indeed, one thing this literature already gives us, is a sense of the normalcy of discourses concerning women’s rights, and particularly women’s protection, being mobilized to support regressive outcomes in certain contexts. Another thing, however, that remains to be theorized is the precise relationships between the mobilization of trans exclusionary women’s and feminist groups, anti-gender movements, and right-wing populism. This brief comparative inquiry addresses this gap.

Theoretical framework

This article first observes that it is right-wing populism that provides the most compelling condition and driver for streams within evolving trans exclusionary women’s and feminist movements to move into coalition with wider right-wing centered anti-gender forces, in both the Canadian and UK cases since the mid-2010s; coalitions which also include wider streams embracing right-wing conservative, right-wing extremist, and religious right actors. As these coalitions grow, it is argued, they come to resemble the ‘hydra’ formation of anti-gender organizing that Sonia Corrêa has identified (as quoted in Murray, 2022: p.3247). Corrêa describes this as like ‘a creature with many moveable heads that go in very different

directions, apparently operating independently from each other and quite often feeding in contradictory ideological sources' but which are 'part of the same animal that, as whole, moves in the same direction and is highly adaptable to context' (Murray, 2022: p.3247). She notes that this makes it very difficult for observers and analysts to 'grasp what the animal is' (ibid). Wider empirical evidence (GATE, 2022) suggests that actors within different parts of these formations, or who contest their campaigns, may also have a limited line of sight over the wider constellations they engage with.²

As these constellations are forged, we also see more incentives, wider opportunities to come together in the same spaces, and greater potential for ideological resonances to be perceived, felt, and acted upon by otherwise ideologically opposed actors. In turn, some actors aligned with women's and feminist movements, who have historically tended to play the role of adversaries or, at times, collaborative adversaries³ with right-wing religious, conservative, or extremist actors, start to move into a closer model of coordinated action which involves them. This involves: 1) a narrowing of broader feminist platforms into an articulation that is increasingly, primarily, about anti-gender politics; 2) the emergence of shared collective action and identity frames; 3) increased instances of direct and routine collaboration between actors and streams within different movements; 4) changing profile of actors, including the entry of an increasing number of right-wing and conservative actors (and the exit of others) as mobilizations gain resources, access, and momentum; and 5) ideological congruence.

Additionally, as right-wing populist metanarratives increasingly shape politics and society, traditional frames such as those between right and left continue to provide meaning in social movement and wider societal spaces. But they are also joined with new, increasingly shared, right-wing populist frames, which invoke but also supplant the older frames, with increasingly resonant binary oppositions. For example, those opposing real and not real, the people and the elites, the local and the global, us and them, and the material and the ideal or post-material.

As the case studies will also help illustrate, such mobilizations also repeatedly bring into coalition or co-optation a set of actors who claim to be the legitimate and representative voice of real, regular, ordinary, material, or concrete women. This is aligned with what we know more broadly about anti-gender movements, especially as they have evolved to include more progressive-sounding appeals, such as to science, secularism, and human rights (Denkovski, Bernarding, & Linz, 2021). One thing that is also typical across cases, is that this move to inclusion and promotion within coalitions is often simultaneously a move to devaluation and expulsion. The promotion of such 'real', and morally and politically virtuous spokespersons for women's rights or protection within anti-gender coalitions, serves the function of promoting and legitimizing its version of anti-gender politics, whilst also disavowing and delegitimizing wider gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights campaigns, and the lives they make representational claims for; in turn framed as not real, not legitimate, not material. The discourses promoted do not say 'we are all real people'. They say: 'I'm real, not you'. Or, in Allison Phipps (2020) terms, they do not say 'me too'. They say: 'me, not you'.

For right-wing studies scholar Lawrence Rosenthal (2020), the ascendance of zero-sum logics that rights or needs are in necessary or natural conflict with one another, is also expressive of (indeed for Rosenthal, definitional to) contemporary right-wing populist appeals. In a recent paper, Rosenthal (2021) gives the example of US right-wing pundit, Tucker Carlson's formulation: 'Every time they import a new voter' Carlson says, 'I become

² This also opens a reflection that, whilst we can make normative political claims about responsibility for knowing and valuing the properly social context within which one takes political action, it is also possible for equity-seeking or otherwise progressively intentioned actors to be mobilized by anti-gender campaigns.

