

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau press conference, Jan. 31, 2022 — rough transcript

Trudeau: Hello, everyone. This morning I'd like to address the millions of Canadians who are making responsible decisions to ensure their safety and the safety of their loved ones. I know that this pandemic has been frustrating. It's frustrating that after two years, the battle against COVID-19 is still dominating so many parts of our lives.

This virus affects us all. Two of my own children have now contracted it. And this morning I learned I tested positive for COVID-19 as well. I feel well and have no symptoms. Of course, I'll be working remotely this week and we'll keep following public health guidelines.

I want to take this opportunity to remind Canadians to please get vaccinated. It's a challenge that my family and I are facing, but there's nothing unusual or special about it. It's a challenge to many Canadians and people around the world know all too well. Throughout this pandemic people have lost loved ones, our health care workers are continuing to work very hard, scientists are working day and night to ensure that we can get vaccines to keep us safe.

This pandemic is not over, and we have to be there for one another, and as we continue to have each other's backs as we steel ourselves for the challenges ahead. I know you're wondering about what you saw in our capital city this weekend. As my friend Irwin Cutler said on Saturday: "Freedom of expression, assembly and association are cornerstones of democracy. But Nazi symbolism, racist imagery and desecration of war memorials are not."

It is an insult to memory and truth. Hate can never be the answer. Over the past few days, Canadians were shocked and frankly disgusted by the behavior displayed by some people protesting in our nation's capital. I want to be very clear. We are not intimidated by those who hurl insults and abuse at small business workers and steal food from the homeless. We won't give in to those who fly racist flags. We won't cave to those who engage in vandalism or dishonor the memory of our veterans. The statue of Terry Fox and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier are not only symbols of the past, they are important symbols from our history that represent Canadian heroes and the values for which they fought. The sacrifices that these heroes made allowed us to build a better Canada. All Canadians have the right to express their opinion or their disagreement with the government, but they don't have the right to threaten or harass their fellow citizens or to spread hateful messages.

I want to thank the many Canadians who've made donations to the Shepherds of Good Hope and to the Terry Fox Foundation in response to what they saw this weekend. There is no place in our country for threats, violence or hatred.

So to those responsible for this behavior: It needs to stop. To anyone who joined the convoy, but is rightly uncomfortable with the symbols of hatred and division on display: Join with your fellow Canadians. Be courageous and speak out. Do not stand for or with intolerance and hate.

In these difficult times, all politicians must show responsible leadership. We have to work to bring people together in a positive way. We must fight division and fear with facts. To the politicians exploiting people's fears: I ask you to think long and hard about the consequences of your actions. To the nearly 90 percent of truckers across the country who have gotten vaccinated, who continue working hard to keep us fed and keep our economy moving: Thank you.

Truckers have tough jobs. Long hours on the road. Days away from their families. Real challenges, particularly over the past two years, as they've continued to step up, to put food on our shelves and on our tables to support us with life-saving medication and supplies. We have relied on you, and you can rely on us to continue to stand with you and allow you to do your jobs safely. Almost 90 percent of you are doing exactly that, right? Exactly that. And we thank you deeply for everything you've done.

The behavior on display this weekend does not represent you. And to Canadians at home watching in disgust and disbelief at this behavior, wondering how this could have happened in our nation's capital after everything we've been through together: This is not the story of our pandemic, of our country, of our people. Canada is strong because you are strong. For almost two years, Canadians have shown strength, generosity, and respect. You have shown your courage. You have made enormous sacrifices. You've been there for each other as neighbors, friends, and fellow Canadians.

I think of the moms and dads who looked after their families, the kids who stepped up in so many different ways. Seniors who stayed strong in our darkest days, volunteers throughout our communities who supported our most vulnerable. Front line workers, from truckers to store clerks who have kept our shelves stocked and make sure we have food on our tables. Health care heroes who have saved countless lives and continue to do so. We know you're tired, and yet you do not stop. You inspire us. Canadians support you. We're in your corner. All of you. You are the story of this pandemic, not the

convoy. This pandemic is also a story of millions of people who made the right choices, who got vaccinated and who made sacrifices to keep themselves and others safe.

