From Social Awareness to Authoritarian Other: The Conservative Weaponization of Woke in Canadian Parliamentary Discourse

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Abstract (149)
This study examines the evolution of (anti)woke discourse in debates within the Canadian House of Commons from 2019 to 2023, analyzing how "conceptual flipsiding" and moral panic operate to transform democratic language into tools of illiberal politics. Our critical discourse analysis of Hansard transcripts identifies three key themes: the semantic shift of woke from social awareness to authoritarianism, the strategic redefinition of woke by Conservative MPs - led by party leader Pierre Poilievre - to construct a moral panic around an anti-Canadian ideological Other, and inadequate attempts by MPs from other parties to challenge this negative framing. We argue that the discursive weaponization of woke demonstrates how political actors appropriate and invert democratic language to advance illiberal agendas while maintaining democratic legitimacy. This Canadian case illuminates broader patterns in how democratic language is manipulated across national contexts while revealing how ineffective counter-frames can inadvertently legitimize anti-democratic action within democratic institutions.

Introduction

The normalization of extremist and hate-driven ideologies within political discourse is a transnational phenomenon affecting democracies worldwide. In Canada, as in many other countries, this trend is reflected in the increasing number of hate crimes reported to police (Perry 2022; Ndegwa and McDonald 2023). This global surge in hate discourses and accompanying actions of violence are not anomalies. Still, they are part of a worrying trend of far-right extremism enabled and normalized by a political environment increasingly driven by reactionary politics of division, polarization, and exclusion. Krzyżanowski et al. (2023, 415) recently called for examining "how, why, and under which conditions, discourses and practices underlying normalization processes re-emerge to challenge the liberal democratic order". This article responds to that call and shares the concern about the "dismantling or at least profound undermining of the core ideas of democratically-funded, inclusive community and liberal democracy" (ibid., 417). One way in which this 'normalization' is achieved is by 'abnormalizing' those peoples and discourses which contest racism, anti-LGBTQ discourses, sexism and fascism (Cammaerts 2022). A prime example of this "abnormalization" process is the discursive polarization of the term woke (ibid).

We examine this normalization process through the theoretical lens of conceptual flipsiding (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024), focusing on how the term woke has been transformed in Canadian parliamentary discourse. They define "conceptual flipsiding" (ibid., 35) as the strategic reversal of meanings associated with liberal democratic values, recontextualizing them to serve pronouncedly illiberal ends. This is reminiscent of the Situationist practice of *détournement*, which "involves the disarticulation of conventional forms of culture and their rearticulation into forms of oppositional culture" (Best and Kellner 1997, 92). Unlike the socialist revolutionary intent of the Situationists, in our case, the term woke has been appropriated and reframed through conceptual flipsiding—from a concept

rooted in social justice to a pejorative label denoting authoritarianism, divisiveness and intolerance. This conceptual reversal serves two interrelated purposes: first, it delegitimizes social and racial justice movements by portraying them as extreme and dangerous; second, it creates space for the normalization of fascist, racist, homophobic, and anti-trans ideologies by redefining the pursuit of equality as a threat to (Western) societal values. Through this process, conceptual flipsiding does more than distort the original meaning of woke—it entrenches an illiberal worldview within mainstream discourse, fueling cultural polarization and making it harder to contest the normalization of exclusionary politics.

In the United States, (anti)woke discourse has become a central focus of conservative politicians and lawmakers (Schoorman 2024). In the United Kingdom, the 'war on woke' has become a prominent feature of political debate and media coverage, shaping public discourse and policy discussions (Davies and MacRae 2023; Smith et al. 2023). In France, debates around 'le wokisme' have intensified, often framed as threatening national values (Campangne 2023). Meanwhile, studies of Belgian and Australian print media have illuminated how the press shapes local woke discourses, underscoring the phenomenon's global reach (Dhoest and Paulussen 2024; Sparrow 2023).

Canada presents a compelling case study within this global landscape of anti-woke rhetoric. Like other democracies, Canada has witnessed a sustained 'war of position' aimed at renormalizing racist, fascist, homophobic, and sexist viewpoints within public discourse. By examining the Canadian context, this study not only contributes to the broader understanding of how far-right rhetoric is being normalized within democratic institutions globally but also illuminates the specific ways these transnational trends manifest in distinct national contexts. Through examining how conceptual flipsiding operates in parliamentary discourse, this study contributes to our understanding of how democratic language is strategically transformed into tools of illiberal politics while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

This 'war on woke' manifests distinctly in Canadian politics, where it has emerged alongside rising polarization and the mainstreaming of far-right ideologies (Perry 2022). As such, our interest lies in Canadian political discourse around woke and the accompanying woke culture war in national politics. We are specifically interested in remarks said by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons during a session of parliament. MPs serve as what Cohen (2011) terms "moral entrepreneurs". They shape public discourse through their position and define deviance through signification and labelling in parliamentary debates. These debates can provide insights into political ideologies, power dynamics, and societal values (Proksch and Slapin 2015, 19). This study aims to (1) trace the evolution of woke discourse in debates within the Canadian House of Commons, (2) analyze how MPs employ woke to frame political narratives and influence public opinion, and (3) assess the implications of this rhetoric for Canadian political discourse and democratic values.