³ Wherein we may see similarities in some frames used, some limited policy alignment, and presence in the same influencing spaces (Whittier, 2018).

disenfranchised as a current voter'. A similar formulation is provided by UK feminist academic Kathleen Stock, whose July 2018 speech positions conflicts of interest between two groups as an essential(ized) feature of political life:

'One focus in my writing is on possible conflicts of interest between two groups – *on the one hand biological females, and on the other hand self-identifying trans women*. Now conflicts of interest between political groups happen as a standard feature of political life.' (Stock, 2018, 1'59'', author's italics)

In many respects, this invocation of 'real women' (or 'biological females') at risk of being replaced by 'not real women' (or 'self-identified trans women') mirrors classic right-wing populist appeals to 'the people' and 'the elites' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Herein, the people are positioned as having valid, real, authentic, and material claims (so arrogantly dismissed, it is claimed, by liberal or left-wing elites to blame for their deteriorating conditions). Meanwhile, these antagonistic 'elites' are commonly framed as having claims that are inauthentic, invalid, not real, and not material.

Importantly, binaries concerning what is material and what is not material can involve claims about what is and is not important: about what matters. They can also take on meaning in the context of certain social movements and (associated) intellectual frameworks. As the case studies help illustrate, an interesting development is the increased transit of some traditionally left-wing actors who frame their own interests and needs, or that of their class, as 'real' and 'material' – whilst casting those of elite others as 'not real' or 'post-material' (or sometimes, as socially constructed, ideological, cultural, or expressive of identity politics) – towards positions within right-wing populist campaigns. Similar trends have been discussed in the case of traditional labor and class-based movements and constituencies which have resisted intersectional politics, which have been mobilized within right-wing populist coalitions in some contexts (e.g., Gusterson, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Additionally, as the case studies help us to understand, these trends have also affected people with worldviews shaped by (some) radical feminist, Marxist, and/or anti-postmodernist frameworks.⁴

Finally, trans exclusionary women's rights and feminist actors involved in these coalitions – by helping to popularize specific arguments, tropes, and fears concerning gender, sexuality, and culture – play an important role in generating symbols and wider imagery central to the storytelling and emotional appeals on which right-wing populist politics relies. As will be explored below, arguments repeatedly feature mythical, terrifying, and highly stereotyped portrayals, such as so-framed figures of predatory trans women, an elite 'transgender lobby', and the supposed 'gender ideology' (or 'transgender ideology') they uphold – pitched against more tangible images of vulnerable women and girls, in various concrete, everyday settings.

Portrayals like these have been elsewhere critiqued for their spurious and harmful nature, including their role in justifying exclusion (McLean, 2021), fueling and enacting stigma (Bailey & Jones, 2023), and generating exclusionary political capital (Phipps, 2020). In this case, the stringing together of isolated cases into a consistent, post-factual, script appears to play a central functional role in anti-gender and right-wing populist politics: it helps to people and portray 'the elite', plot the egregious harm allegedly done by those elites, and to ignite the resentment and contempt of 'the people' that drives mobilization, and which may serve to justify – indeed for some necessitate – exclusion or aggression. As in the case of racialized or ethnicized 'Others', so central also to right-wing populist and nationalist

⁴ Particularly those which rest on conceptual splitting of idealist and materialist conceptions of culture, politics, and history, and posit a role for ideology (or other concepts, such as backlash, post-feminism, post-modernism, or post-materialism) in obscuring enduring conditions of oppression.

scripts and scapegoating dynamics, these portrayals may serve to fuel a politics of fear, anger, and contempt amongst target audiences, and therein to drive and justify urgent calls to arms, including punitive and securitization responses (Wodak, 2015; Rosenthal, 2020; Phipps, 2021). These drivers and justifications are made possible, this article suggests finally, in part because trans lives function as not real, ideal, abstract, and – therein, once they do not *matter* – as a site for projection.

Methodology

The empirical material presented in this article focuses on flagship legal change efforts for trans communities in the UK and Canada. In Canada, research considers the passage of Bill C-16, concerning anti-discrimination measures. In the UK, it considers reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, concerning legal gender recognition. The cases happen at similar times in contexts shaped, to varying degrees, by national and international trends towards right-wing populist politics, particularly from 2016, including the rise of Trumpism in the US and the politics of Brexit in the UK. Yet, what makes them interesting cases to compare is that in Canada, right-wing populist politics had not, during the study period, been articulated into a successful national policy agenda. Whereas, in the UK, it has profoundly shaped the positions of key political parties, public policy, electoral campaigns, media narratives, public attitudes, and social movement frames.

Both case studies involved review of a range of primary and secondary documentary sources to develop a detailed account of the passage of legislation, including the involvement of actors connected to anti-gender campaigns. Texts consulted included transcripts of parliamentary proceedings, policy briefs, government reports, independent reviews, statements by policymakers and advocates, and campaigning materials. Each case also considers the role of trans exclusionary women's and feminist actors in policy influencing efforts, looking particularly at discourses used and identifying key themes through detailed qualitative coding. To support reproducibility, the scope of data coded is clearly specified and available in the public domain. Data gathering and analysis took place between November 2022 and August 2023.