I can tell you that I will continue to encourage people to get vaccinated, whether it's booster shots or childhood vaccines. I will continue to be there for you. I wish I could tell you that there are no more difficult moments ahead. We all know I can't say that. What I can say is that this government will continue to have your backs. We will continue to be there for you. As long as it takes with as much as it takes, that's how we've all gotten through this pandemic so far. That's what we and I will continue to focus on. Because we believe in you.

Canadians are compassionate, kind, strong, and resilient. You elected us all to get big things done and with the return of Parliament, we all have work to do. Later today, I'll be participating in a question period, an important part of our democratic system alongside parliamentarians who, despite threats and intimidation, will continue to serve you, Canadians, and work together to deliver results for people.

This afternoon, we'll be introducing legislation to ensure we continue providing as many rapid tests as possible to the provinces and territories. And tonight I'll be virtually addressing the House of Commons about the situation in Ukraine. I'll be talking about the importance of freedom, democracy and the rule of law in the face of Russian provocation, in this difficult time, more than ever. We must stay true to our values, to who we are as Canadians, as Canadians. We stand up for what's right. And mostly we stand up for each other. That's how we've gotten through this so far. That's how we'll continue. To get through this. That's how we remain true to who we are. Thank you my friends.

Reporter: Yeah, good afternoon. I'm wondering a lot of them leaders or organizers of this convoy have asked to meet or at least hear from you about what's happening and their demand. Have you or will you or anyone from your government meet with them or negotiate with them in any way?

Trudeau: My focus is standing with Canadians and getting through this pandemic, the way to get through this pandemic is to continue making the challenging choices and sacrifices as citizens, as individuals, as communities to keep each other safe, to trust science, to trust facts. To continue being there for each other. That is my focus. That is what I will stay focused on.

Reporter: Can you explain the reason why you won't participate or meet with them, and then: You attended rallies on the Hill in the past, including during Black Lives Matter protest and others. Is there a

reason that you can give us for why you will not discuss or have any negotiations with this particular group?

Trudeau: I have attended protests and rallies in the past when I agreed with the goals, when I supported the people expressing their concerns and their issues. Black Lives Matter is an excellent example of that. But I have also chosen to not go anywhere near protests that have expressed hateful rhetoric, violence towards fellow citizens and a disrespect not just of science, but of the frontline health workers. And, quite frankly, the 90 percent of truckers who have been doing the right thing to keep Canadians safe, to put food on our tables — Canadians know where I stand. This is a moment for responsible leaders to think carefully about where they stand and who they stand with.

Reporter: Mr. Trudeau, I was wondering how you're going to deal with the discontent that's been expressed over the last few days in Ottawa? I understand that there are extremist elements in the movement, but there are also many people who are not ... What are you going to do to appease their anger?

Trudeau: First of all, I think everyone across the country, whether here in Ottawa or not, is frustrated. Everybody is grumbling, everybody is fed up with this pandemic. Everyone is exhausted. Everybody wants it to end. Everybody wishes we could just say it's over and then go back to who we are, what we want to do. But the vast majority of Canadians, they know that it's not by respecting that we're going to end this pandemic. It's by getting vaccinated. It's by listening, by listening to the best public health advice. And the best way to get through this, the best way to continue to be there for each other, is to show that we understand the importance of following the science, the facts. Health experts. Public health experts. That's how we're going to get out of this pandemic. And that's what I'm going to focus on.

Reporter: Some people accuse you of having politicized the issue of compulsory vaccination, among others during the election campaign. How do you respond to those who say that some of the blame is not on the grumbling that we've seen in Ottawa over the last few days?