1. History of Woke

We can trace woke's conceptual flipsiding through its historical evolution. Originally part of African American Vernacular English since the early 20th century, woke signified a call for awareness of systemic injustice and violence in a deeply racialized and racist society. Calls to 'wake up' and 'stay woke' were used for over a century in the context of racial discrimination and injustice in America (Carter 2022; Smithsonian n.d.), with the term gaining renewed prominence during the 2014 Ferguson protests through the hashtag #StayWoke. As its visibility grew, the term underwent its first semantic shift as non-Black progressives adopted it to encompass broader societal injustices related to feminist, LGBTQ, and intersectional concerns (Sobande et al. 2022). This initial expansion, while maintaining the term's core connection to social justice, set the stage for its later strategic recontextualization by political actors.

This expanded usage created an opportunity for conceptual flipsiding, as the far-right began appropriating woke, strategically inverting its meaning to frame those seeking social and racial justice as extreme and intolerant. This pejorative use seeks to discredit, silence, or otherwise pervert and dehumanize anyone campaigning for social justice and the broader political intersectional project (Cammaerts 2022). Lilleker and Pérez-Escolar (2023) argue that woke is "an example of implicit hate speech", which has become weaponized against groups who have historically used the word to call for justice (ibid., 2). This weaponization of woke by the far-right, but increasingly also by the democratic right, is a topsy-turvy *détournement*, a hollowing-out and inversion of the term's meaning to denote the exact opposite, namely intolerant, racist against the dominant group, and immoral. As a result, the term now suggests intolerance, racism against the white majority, and a disregard for traditional values and norms. This détournement through conceptual flipsiding furthermore helps the right construct an 'ideological enemy' or folk-devil not only of social justice activists but of any marginalized person who speaks about oppression, framing them all as deviant, dangerous, intolerant, dogmatic, and quintessentially anti-democratic and illiberal, thereby instigating a moral panic within public discourse. Cohen (2011, 1) has shown that such deviance labels are powerful tools for generating moral panics, which he denoted as a moment in which "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media". Drawing from Becker (1963), Cohen highlighted the significant role of "moral entrepreneurs" in identifying and labelling individuals or groups as deviant, advocating for creating, enforcing, or interpreting norms to manage or modify such behaviours. In the case of woke, moral panic theory helps explain how conceptual flipsiding operates, with political actors constructing and amplifying perceived threats to societal values. This is particularly evident in how Conservative MPs strategically reframe

woke awareness of social injustice as a threat to freedom and traditional values. Their legislative roles and unique social position allow them to set and frame public discourse. This aligns with the elite-engineered model of moral panic whereby political elites "engineer a panic from a nonexistent or trivial threat" to "gain something of value or divert attention away from [other] issues" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 54). Their powerful position enables politicians to shape societal norms and, crucially, label certain behaviours, ideologies, or groups as threats to these norms. As Hall et al. (1978, 221) observed, moral panics are often instrumental to "the maintenance of hegemonic domination".

An underlying dimension of the anti-woke rhetoric in Canadian politics reflects broader shifts in how conservative politics frames Canadian values and identity. Kwak (2019) identifies the 2003 merger between the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance as a watershed moment for Canada's political right, uniting socially conservative roots under the newly formed Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) (Kwak 2019; Perry and Scrivens 2019). Perry (2022) documents how political actors have increasingly positioned specific ideas and groups as threats to 'Canadian values' - a framing that often implicitly draws on Christian and traditional religious identity. For instance, Perry details how Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper specifically vilified Muslims, calling Islamic culture "anti-women", declaring the hijab "offensive", and promoting policies like screening immigrants for 'Canadian values.' Similarly, Quebec Premier Francois Legault implemented Bill 21 in 2019 restricting religious symbols, which Perry notes disproportionately impacted Muslim women while privileging Christian cultural norms. Similar patterns emerge in anti-woke rhetoric, where progressive social changes are framed as dangerous departures from traditional Canadian social and moral structures. This positioning of woke as oppositional to Canadian traditions must be understood within the longer trajectory of conservative politics in Canada.