The next sections consider the Canadian case and then the UK case. A conclusion follows which connects the empirical material and theoretical framework to broader discussions concerning LGBTIQ+ rights and feminism, social movements, and democracy.

Canada

Anti-gender politics has had a relatively limited influence on state policy in Canada during 2015-2022, in comparison with many other national contexts, including the UK.⁵ The federal Government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party of Canada since November 2015, has advanced a broadly inclusive policy agenda concerning gender equality and 2SLGBTIQ+ rights, even as there have been limitations.⁶ Flagship 2SLGBTIQ+ equality reforms have included the extension of federal anti-discrimination law to cover gender identity or expression (Bill C-16, passed 19 June 2017) and a new federal law banning so-called 'conversion therapy' (Bill C-4, passed 8 December 2021). Key gender equality reforms include the Pay Equity Act (December 2018), and the advancement of two major feminist mainstreaming frameworks: the Gender-Based Analysis Plus and the Feminist International

⁵ At the time of final submission of this article, in November 2023, there are clear signs this is changing. Key developments include blocks or rollbacks on trans rights provisions in provinces of New Brunswick (June 2023) and Saskatchewan (August 2023) and in the federal Conservative Party of Canada's policy platform (September 2023). In September 2023, a wave of nationwide 'One Million March for Children' campaigns, often invoking 'gender ideology', brought thousands of protestors to the streets. The influence of right-wing populist politics is evident in each instance and further research is needed on the role of trans exclusionary women's and feminist actors.

⁶ The term 2SLGBTIQ+ (Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, and Queer) is used when referring to communities in Canada.

Assistance Policy. In this context, anti-gender campaigns have most often appeared as part of social and political movements connected to right-wing populism.

It is in 2016 that we see the emergence of a first major flashpoint for anti-gender organizing in Canada, which brings together the different sub-streams we see in the contemporary Canadian anti-gender movement for the first time: contestation around Bill C-16. Now law, Bill C-16, proposed to add the terms ‘gender identity or expression’ to the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code, thereby extending federal anti-discrimination legislation. Opposition to Bill C-16 came, firstly, from actors traditionally opposed to 2SLGBTIQ+ rights: right-wing conservative and religious groups. For example, long-standing policy influencing groups the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) and REAL Women of Canada, both provided evidence at House of Commons Committee stages. In November 2012 and November 2016, REAL Women of Canada argued against proposed legislation in different iterations (C-279 and C-16 respectively) on almost identical grounds, using largely traditional conservative argumentation, including concern for the protection of women and children (Canada, Parliament, 2012 November 27; REAL Women of Canada 2016). In Summer 2016, ARPA also objected to Bill C-16 using traditional but also anti-gender argumentation (ARPA, 2016). For example, the briefing argues against a view of sex/gender as a ‘social construct’, rather than ‘one’s biological sex [which] is built into the DNA and sex hormones that shape a body’ (ARPA, 2016:1-2). It emphasizes, ‘the theory behind popular approaches to transgenderism today is not scientific – it is political’ and states:

‘Parents, the medical profession, churches and other community groups must have the freedom to address gender dysphoria in their families and communities without threat of enforced ideological conformity by the State.’ (ARPA, 2016: pp.2-6)

Shortly after, as the Bill was passing through its second reading, a set of less familiar actors deploying anti-gender discourse would make themselves known. On 27 September 2016, Canadian psychology professor, author, and digital influencer, associated with new right online ‘alternative influence networks’ (Lewis, 2018), Jordan Peterson, released a series of three lectures online. In the first of these, Peterson presented Bill C-16 as a frightening illustration of ‘political correctness and its dangerously totalitarian aspirations’ (Peterson, 2016). One of Peterson’s allegations was that Bill C-16 represented a form of ‘compelled speech’ that would require people to use people’s correct pronouns or face criminal charges. This argument was quickly discredited (for example, by the Canadian Bar Association, 2017 and Cossman, 2018). However, it still generated significant repercussion in Canadian media and public debate.

Peterson’s arguments, and their resonance with audiences, do not come out of thin air. For example, Peterson would later post reflections on the election of Donald Trump in the US on 8 November 2016 – several weeks after Peterson’s interventions concerning Bill C-16 – in which he repeats common right-wing populist tropes (Peterson, 2022). For example: the Right as victim;⁷ the betrayal of the working-class by powerful liberal elites;⁸ radical leftists seeking to destroy democracy;⁹ freedom of speech under threat;¹⁰ and all-

⁷ Peterson argues Trump was treated, during the campaign, ‘more despicably and unfairly and prejudicially by his political opponents than any US leader in living memory’ (Peterson, 2022: 13’06’’).

⁸ Peterson observes the Trump campaign capitalized on the ‘resentment festering among the working class who were so carelessly and foolishly and arrogantly abandoned by... the Democratic side under Hillary Clinton’ (Ibid, 2022: 11’35’’).