Trudeau: Canadians chose to get vaccinated at a higher rate than almost any other country in the world. We've seen at every step Canadians choosing to be there for each other. As well as having a higher rate of vaccination than many of our other countries, we've also been able to protect our health care system and our seniors and see our economy rebound in the right way. I understand that there are some people

who choose to reject science, who choose to reject the caring and service and sacrifice that the vast majority of Canadians make. But that is their choice. My choice is to continue to be here. For the 90 percent of Canadians who, yes, are fed up, but who know that the way to get through this is by standing together, by respecting each other. And following the public health guidelines

Reporter: Hi, Prime Minister, thanks for taking our questions. Supporters of this movement will say that it's a small minority of people in this protest [who] were causing trouble. So is it fair to focus in on the obviously terrible behavior of some, and [stroke] all protesters with that brush?

Trudeau: I think obviously the right to free expression, the right to assembly, the right to make your displeasure known in a democracy is extraordinarily important and needs to be heeded and respected. But there have been many, many protests over the past years that I've seen, that I've been part of, that I've watched from a distance on Parliament Hill and elsewhere, where people come together angry about a certain thing wanting something else to change. That don't see the level of hateful rhetoric of swastikas, of abuse towards their fellow citizens. There is always a right to protest peacefully that I and others will defend fully as part of this democracy. There is not a right to incite violence, to perform acts of violence or to spew hatred. And I think anyone who is part of this group who is disgusted by what the folks protesting alongside are doing needs to step up and take responsibility, condemned these actions. And look for other ways to express their displeasure.

Reporter: You talk about politicians exploiting people's fears. Who are you talking about and what impact do you think they're having?

Trudeau: I think all politicians need to think very carefully about who they're supporting, about what messages they're putting out. We have seen over the past many, many months conservative politicians sharing disinformation about vaccines, encouraging conspiracy theories online. And I think Erin O'Toole is going to need to reflect very carefully on how he's walking a path that supports these people who do not represent truckers, let alone the vast majority of Canadians.

Reporter: Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, are you considering some concessions to the truckers who were protesting?

Trudeau: The challenges that we are facing in our supply chains are not due to vaccination policies, but are due to COVID-19. The best way to get through these difficult times for truckers, for all Canadians, is

to continue to follow public health guidelines, to continue to get vaccinated, as almost 90 percent of truckers have done. That's what I'm going to focus on, not on these protesters who don't respect the facts, the science, or for many of us, our democratic principles.

Reporter: Some demonstrators say that Canada was behind the US decision and the mandatory vaccination. From their side, what you can tell us, [whether] you pressured the Biden administration to do the same thing as Canada?

Trudeau: Since the beginning, I've often been asked about the alignment or non-alignment between our policies. Here in Canada, in relation to the borders with the Americans, there have been things on which we have aligned ourselves. We know how to work very well. There have been other things on which we are less aligned. But each time, I have demonstrated and insisted that each country can and must make its own decisions regarding its public security. But obviously, since we follow the same science and the same kind of expert advice, it should not be surprising that the same principles are at stake when you bring in measures to protect citizens.

Reporter: Mr. Prime Minister, you said Erin O'Toole has to think carefully, but he did meet with some truckers on Friday. Do you think that was an inappropriate gesture of support ...?

Trudeau: As part of our job as politicians, every single day, we make decisions about who to meet with, who to respond to, how to respond to them, who to engage with. How not just our engagements, but our example impacts on public discourse, if we choose to put up with and tacitly support conspiracy theorists and folks peddling disinformation. That's a reflection on what we choose to do as politicians and who we are as leaders. Obviously, I'm going to trust in Canadians' understanding of the kind of responsible leadership that is needed right now, and I'm sure Canadians are watching what all politicians are doing right now, and remembering: Who is choosing to stand up for what and for whom, and what choices they are making as leaders, I think, through this pandemic. Canadians have seen, have a right to expect responsible leadership. Unfortunately, that's not what we've always seen from the likes of Erin O'Toole or even more Maxime Bernier.

Reporter: Is there a need for more security on Parliament Hill?

Trudeau: Well, first of all, I'd like to make sure that people are safe first and foremost, that small businesses or restaurants in Ottawa can get back to work, that citizens can go to their jobs, that

parliamentarians can continue to do the important work of serving Canadians, of upholding our democracy. Yes, there is a right to protest, there is a right to make your voices heard loudly and clearly. There is not a right to shut down our democracy or our democratic processes, there is not a right to abuse, intimidate and harass your fellow citizens who are trying to go about their business, trying to live their lives and not necessarily in agreement with what you were doing.