Academic attention has focused on the rise of the populist right in Canadian federal politics and its entanglement with the CPC (Crosby 2021). For example, the right-wing populist People's Party of Canada (PPC) was founded in 2018 by former CPC Member of Parliament Maxime Bernier after he lost the 2017 CPC leadership race to Andrew Scheer on the 13th ballot by less than 2% of the vote. Since 2017, the CPC has cycled through three new federal leaders, with Pierre Poilievre assuming leadership in September 2022. Recently, Elmer et al. (2022) observed "a large section of the Conservative party has unabashedly embraced conspiratorial populism with few limits" (ibid., 1) and that within the party, "Conservative elements would seek to normalize the alt-right as part of a neo-colonial Canadian project" (ibid., 3).

Two connected political moments capture Canada's rise of the far-right and the affinity with conservative politicians. First is Canada's 2019 Yellow Vest Movement, which saw a series of protests and a truck convoy under the United We Roll (UWR) banner converge in Ottawa. While presenting itself as a pro-pipeline and pro-oil and gas movement, closer inspection revealed that UWR was not just about energy; it was a mélange of issues and conspiracy theories, and membership openly attracted extremist, far-right, white nationalist and hate groups (De Cillia and McCurdy 2020). However, the close affiliation with and presence of far-right elements did not deter Andrew Scheer, the Conservative Party leader at the time, nor Pierre Poilievre, then finance critic and current leader, from addressing the crowd.

In late January 2022, many prominent figures from the 2019 convoy reappeared during what became known as the 2022 Freedom Convoy/Anti-Vaccine Mandate Protests ('Freedom Convoy'). The Freedom Convoy was a cross-country convoy and protest that started in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. It converged in Ottawa on January 29, 2022, occupying a portion of the downtown core outside Parliament. A coordinated police

operation forcefully removed the protests following Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's invocation of the federal Emergencies Act on February 14, 2022. While initially spurred by resistance to federal COVID-19 public health measures such as vaccine mandates, mask mandates and lockdowns, as the protest and Convoy grew, the demands splintered, crossing into such topics as the carbon tax, political Islam, great replacement theory and COVID conspiracies. During the three-week occupation of Ottawa, parallel convoys and protests were held across Canada, including prominent blockades at Canada/US border crossings in Coutts, Alberta and Windsor, Ontario.

Far-right extremist affiliations of movement organizers and select members were flagged early by journalists and the Canadian Anti-Hate Network. The Ottawa occupation was also peppered with signs espousing various covid conspiracies, "F*ck Trudeau" flags and demands that Prime Minister Trudeau be tried for treason. Meanwhile, the presence of unambiguous hate symbols such as a Nazi Swastika flag and the Confederate flag were documented at Convoy protests (Panneton et al. 2022). Thus, while the protest was not the exclusive domain of far-right extremists and hate organizations, their indisputable presence and connections were flagged from the beginning. Yet the open presence of these disconcerting elements did not prevent multiple Conservative politicians from visiting protestors, pausing for photographs and, in the case of Pierre Poilievre, handing out coffee and donuts (CBC News 2022), thereby helping to legitimize and normalize these groups. Gillies and Wisniewski (2023) suggest Poilievre's embrace of the Convoy, together with the broader Conservative shift to the populist right, signifies the emergence of a new conservative brand where to be successful, Poilievre "…probably has to target the far right and create a groundswell of voters who often are excluded from the mainstream process or simply have not voted in the past" (ibid., 36).

These two related Convoys display the increased visibility of far-right extremist and hate groups as well as the creeping normalization and validation of said groups, especially as they were visited or addressed by sitting Members of Parliament (MPs). This normalization of the far-right is particularly concerning when considering their attempts to redefine and weaponize terms like woke to discredit and silence democratic voices who contest far-right discourses, values and ideas. As the Conservative Party deepens its relationship with the populist right, scholars must examine mainstreaming extremist ideologies, normalizing far-right rhetoric, and implications for democratic norms and values in Canada. The following section outlines our methodological approach to critical discourse analysis, data collection, and inductive coding, along with the conceptualizations of woke which emerged from our analysis.

2. Methods

The Hansard is the official edited transcript of Canada's House of Commons proceedings. Freely available online via the House of Commons Publication Search tool, it offers the complete proceedings of each session within the House of Commons, including speeches, statements, comments, and interventions[1]. According to van Dijk (1997), not all discourse produced in political settings by political actors qualifies as 'political discourse.' For van Dijk, discourse becomes political when it actively participates in political processes or constitutes a form of political action. This distinction allows us to focus specifically on how terms like woke—originating in broader culture—are recontextualized within parliamentary discourse as part of discursive strategies that construct and reinforce ideological stances in legislative debates. In this study, we analyze anti-woke rhetoric in the Canadian House of Commons as part of the formal parliamentary process, a key activity meeting van Dijk's criteria for political discourse.