⁹ Peterson refers to ‘radical leftists who believe that everything should be burned to the ground – the Constitution, capitalism, tradition, identity’ (Ibid, 2022: 12’25’’).

¹⁰ Peterson decries Trump’s banning from Twitter as an ‘unpalatable and immoral broadside’ (Ibid, 2022: 13’54’’).

powerful globalists.¹¹ As a study from Rebecca Lewis (2018) helps us understand, Peterson and his networks and audiences, form part of an emerging ‘alternative influence network’. Based mostly in the US, Canada, and the UK, this represents an assortment of academics, authors, pundits, and social media influencers, who:

‘[P]romote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism... [and] share a fundamental contempt for progressive politics – specifically for contemporary social justice movements... United in this standpoint... [they] frequently collaborate with and appear with others across ideological lines.’ (Lewis, 2018: p.1)

As Bill C-16 passes through to its second reading, after Peterson’s interventions, new discourses and actors against reform increasingly appear at the policy level. In speeches in the House of Commons, on 18 October 2016, two representatives of Canada’s main opposition party, the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), shared the CPC’s formal response to the Bill (Canada, Parliament, 2016 October 18). Conservative MP Michael Cooper advised the CPC would be taking an open vote position and objects on largely technical grounds. MP Harold Albrecht, like ARPA and Peterson, objects to Bill-16 on grounds including anti-gender framing. For example, Albrecht says:

‘I am concerned that this bill would cause *fear* for many Canadians... that they would not be able to even discuss public policy issues... on which they may disagree with the *government-imposed agenda*. I am concerned about the potential *harm to innocent children and youth*... Any law that limits legitimate discussion and debate of closely held beliefs presents a *danger to freedom of expression*, a fundamental value held dear by *people across the political spectrum*.’ (Ibid, author’s italics)

Later in the same debate, another CPC member, Brad Trost, also introduces a less familiar set of discourses and actors into discussion:

‘There was a rape counselling group in the Vancouver area that was hauled into the legal system because it refused to take, as a counsellor, a gentlemen [sic] who had transformed into a lady... Why should organizations like rape counselling organizations be discriminated against...?’ (Ibid)

In Senate debate on 2 March 2017, Senators and CPC members Donald Plett and Betty Unger continue to press for further debate on the bill (Canada, Parliament, 2017 March 2). Their main arguments are now focused on (cisgender) women’s protection, compelled speech, and child protection. Plett cites Jordan Peterson and prominent Canadian feminist, Meghan Murphy.

At Senate Committee stage in May 2017, Peterson, Murphy, and other key actors opposing Bill C-16 appear in two Senate hearings (Canada, Parliament, 2017 May 10; Canada, Parliament, 2017 May 17). Peterson provides testimony alongside lawyers Jared Brown and Jay Cameron, and law professor, Bruce Parly, all connected to the conservative organization Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (JCCF), who echo Peterson’s arguments concerning compelled speech.¹² Other opposing representatives are Gad Saad and

¹¹ Peterson describes ‘the Europeans’ as submitting to ‘the so-called environmentalist and utterly economically and practically deranged globalist utopians’ (Ibid, 2022: 14’34’’).

¹² Cameron represents the JCCF at the hearings. Brown has assisted the JCCF in at least one case (Brown, 2021). Parly is listed in 2018 as part of the JCCF Board of Directors (JCCF, 2018: p.21).

Theryn Meyer, both affiliated with actors in Lewis's (2018) alternative influence network.¹³ Also in attendance is Baptist Pastor, Paul Dirks, founder of the campaign group WOMAN Means Something.¹⁴ Four representatives of feminist groups or positions speak during the two sessions. As well as Murphy, Hilla Kerner, representing Vancouver Rape Relief, and Michèle Sirois and Diane Guilbault, representing Québec Women's Rights Association (Pour les Droits des Femmes du Québec, PDF) are also present and contest reform from a feminist standpoint.¹⁵

In other words, by this point, we have a fully-fledged hydra present and active at the federal policy level. These actors, each of them using anti-gender framing, may share diverse ideological standpoints in many respects. However, they share the same policy goal in this instance, and are using similar social movement frames, in the same policy space, and towards the same goal. To shed light on the role of women's rights and protection actors in these coalitions, the following sub-section examines their discourses in these two Senate hearings.