Reporter: The Minister of Transport said recently that he wanted to perhaps move forward with a vaccine mandate for truckers traveling across the border.

Trudeau: We are, as you know, very clear on the need for as many people as possible to be vaccinated. We have brought in vaccination mandates for the federal public service. We have brought in vaccination mandates for those who want to travel on a plane or a train. We will continue to encourage people to get vaccinated. At the moment, the mandates for truckers apply to the Canada-U.S. border.

Reporter: But I wanted to know if that was something that is still on the table ...

Trudeau: I don't want to go too far into hypotheticals. We are looking at concrete measures that will continue to protect Canadians. And when you think that almost 90 percent of truckers are already vaccinated, we know that even without having additional mandates, domestic mandates, people are doing the right thing. But as you know, in the last two years, we've seen a lot of measures and things that we've had to do that we couldn't have imagined three or four years ago. We will continue to follow the science. We will continue to do everything necessary to keep people healthy and safe. We're going to focus on what we're doing now and not theorize about what the next steps might be or might not be.

Reporter: Hi Prime Minister, thanks for taking our call. I'm just trying to follow up on some of your responses about the protesters. I understand the concerns around many of the actions from many of the protesters, but I'm wondering if you, as the prime minister, need to engage with the fears and the concerns that others in the crowd raised about the vaccine. There seems to be a real concern for many of them about the safety of that vaccine. And I'm wondering if you are avoiding addressing that by only focusing on the much more hateful and the various elements of the protest this weekend.

Trudeau: ... Anyone who thinks that I haven't been talking about how safe vaccines are hasn't been listening to everything I've been saying over the past two years. Vaccines are safe and effective, the way we get through, the way we get through this public health crisis, get back to the things we love is by

trusting science, by trusting the facts. By being there for each other, by stepping up for each other. We have been hearing people hesitant about getting vaccinated for well over a year now, and we have been reaching out to them community by community, individual by individual at the highest level, but also in interpersonal contacts to reassure people that vaccines are safe and effective and that they are the way to get through this pandemic. So, yes, the concerns expressed by a few people gathered in Ottawa right now are not new, not surprising, are heard, but are a continuation of what we've unfortunately seen in disinformation and misinformation, online conspiracy theorists, about microchips, about, you know, God knows what else that go with the tinfoil hat. We have been clear every step of the way that the work, our frontline health workers, the work our scientists and researchers are doing, the people at Health Canada, people working on these vaccines all around the world is the work that will get us through this, get us back to the things we love.

Reporter: Hello Mr. Trudeau, have any of the messages from the three historical days of demonstrations on Parliament Hill led you to change your position on anything?

Trudeau: I think what we saw was that yes, there are people who are still hesitant to get vaccinated, but at the same time in the reaction of Canadians across the board, not only to the expressions of hatred and intolerance that we saw among these protesters, but also in the message of freedom of choice. Canadians are saying, my freedom is the freedom to go back to things I wanted to do before, and the way to assume that freedom is to get vaccinated. My choice is to be there for each other, because that's how we created this country. That's how we define what it is to be Canadian, by being there for each other. So at the same time a small, marginalized minority is grumbling, protesting. The vast majority of Canadians are saying, well, let's see. It's by continuing to be there for each other that we'll get through this. We all agree: We want this pandemic to be over. But the vast majority of Canadians know full well that the way to end it, it's not by demonstrating against the pandemic — getting vaccinated.

Reporter: Is the parliamentary precinct safe and do we need more police presence?

Trudeau: I have great confidence in our public security services who do an outstanding job in extremely difficult situations. I want to thank the Ottawa police, the RCMP, the Parliamentary Protective Service and all those who worked so hard this weekend to make sure that we minimized the damage to and the harassment and intimidation of citizens that we saw in Ottawa. It's not over, but they will continue to do

their job and I know that Canadians across the country can have confidence in those who choose to serve the public good.