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[1] The search tool is available at: https://www.ourcommons.ca/PublicationSearch/en/?PubType=37

The corpus was constructed using the publication search tool with the phrase: *"woke" or "wokeness" not "woke up"*; wokeness was included to capture instances where woke was used as a noun. Two searches were conducted. The first search included all Hansard entries from September 17, 2001 (37th Parliament, 1st session, sitting No. 79) up to May 1, 2023 (44th Parliament, 1st session, sitting No. 188). The search returned results from 338 Hansard transcripts between September 17, 2001, and May 1, 2023. After a careful review of results from September 18, 2001, to January 31, 2019, 234 transcripts were discarded as woke was used only to mean "wake up". The first use of woke in a non "wake up" context was made on February 1, 2019, by Liberal MP Greg Fergus. In total, 38 Hansard transcripts contained relevant uses of woke, which had 67 relevant uses of woke across the 38 transcripts. The 67 uses were condensed into 56 instances. Occurrences where a speaker used woke more than once in the same unbroken speech, and its repetition did not alter the speaker's purpose or meaning were counted as one instance. For example, in the phrase "As for the definition of woke, woke has one purpose and only one purpose" (Poilievre, P. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151*(176) [Electronic transcript]), woke is used twice but coded and analyzed as a single instance.

A second Hansard search (May 1, 2023, to June 21, 2023) returned 91 uses of woke across 18 transcripts. Upon review, five irrelevant references were dropped, leaving 16 transcripts and 86 uses of woke, which, following the same protocol as the first search, were condensed to 66 instances. The project's corpus consists of 111 instances of woke across 54 Hansard transcripts made between February 1, 2019, and June 21, 2023. In addition to database results (n=111), the corpus includes 11 uses of woke variants (wokeism=10, wokeists=1) manually identified while reading transcripts but not returned in search results. We added these to the corpus, bringing the total to 122 instances of woke. As noted in Table 1, 94 instances were from 20 Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) MPs, the most prolific of

which was current CPC leader Pierre Poilievre (PP) at 35 instances. Meanwhile, 19 instances

came from Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) members, six from Bloc Quebecois (BQ), and

three from New Democratic Party (NDP) MPs.

Table 1: Total Instances of Woke by Year and Political Party (n=122).

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Total	2	3	9	20	88	122
CPC **Pierre Poilievre**	1 PP: 0	3 PP: 0	8 PP: 1	19 PP: 1	63 PP: 33	94 PP: 35
LPC	1	0	0	1	17	19
NDP	0	0	0	0	3	3
BQ	0	0	1	0	5	6

van Dijk (1997, 2011) stresses the importance of acknowledging the topic of political speech

acts, rhetoric, and ideology. Here, we focus on the "topic" and take a particular interest in

meaning, understood as how the MP would define woke or what definition of woke was

conveyed and its intended meaning.

Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic coding and using the qualitative software

package *Atlas.ti*, we undertook an inductive coding process. Coding began with two authors

independently coding a small sample of texts, devising initial categories, and then jointly

discussing results. Corpus categories and working definitions were discussed, revised,

dropped, expanded, or added to the satisfaction of both coders, resulting in seven mutually

exclusive definitions. The entire corpus (n=122) was then independently coded by two

authors with any disagreements or borderline instances discussed and resolved to boost the

"internal validity" of the findings (Bauer and Gaskell 2003, 350). All cases coded to one of seven mutually exclusive woke definitions:

Standalone Uses

1. Awareness: When an MP uses woke to acknowledge racial justice, inequality, discrimination, or broader social injustices.

2. Challenge: When an MP uses woke to challenge or seek clarity around another speaker's vague or implicitly negative use of woke. In this context, the speaker is not defining the word but challenging the MP to provide a definition.

Moral Panic

3. Authoritarian: When an MP uses woke to describe a person, group or event as controlling, intolerant, or authoritarian.

4. Nefarious: When an MP uses woke to imply that nefarious intentions drive the actions of a political party or individual. Actions that may otherwise be seen as ineffective or hollow and are deliberately associated with negative intent.

Delegitimization Strategies

5. Exaggerated: When an MP uses woke to suggest the social concerns expressed by the so-called woke movements are exaggerated, ungenuine, unnecessary and/or illegitimate.

6. Hollow: When an MP uses woke to describe an action as lacking authenticity or being a form of virtue signalling. The use suggests a disconnect between the words and actions or questions the genuine convictions of the targeted MP/party.