Discourses and roles of trans exclusionary women's and feminist actors

Taken together, the arguments against reform used by the five women's rights or protection actors who speak in the two Senate sessions, on 10 May and 17 May 2017, can be coded under the following three themes.¹⁶ The first theme is gender, and/or gender identity or expression, as oppressive social constructs, with actors consistently understanding gender as a 'social construct', and in an expansive and negative way. For instance, Michèle Sirois argues: 'Gender... is a social construct, and this is what gender stereotypes refer to' (Canada, Parliament, 2017, May 17). Hilla Kerner states:

'Gender expression describes the behaviours that oppress and control women... Men are violent because of the social construction of masculinity and manhood. In this context, rape is a gender expression.' (Canada, Parliament, 2017, May 10)

Arguments used by women's and feminist actors in these settings are similar, in part, to other actors opposing reform at the Senate hearings, who also present gender as an oppressive 'social construction' or as 'ideological'. Theryn Meyer for example, objects to the 'unprecedented ideological motivations behind the terms being used' (ibid). Jordan Peterson frames the two ideas (i.e., social construct and ideology) together:

'[T]he evidence that biological factors play a role in determining gender identity is, in a word, overwhelming... [alternative] arguments are entirely ideologically driven. It's a tenet of the ideology that identity is socially constructed.' (Canada, Parliament, 2017, May 17)

A second theme is conflicts in rights, or the alleged cost of trans rights to cisgender women or other rightsholders. Arguments sometimes also emphasize these costs are particularly impactful because rights or services for (cisgender) women are already limited.

¹³ For example, on 18 October 2020, Gad Saad joined Dave Rubin on his platform The Rubin Report, in which they discuss 'the dangerous ideas of identity politics, intersectionality and social justice that have infected people's brains like a parasite' (Rubin Report, 2020, Video description). Theryn Meyer has appeared on the Gavin McInnes Show and The Rubin Report (Daily Caller, n.d.).

¹⁴ A group which was 'begun in opposition to Bill C-16... [as] an informational hub for those opposing the erasure of women's rights, privacy, and protections' (WOMAN Means Something, n.d.).

¹⁵ These are longer-standing feminist organizations: Vancouver Rape Relief was formed in 1973 and PDF in 2013.

¹⁶ Paul Dirks is included as a women's rights or protection actor, since he speaks from the position of spokesperson for the campaign group, WOMAN Means Something (see above).

Sirois states: ‘Bill C-16 does nothing to protect the rights of transgendered persons. The bill will, however, eliminate or weaken women's rights’ (ibid). Kerner argues:

‘We are worried that well-intentioned legislation will be used to undermine the rights of women... We have barely achieved formal equality rights for women, let alone changed the reality of women's lives, and we are asked to concede...’ (Canada, Parliament, 2017, May 10)

A third significant theme is alleged threats to (cisgender) women and children. For example, Paul Dirks argues that the proposed law could put ‘women and children at risk of sexual violence’ (ibid). As in the UK case, messaging includes strong imagery concerning these alleged risks. For example, Dirks threads together concrete and isolated examples of assault and voyeurism and argues ‘gender-inclusive legislation is associated with increased harm to women’ (ibid). Sirois similarly states:

‘[E]veryone remembers Colonel Russell Williams, who was found guilty on 92 charges, including murdering two women and numerous sexual assaults... Why might he not decide that he would be better off in a women’s prison?’ (Canada, Parliament, 2017, May 17)

As this brief case study shows, it is right-wing actors acting at the policy level who widen the space for new frames and actors to try and influence policy. The religious right (specifically, the Christian advocacy organization, ARPA) is the first actor to introduce anti-gender discourse at the policy level. However, it is right-wing conservatives acting in the context of rising right-wing populist narratives in the public sphere, who then seek a shift in the political opportunity structure; creating opportunities for newer anti-gender actors to join appeals, including trans exclusionary feminists, and others who speak in the name of women.

What is notable about the Canadian case, however, is that anti-gender arguments and actors are heavily contested at the policy level, by a relatively wide and well-positioned range of actors who support reform. At alternate Senate sessions on 4 and 11 May 2017, for example, these actors represent key trans and 2SLGBTIQ+ rights actors. They also represent prominent feminist academics, parents of trans youth, scientists, lawyers, professional bodies, and the Department of Justice. This is a more diverse, mainstream, and powerful coalition than that present at the policy level to argue for legal reform at decisive moments in the UK case. This support from wider and well-positioned actors, including mainstream feminists, has continued to be an important block on the progression of anti-gender politics in Canada until 2022. In May 2021, for example, a group of organizations published the statement, ‘Our Feminism is Trans Inclusive’ in response to increased mobilization around Bill C-4 (banning so-called ‘conversion therapy’) by trans exclusionary feminist actors. It was supported by over 100 Canadian organizations with a commitment to feminism, including many mainstream groups (Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights et al., 2021).

United Kingdom

Anti-gender mobilizations have had a significant impact on UK politics and society since 2016, and with significant effects on trans rights. For example, legislation and policy designed to ensure trans equality and human rights has been limited or challenged in areas including legal gender recognition, so-called ‘conversion therapy’, and access to healthcare, education, and justice, particularly after 2019 (GATE, 2022; Madrigal-Borloz, 2023). As elsewhere, anti-gender politics in the UK has been substantially co-articulated with right-wing populism, particularly following the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016 (GATE, 2022).

