

A complicit and dismissive federal government contributed to the convoy occupation in Centre Town by Ken Rubin, investigative researcher, community activist, Centretown Buzz, Jan 20/23 page 5

When the Public Order Emergency Commission (POEC) reports next month, it should attribute a large part of the blame for the convoy occupation of downtown Ottawa to federal authorities.

The Ottawa Police and former mayor Jim Watson have so far garnered much of the blame and, undoubtedly, they played a significant part.

But the convoy groups came looking for the federal leaders – not Watson and crew – and wanted to change the federal government, not City Hall.

And, as leaders in national security, it was their federal intelligence officials' failings that led to not attaching enough importance to the convoy occupation's goals and the racism displayed by participants. That doomed Ottawa's capital to over three weeks of misery and anguish.

CSIS and security officials stepped back, seeing convoy protesters as not being within their scope of a national security threat. They seemed to be soft on domestic terrorist racism, seeing it as not requiring their urgent attention.

Repeatedly in their testimony at POEC, they presented a narrow vision of their mandate as being "threats to the security of Canada," and particularly espionage, foreign interference, or potential threats to cybersecurity. According to that interpretation, the occupation didn't qualify. The federal cabinet ended up disagreeing with that narrow interpretation when it invoked the Emergencies Act – but that was too late.

CSIS itself has also been hit with racist charges from its own, or former, ranks, including from Sameer Ebadi and Huda Mukbil, where minority members saw themselves as being discriminated against and passed over for advancement.

Now, the prime minister's own national security advisor, Jody Thomas, is saying a second convoy wave may be coming to Ottawa and that the feds will be better prepared to lead.

So far, though, few have been dismissed for faulty intelligence. Few former or serving federal employees, including in the RCMP and Armed Forces, who supported the convoy's mixed anti-vaccination and hateful messages here in Ottawa and elsewhere, have been prosecuted.

One revelation of the inquiry, which received little attention, was that the convoy occupation of Ottawa was only made physically possible because of the cooperation and go-ahead federal and National Capital Commission (NCC) authorities. They allowed trucker rigs to use their parkways to come and take over downtown Ottawa. This included even getting to park on a downtown parkway!

Federal authorities also did nothing to barricade and close Wellington Street outside Parliament Hill. Nor did they bother to put secure, not flimsy, barriers around the War Memorial or Confederation Park, which allowed both sites to be occupied.

The underlying federal inaction during the occupation of downtown Ottawa is a troublesome and dismissive attitude to the well-being of downtown Ottawa residents. Tension between Crown and Town means that Ottawa residents living downtown are largely on the losing side in this company town.

This is not the first time the Crown has made residents the losers. In the 1960s, it tore down LeBreton Flats, and, a few years later, much of downtown Gatineau for federal offices. Much of LeBreton has now been sold off for expensive condos, including now promoting a privately held sports arena. These decisions have been driven by special interests. They are not largely done in consultations with or

aligned with affected residents' interests.

Similarly, the federal government ended community use of the Library and Archive Canada meeting spaces and discouraged keeping Ottawa's main library in Centretown. This has hardly helped keep the core downtown of Ottawa alive and vibrant.

Now the Crown wants to use its clout to create a national police force to protect its ever-expanding Parliamentary Precinct (including Wellington and Sparks Streets) from growing illegal occupations.

But surrounding neighbourhoods are not offered similar protection. And, from now on, their residents could be put in a restricted-access, security red zone at any time at the decree of federal authorities. That could help devalue downtown living and bring on the downtown blues.

If closed to traffic (as recently proposed by a Parliamentary committee), Wellington and Sparks Streets would become home to only officially sanctioned federal activities. This could mean closing off parts of Centretown residents' everyday movements and activities, so that this newly acquired "green" Parliament Hill space could celebrate and be protected, while bringing greater traffic congestion to downtown.

The new federal security apparatus already includes MPs getting panic buttons for their protection at the cost of millions of dollars – while the 40,000 or so downtown Ottawa residents under increasing threat get no special protection except being treated as occasional hostages.

It will be interesting to see if Ottawa's new police chief, Eric Stubbs, after a long RCMP career, will have the local community's protection as his main priority.

The POEC, the federal parliamentary committee hearings, and Ottawa's new City Council should not ignore the effect federal inaction and indifference played in the occupation of Ottawa. And Premier Ford should note that Eastern Ontario is part of the province and not just the place where friendly developers hold sway.

For over three weeks, it was downtown Ottawa residents that had to live in a state of emergency. And the feds need to own up to being a large part of that problem.

*Ken Rubin has lived in inner-city Ottawa for over 50 years. He contributed to the Centretown News, served on the Centretown Community Association board and planning committee, and was involved in tenant rights and a Dalhousie community self-study. Last February, he founded the Ottawa People's Commission on the Convoy Occupation. He is reachable via*