7. Ineffective: When an MP uses woke to describe a policy or legislation as either ineffective or actively harmful.

We subsequently categorized all uses of woke into three broader groups: Standalone uses (2), Moral panic (2), and Delegitimization strategies (3). While standalone uses (Awareness, Challenge) each represent a unique use of woke, either acknowledging social injustices or

seeking clarity around the term's use, they are distinct from the negative narratives of the other two groups. Delegitimization strategies, consisting of "Exaggerated", "Hollow", and "Ineffective", question the legitimacy and effectiveness of woke ideas and policies. Meanwhile, moral panic uses (Authoritarian, Nefarious) are the most negative and emotionally charged, constructing woke as controlling, intolerant, or driven by malicious intentions as an active and imminent threat to society.

3. Results and Analysis

The analysis is divided into three themes, each examining how woke has been employed and how its demonization has been contested in Canadian parliamentary discourse. The first theme traces the semantic shift of woke from its original meaning of social awareness to a pejorative term associated with authoritarianism. The second theme explores how woke has been strategically redefined by Conservative MPs to construct a threatening ideological Other. Finally, the third theme analyses how MPs from other parties have attempted to challenge the negative framing of woke, we assess the effectiveness and limitations of politicians' efforts in countering the normalization of far-right rhetoric in Canadian politics.

4.1 Woke - From Awareness to Authoritarian

We can understand the evolution of woke within Canadian parliamentary discourse through three semantic shifts. Its first political use in Parliament was made on February 2, 2019, by Liberal MP Greg Fergus in celebration of Black History Month:

> (1) Whereas we once divided ourselves into narrow interests based on where we or our ancestors came from, more and more we are a woke community that is working together to achieve a common interest: to be equal and to be treated as equal, equal in business, studies, law, culture, innovation, politics, government and citizenship. Fergus, G. (Speaker). (2019). *Edited Hansard 148*(376) [Electronic transcript].

Fergus' statement was the first and only time woke was used in parliament to acknowledge Black History Month or show awareness of any broader social justice issue. Soon after

Fergus' commemoration, Conservative Party members began using woke pejoratively. CPC MP Michael Barrett's remarks capture how woke was deployed in parliamentary discourse following Fergus' first use:

> (2) Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister says that he takes these threats seriously, but he is not giving serious answers[…] Will the Prime Minister ditch the script and the woke talking points and answer yes or no? Will he bar scientists who are sent here from the Chinese government and the Chinese military from accessing sensitive Canadian research facilities? Barrett, M. (Speaker). (2021). *Edited Hansard 150*(104) [Electronic transcript].

Woke was hollow, fake, and unserious in addressing purported issues facing Canadians. Woke was a "script" and denoted as little more than Liberal Party talking points. Used in this way, woke challenged the perceived (in)action of the Liberal party. At the beginning of woke's détournement the term was used pejoratively as a delegitimization strategy and deviation from its roots as a concept committed to racial and social justice. However, the reshaping of the intended meaning of woke took on a more sinister tone in parliamentary discourse in early 2022.

As Canadian COVID-19 policies evolved to mandate full vaccination and proof thereof for some domestic travel and international travel, politicians began using woke more expansively. No longer limited to describing Liberal social policy or the actions of the Prime Minister as infective or hollow, Conservative MPs began using woke to communicate concerns relating to the underlying motivations of those classified as woke. Exactly three years after Fergus 'initial use of woke in 2019, CPC member Garrett Genuis said the following about the Liberal government's pandemic response:

> (3) It is a government that has turned its back on classic liberalism and is instead embracing an authoritarian progressivism. It is a government that values being woke over being free. Genuis, G. (Speaker). (2022). *Edited Hansard 151*(022) [Electronic transcript].

By presenting woke as antithetical to freedom and associating it with 'authoritarian progressivism,' Genuis exemplifies conceptual flipsiding—discursively inverting woke's original meaning and commitment to social and racial justice (freedom from oppression) to portray it as a threat to freedom. Genuis's invocation of "authoritarian progressivism" coupled with the value of "being woke over being free", can also be read as a justification of resistance against the Liberal government's perceived oppression, effectively inverting the meaning of oppression to endorse a worldview that upholds systemic inequalities and white supremacy. This process allows for the recontextualization and normalization of illiberal understandings of society and politics (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024).