In 2015, key organizations within the UK's LGBTIQ+ and trans rights movements began to prioritize trans rights reforms, particularly reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Relevant Parliamentary bodies and the Conservative Government, then led by Prime Minister David Cameron, seemed initially receptive to potential reform. Early policy influencing work by advocates contributed to the setting up of a Transgender Equality Inquiry by the parliamentary body, the Women and Equalities Select Committee (WESC) from July 2015. Witnesses invited to four oral evidence sessions (held between 15 September – 3 November 2015) were overwhelmingly supportive of equality reforms (WESC, n.d. a). A small proportion of written evidence submissions seem to have been opposed (WESC, n.d. b).¹⁷

Interestingly, concepts of 'gender ideology' do appear at the UK Government policy level at this moment, from feminist actors. For example, one submission to the Inquiry discusses gender as 'a conservative ideology that forms the foundation for women's subordination' (Lesbian Rights Group, 2015: p.4). This is verbatim text from Sheila Jeffreys' (2014) book *Gender Hurts*, in which she theorizes so-called 'transgender ideology'. These and other opposing arguments, however, are largely ignored in the report on the Inquiry, published on 14 January 2016 (WESC, 2016). The report recommends, amongst other measures, that the Government bring forward proposals to update the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004 on a self-determination model. When the UK Government published a response, in July 2016, it included a commitment to review the GRA (GEO, 2016).

However, by the time the Government began its public consultation concerning GRA reform, in July 2018, opposition would come from a much broader coalition of actors, centered on the rise of right-wing populist actors, ideas, and frames within British politics. Detailed mapping of UK networks connected to anti-gender campaigns finds that it is the emergence of this block as an increasingly powerful political force, from approximately 2016, that serves to propel anti-gender campaigns into positions of significant influence in the media, public debate, and key policy spaces (GATE, 2022). This central block would increasingly co-mobilize with wider streams, embracing trans exclusionary women's and feminist actors, the religious right, neoliberal and neoconservative interests, and right-wing extremist groups (ibid).

At the same time, right-wing populist appeals would increasingly shape British politics generally. For example, Conservative Party election campaigns under Theresa May in July 2019 and Boris Johnson in December 2019 sought to leverage social and economic cleavages generated by Brexit, to create wider Conservative coalitions, spanning support beyond traditional class, generational, and geographic lines, and amongst new 'geographies of discontent' (Cooper & Cooper, 2020). These efforts would contribute to Conservative Party wins in traditional working-class heartlands in the Midlands, the North of England, and Wales in December 2019, and amongst other constituencies inspired to 'take back control' from distant elites and trends, which had allegedly reduced their perceived social value (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021) or excluded them from a 'silent cultural revolution' (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Ultimately, with Johnson in office from December 2019 on a mandate to 'get Brexit done', in the name of the 'authentic' people, and against the 'fake' elite (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022), a more conducive policy environment and political culture would exist for campaigners disposed to produce frames aligned with right-wing populist politics.

Concerning GRA reform specifically, evidence suggests that successive changes in and within Governments, and particularly positions taken under Boris Johnson's leadership and cabinet, contributed to a dampening of political will for change (see particularly JR 111 Re Application for Judicial Review 2021, paragraph 59). During July-October 2018, the UK

¹⁷ Non-systematic review of the over 200 written submissions found 11 from feminist individuals and groups who were critical of reform, one from the religious right, and one from a group of 'concerned parents and grandparents.'

Government's consultation on GRA reform received over 100,000 responses from the public, with a clear majority indicating support for broad change (King, Paechter, & Ridgway, 2020).

Nevertheless, records show there was not support for legal gender recognition on a self-determination model at Ministerial level by March 2020 (JR 111 Re Application for Judicial Review 2021, paragraphs 61-63). The then Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, together with Government Equalities Office (GEO) officials, were instead seeking options for reform which would retain medicalized aspects of the process, to help ensure 'safeguards', and avoid 'vexatious' or 'frivolous' applications (ibid: paragraphs 59, 62 and 72). In addition, in the summer of 2020, and despite earlier indications the Government would at least promote some changes towards de-medicalization, there was 'a wider decision not to move forward with any legislative reform on the GRA' (ibid: paragraphs 62, 76 and 78). This decision appears to have involved the Prime Minister's Office and Liz Truss (ibid: paragraph 76) and possibly wider actors including the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock (ibid: paragraphs 68-78). This combination of a narrow policy change window initially with a 'wider decision' appears to have been decisive, with other outcomes seemingly still possible at various points in the lead up to the Government's policy decision in July 2020. When Truss announced the Government's decision in September 2020, she cited a concern with 'proper checks and balances' as critical to its decision:

'It is the Government's view that the balance struck in this legislation is correct, in that there are proper checks and balances in the system and also support for people who want to change their legal sex.' (GEO & Truss, 2020)

In short, the available evidence suggests that actors warning of alleged risks posed by a self-determination model, requiring 'checks', and conflicts with other rights, requiring 'balances', may have won the battle of ideas (see also Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020: pp.678-680). Or at least, that they were more willing and better positioned to produce frames which were more meaningful, persuasive, convenient, or strategic for key policymakers at this moment, including those linked to the ascendance of right-wing populist politics within the Conservative Party.

Discourses and role of trans exclusionary women's and feminist actors

During the UK Government's GRA public consultation period (July–October 2018), at least 17 campaigns were organized to encourage specific responses (King, Paechter, & Ridgway, 2020: p.145). Of these, there were four major campaigns against reform, which sought significantly similar responses to consultation questions (ibid: pp.147-148). Two of these were organized by organizations from the UK religious right: Christian Concern and the Christian Institute. The other two were organized by groups focused on women's rights or protection perspectives: Fair Play for Women and Woman's Place UK (WPUK).

Both formed in 2017, Fair Play for Women and WPUK sprang up, at least initially, with a primary focus on contesting trans rights reforms, and particularly changes to the GRA. Fair Play for Women's campaign was particularly successful, with 18% of all responses to the Government's consultation submitted through its webform (King, Paechter, & Ridgway, 2020: p.7). In these two groups' campaigning and policy materials to influence the GRA consultation, the following themes can be identified.¹⁸ Firstly, in describing their activities, these groups consistently place an emphasis on their profile as, variously, 'grass roots' and offering a 'range' of 'ordinary' perspectives. For example, Fair Play for Women welcomed the Government's decision to effectively retain existing legislation, saying it 'comes after an incredible grassroots campaign by ordinary women' (Fair Play for Women, 2020). WPUK

¹⁸ These materials are a) key webpages of both groups (i.e., their home and about pages); b) the consultation guidance produced by both groups; and c) Fair Play for Women's article responding to the government's position.

similarly describe themselves on their website as ‘a group of women from a range of backgrounds... trade unions, women’s organisations, academia and the [National Health Service]. We are united by our belief that women’s hard won rights must be defended’ (WPUK, n.d.).

This multiple ‘we’ (also cast as, ‘ALL the people’, ‘vulnerable group[s] – women and girls’, ‘thousands of people’, and ‘the voices calling for fairness and respect’; see below) is then commonly pitched against representations of elites. One such representation which features significantly is the so-called ‘transgender lobby’, or ‘trans lobby groups.’ This alleged ‘transgender lobby’ is in places equated with actors common to pro-Brexit and broader right-wing populist narratives, such as Parliament, ‘experts’, and ‘well funded campaign groups and major institutions’. As Fair Play’s consultation guidance states:

‘On the back of this [*Parliamentary*] committee’s recommendations, and amid ongoing pressure from *trans lobby groups*... many organisations have dropped single-sex spaces... Instead of just capitulating to the wishes of *the transgender lobby*, we believe the Government should do its job and consider the rights and interests of *ALL the people* affected by this law. There is a fundamental conflict between the demands of *trans lobby groups* and the rights of another *vulnerable group – women and girls*... The Government has launched a public consultation, so that *we* can all have our say. You don’t have to be an *expert* to take part... *Thousands of people* responded to Scotland’s consultation... *We* expect the same... Opposing voices will be loud, and backed by *well funded campaign groups and major institutions*. *We* need to make sure *the voices calling for fairness and respect*... are heard too.’ (Fair Play for Women, 2018, author’s italics)

Secondly, in their consultation guidance, both Fair Play for Women and WPUK also present trans rights as in conflict with women’s or other rights. For example, Fair Play’s guidance states: ‘Self-ID may well make the process easier for transgender people, but it will come at the expense of women’s rights’ (ibid). WPUK’s guidance argues for a medical report as a prerequisite for legal gender recognition, rationalizing: ‘It ensures any decision made is done so after profound reflection and with consideration of others and their rights’ (WPUK, 2018).