As Genuis connected these dots in February 2022, the "Freedom Convoy" had encamped itself in downtown Ottawa outside Parliament Hill. The Convoy's complaints mirrored Genuis' assertions that their freedom was under attack. This use in the House of Commons reflected the sentiments of an increasingly extreme group of right-wing Canadians. Interestingly, this meaning of woke was not only reflected by the right. Liberal MP Andy Fillmore quoted columnist John Ivison's use of woke a few weeks after Genuis:

> (4) It feels like Canada is splintering into two tribes—the intolerant, authoritarian woke lunatics on the left and the spittle-flecked, hateful lunatics on the far-right. 'The optimist in me wants to deny it, but I cannot". Fillmore, A. (Speaker). (2022). *Edited Hansard 151*(035) [Electronic transcript].

By quoting Ivison's characterization of "intolerant, authoritarian woke lunatics on the left" in Parliament, Liberal MP Andy Fillmore lends credence to woke's pejorative use and aligns with the Conservative moral panic. Through conceptual flipsiding, woke is reframed as a polarizing and extremist ideology, with this pejorative inversion gaining such discursive power that it has achieved cross-partisan acceptance in demonizing woke movements and policies. Yet, it was almost exclusively Conservative MPs who drove woke's pejorative use in parliamentary discourse. They consistently presented woke as a threat to Canadian values

and freedoms, portraying it as representative of an authoritarian left that causes or contributes to increasing polarization in Canada. Moreover, Conservative MPs created vague associations between "woke rules ", "woke censorship", "woke division", and a negative "woke agenda" that seeks to "control" and impose a "doctrine" on Canadians, threatening freedom of expression. They framed woke as an ideology being forced 'down throats' and a form of 'cultural domination', strategically recasting social justice advocacy as authoritarian threats to democracy – a discursive move that both legitimizes and normalizes illiberal politics while claiming to defend democratic values. By using such rhetoric, they effectively lay the groundwork for a moral panic around woke authoritarianism, presenting it as an existential threat to individual freedoms and Canadian values.

This framing of woke as an "authoritarian" threat reached a crescendo in 2023, with the term becoming increasingly associated with notions of control, intolerance and division. While woke had generally been used abstractly, things came to a head when Liberal party member Jenica Atwin asked Conservative MP Brad Redekopp and CPC party leader Pierre Poilievre to define what they meant by woke. While Redekopp avoided giving his interpretation, Poilievre was explicit in his extreme categorization:

(5) As for the definition of woke, woke has one purpose and only one purpose. It has plenty of pretexts but only one purpose: control. It is designed to divide people by race, gender, ethnicity, religion, vaccine status and any other way one can divide people into groups. Why? It is because then one can justify having a government to control all those groups. No more woke; we need freedom. Poilievre, P. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151*(176) [Electronic transcript].

Table 2: Meaning of Woke by Year.

		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Totals
Stand Alone	**1. Awareness**	1	0	0	0	0	1
	2. Challenge	0	0	0	0	22	22
Moral Panic	**3. Authoritarian**	0	1	0	6	29	36
	4. Nefarious	0	0	0	0	16	16
Delegitimization	**5. Exaggerated**	0	0	2	0	3	5
	6. Hollow	1	2	3	3	4	13
	7. Ineffective	0	0	4	11	14	29
	Total	2	3	9	20	88	122

Poilievre's reply is the clearest definition of the clearly polysemous woke given in the House of Commons and its most extreme. Poilievre uses conceptual flipsiding to disingenuously invert woke's meaning, framing the pursuit of racial and social justice as a divisive tool of government control, thereby entrenching a moral panic around woke authoritarianism; calls for justice along racial, gender or ethnic lines are calls for division. This discursive shift marks a significant escalation in MP's rhetorical strategies, moving from delegitimizing progressive causes to constructing a deviant "Other" and moral panic around totalitarian woke mobs who present an immediate and urgent threat to social order. As such, the anti-woke discourse is part and parcel of an oyeran discursive strategy intent on increasing "semantic and ideological polarization" through the creation of a constitutive Other; an ideological enemy (van Dijk 1997, 28). Moreover, Poilievre's description of woke's purpose as totalitarian "control" makes its position not one to be debated, but to be fought and

resisted, ultimately seeking to galvanize support by appealing to fears of a woke takeover. In sum, this populist strategy aims to create a clear antagonism between the "freedom-loving" majority and the "authoritarian" woke minority, fueling a moral panic that frames woke activism as a deviant Other threatening the very fabric of Canadian society and values.

4.2 From Adjective to anti-Canadian Adversary - Constructing the Authoritarian 'Other'

Early uses of woke by MPs, beginning in 2019, saw it deployed as an adjective seeking to deride a fellow politician or political party's policies as exaggerated, hollow, or ineffective; a discursive strategy conducted almost exclusively by Conservative MPs and tightly focused on Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberal party. However, this use of woke quickly evolved into a more potent narrative that framed wokeness as inherently anti-Canadian. Indeed, what was woke was often presented as detrimental. This can be seen in Michelle Rempel-Garner's comments from October 4, 2022:

> (6) [Liberal MPs] were quoted in a news article after their caucus meeting, and they said something to the effect that they wished the leadership of their party would stop being so woke and focus on inflation. Rempel-Garner, M. (Speaker). (2022). *Edited Hansard 151*(107) [Electronic transcript].

In this quote, "being so woke" is referring to what MP Kyle Seeback will describe, just a few weeks later as "woke energy environmentalism" (Seeback, K. (Speaker). (2022). *Edited Hansard 151*(116) [Electronic transcript]); that is, green energy policy that is presented as unbeneficial to Canadians. MPs invoked the anti-environmentalist implication of woke to suggest environmental protections do not serve to improve the lives of Canadians. This complaint, of course, strategically ignores the harm that climate change causes to the planet, Canada, and Canadians, and more specifically, Indigenous Canadians. In criticizing NDP MPs for joining the Shut Down Canada protests contesting the Coastal GasLink pipeline, O'Toole said that "working families want more than some woke voices" (O'Toole, E.

(Speaker). (2021). *Edited Hansard 151*(007) [Electronic transcript]). Although Indigenous communities led these protests, O'Toole insisted that the protest "hurts [I]ndigenous communities" (O'Toole, E. (Speaker). (2021). *Edited Hansard 151*(007) [Electronic transcript]). These uses of woke combine to communicate that for something to benefit Canadians, it must positively impact the economy. It must directly benefit more than just a marginalized group like the Wet'suwet'en First Nation. A quote from Garnett Genuis in January 2020 contributes to the idea that woke is selectively beneficial:

(7) [Social justice warriors] seek to invert structures of privilege while still singling people out for bad or good treatment based on characteristics that they cannot control. The prevailing SJW norms of call-out culture, wokeness and privilege inversion do not emphasize the truly radical and much more elevated messages of unity, universal solidarity and shared progress. Genuis, G. (Speaker). (2020). *Edited Hansard 151*(008) [Electronic transcript].

Genuis' remarks capture the perceived threat to Canadian life contained in wokeness. Meanwhile, his description of "privilege inversion" flips woke's core meaning: that social justice does not only seek equality and freedom from oppression, but to oppress those in positions of privilege. He sees this and wokeness as a threat to unity in Canada; he is constructing "social justice warriors" as un-Canadian Others or folk-devils.

As the use of woke as a pejorative term became more entrenched, Conservative MPs began constructing a more abstract and menacing image of wokeness as an authoritarian Other, inverting the roles of the oppressed and oppressor. In February 2022, Conservative MP Jake Stewart described the "woke community" as a force that operates outside of Canadian political norms, seeking to impose its views on the country:

(8) I understand the precedent of a war and how that is the biggest issue of our time, but in this country, all too often the woke community can go out and spew what it likes, drive it down everybody's throat and then try to compare us to American politicians, which could not be any

further from the truth. Stewart, J. (Speaker). (2022). *Edited Hansard 151*(037) [Electronic

transcript].

Stewart's remarks mark a shift from woke describing specific policies or ideas to constructing

a nebulous and threatening Other or folk devil. The woke community is presented as a

threatening and deviant group operating outside societal norms (Cohen 2011). This discursive

move allows woke to serve as a catch-all for a wide range of perceived threats to Canadian

values and freedoms while constructing a nefarious entity and shadowy Other under woke's

banner. In 2023, Conservatives continued their representation of woke as its own political

object. For example, on March 7, 2023, Garnett Genuis described "woke capitalism" as:

(9) [The] idea that large corporations should be making definitive determinations and forcing

those implementations on the country using their power and that governments can push

corporations to push woke ideas or particular views of the common good that arise not

through free democratic deliberation, but that came about because of pressure from corporate

interests. Genuis, G. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151*(165) [Electronic transcript].

Genuis constructs woke as an anti-democratic corporate ideology imposing its will from

outside the political process. It is a clear example of exaggeration and escalation, key

components of a moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). This framing presents "woke

ideas" as an authoritarian Other and ideological enemy whose impending and imposing

ideology threatens Canadian freedom and values. It requires drastic push-back on the part of

Canadians.

Pierre Poilievre's description of woke being about "control" on March 30, 2023 (see

quote above) is the culmination of this discursive transformation. By explicitly framing woke

as a mechanism of control, Poilievre demonstrates conceptual flipsiding as he solidifies its

status as an authoritarian Other: a fully realized, purposefully vague, ideological adversary.