Related to this, both texts also focus on the alleged cost of extending trans rights, to other rightsholders, or society in general. This framing is matched by other arguments concerning the hard won, or otherwise earned or more material nature of longer-standing rights, such as cisgender women’s rights, or the need to impose costs on rights recognition. For example, Fair Play’s guidance states: ‘women’s sex-based rights have been hard won and enshrined in law’ (Fair Play for Women, 2018). WPUK’s guidance argues against reducing the cost of applying for legal gender recognition, rationalizing that other marginalized groups also face costs:¹⁹

‘Consideration of such costs should be compared objectively to those encountered by other individuals applying for government funds or recognition such as those required of disabled people or those applying for refugee status or citizenship.’ (WPUK, 2018)

¹⁹ This is an interesting example which effectively rationalizes costs on trans communities, whilst also rationalizing costs for disabled people, refugees, and migrants. The argument does not say: costs on trans communities should be reduced, removed, or redressed, as should costs for disabled people, refugees, and migrants. It says, rather, the costs are reasonable given others also face costs. This suggests a scarce world in which rights come at a cost, are in short supply, and where costs imposed on one community justify costs on another. The example therefore speaks to discussions on zero sum conceptions of rights, the politics of austerity, and the neoliberal attack on the social (see below).

A third important theme is arguments and strong imagery concerning threat. In particular, trans women and girls – and sometimes the actors, policies, or ideologies said to enable them – are repeatedly portrayed as predatory, creeping, or otherwise dangerous. Or these forces are represented as opening the doors to predatory men or sex offenders. As in the Canadian case, scenes evoking danger are often staged in a range of everyday, concrete settings, inhabited by ordinary and unsuspecting (assumedly cisgender) women and girls. For example, Fair Play’s guidance states:

‘Men who say they are women are already coming into women’s changing rooms, sleeping in women-only dormitories, living in women’s prisons. Boys who say they are girls are already getting changed with girls at school, are already joining clubs like Girl Guides and sleeping in tents with girls.’ (Fair Play for Women, 2018)

WPUK’s guidance similarly emphasizes:

‘[Retaining restrictions on legal gender recognition] may also be a deterrent to opportunist claims by sex offenders in prison.’ (WPUK, 2018)

Concluding remarks

In both the Canadian and UK cases, right-wing populism provides a key context and driver for anti-gender mobilizations, which include trans exclusionary women’s and feminist actors. In both cases there are clear parallels in the main discourses these actors use and roles they play in coalitions. This appears to confirm that the mobilization of trans exclusionary women’s and feminist groups is a stable and potentially structural feature of anti-gender and right-wing populist politics, at least in certain contexts.

More broadly, the case studies illustrate that right-wing populist movements and metanarratives have profoundly affected the practical and conceptual landscape within which social movement actors make sense of the world, develop frames, form coalitions, and contest the state. The rising convergence of actors and arguments – seemingly ‘real’, ‘ordinary’, from across the political spectrum, and involving ‘grass roots’ actors – enables increasing positioning of anti-gender arguments as something ‘we’ can all agree on, regardless of our (other) political positions. These powerful appeals to political neutrality, and to populist sentiments, trace a new political line between ‘us’ (real, ordinary, and legitimate) and ‘them’ (not real, elites, and illegitimate). In the UK at least, evidence suggests this neutrality positioning (see also Whittier, 2018) is a driver for further campaigning and policy success, particularly when coupled with political opportunities and a supportive government.

These dynamics have implications for democratic politics broadly speaking. By constructing trans rights actors and claims as part of a corrupt ‘elite’ which threatens exclusion and violence towards (cisgender) women and girls, women’s and feminist actors play a critical role in legitimizing the exclusion of trans communities and, by extension, marginalized communities generally. Moreover, discourses used and legitimized contribute to the portrayal of social movements generally, as external to the realm of legitimate politics; stigmatized and expelled as elite ‘lobby groups’ and ‘radical leftists.’ Yet social movements also hold important claims to legitimately represent ‘the people’ and play an essential role in democratic contestation.

Finally, the promotion of zero sum, austere, and securitized conceptions of rights, and the call on the state to ‘protect’ such rights, also plays a role in disavowing and delegitimizing alternative, more inclusive conceptions of rights, and of social and political solidarity. Intersectional, abundant, and universal conceptions of rights, in which full and mutual recognition is possible, actors can work together in complementary ways and towards a shared common good, and in which exclusion is not a pre-requisite for recognition, in turn appear less viable and less valid.

This critique aligns with, and I believe validates, Wendy Brown's model of neoliberalism, as it is increasingly co-articulated with right-wing populism, as an attack on what she terms 'the social', and therein, on the foundations of democracy:

'The neoliberal attack on the social... is key to generating an *antidemocratic culture from below* while building and legitimating *antidemocratic forms of state power from above*. The synergy between the two is profound: an increasingly undemocratic and antidemocratic citizenry is ever more willing to authorize an increasingly antidemocratic state.' (Brown, 2019: pp.28-29, author's italics)

If correct, this is a deleterious scenario for feminism, just as much as trans and LGBTIQ+ communities. It also poses questions concerning the narrowing of feminist agendas, the instrumentalization of women and feminism, and the loss of transformative visions for change.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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