This adversary is a threat in two ways. First, it is a threat within the public, inverting

capitalism's injustice by casting the most marginalized as collaborators with the most

privileged, effectively erasing the systemic inequalities that the social justice perspective aims to address. Second, this Folk-Devil Other threatens to install an authoritarian government. This second, more ominous threat is visible on March 30, 2023, in Pierre Poilievre's remarks on Bill C-11 during a debate with Liberal Greg Fergus. Poilievre comments:

> (10) He [Fergus] says that all artists support this even Margaret Atwood, no Conservative, has said that this bill represents creeping totalitarianism. It gives the power to a woke agency, the CRTC, named by Liberals, to manipulate social media algorithms in order to shut down voices it does not want people to hear. When will the government realize that Orwell's *1984* was not an instruction manual? Poilievre, P. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151 (176)* [Electronic transcript]

Poilievre continues his exchange with Fergus, eventually holding up a copy of Orwell's *1984* in Parliament. By invoking this dystopian novel, Poilievre suggests that the government's actions, particularly through the CRTC, lead Canada toward authoritarianism.

This analysis demonstrates the contingent and fluid nature of (political) discourse. As Derrida (1978) put it, there is no one fixed "transcendent signified" (278-280), only a dynamic horizon of possibilities. At the same time, the moral panic frame and the sense of crisis and threat it represents serve to fix meaning within that contingency. The discursive shift over time observed in the anti-woke moral panic discourse in Canadian parliamentary records furthermore follows the problematic path of escalation from presenting woke as a political adversary to that of a political enemy, alien to Canadian values, or put differently from agonism to antagonism (Mouffe 2013).

4.3 Push-back or Paradox? MPs' Challenges to the Negative Framing of Woke

This final section examines instances of woke coded as "Challenge" (n=22) where MPs used woke to seek clarity around another speaker's vague or implicitly negative use of the term.

Challenges were made by Liberals (n=17), New Democrats (n=2), and Bloc Quebecois (n=3) MPs, while no challenges were coded by Conservative MPs. Inductive analysis revealed four challenge types – positive self-representation, as an insult, questioning anti-woke and denoting it as far-right rhetoric (See Table 3).

Table 3: Typology of "Challenge"

MP/Party Name	1. Positive Self	2. Insult	3. Questioning	4. "Far right rhetoric"	Totals
Atwin	0	0	2	0	2
Ferrada	0	1	0	0	1
Guilbeault	2	0	0	0	2
Hussen	0	5	0	1	6
Gerretsen	0	5	1	0	6
LPC Total	2	11	3	1	17
Boulerice	0	0	1	0	1
MacGregor	0	1	0	0	1
NDP Total	0	1	1	0	2
Simard/BQ Total	3	0	0	0	3
CUs	5	12	4	1	22

Woke as Positive Self Presentation (n=5): Some MPs used woke to redirect discourse and positively frame themselves or their party. For example, Liberal Minister Hon. Steven Guilbeault highlighted his priorities when called woke:

> (11) Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition and many members across the way have called me woke before, and if woke means standing up for the future of my children and grandchildren so that they have access to clean air and clean water, then so be it" Guilbeault, A. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151*(195) [Electronic transcript].

While such instances push back against Conservatives' use of woke, their primary purpose is positive partisan framing, and they do little to challenge far-right rhetoric.

Woke as an Insult (n=12): Primarily used by Liberal MPs Ahmed Hussen and Mark Gerretsen in response to Pierre Poilievre identifying "woke mayors" as a factor worsening the housing crisis in Canada. MPs typically described Poilievre's statements as "insulting", "denigrating", or "attacking", and Hussen's push-back is typical of coded responses:

> (12) Mr. Speaker, maybe the hon. member needs to talk to her leader, because he stood up
>
> in this House and insulted and denigrated three of the leading mayors of Canada's
>
> largest cities, calling them 'woke'. Hussen, A. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard*
>
> *151*(195) [Electronic transcript].

Viewed superficially, Hussen defends the mayors' honour and chides the Conservative leader for his insolent remarks. However, by failing to challenge the underlying premise of Poilievre's invocation of "woke mayors", Hussen's interaction, even if unintentionally, contributes to woke's pejorative use and the abnormalization of social justice causes. Lastly, by focusing their criticism on the perceived insult to the mayors rather than the problematic use of woke itself, Liberal MPs miss an opportunity to challenge the Conservative's strategic weaponization of the term. As a result, this "Challenge" closely resembles typical Conservative uses of woke, employing the term for partisan gain rather than genuinely pushing back against its far-right connotations.

Questioning Woke's Definition (n=4): MPs questioned Conservatives' nebulous and pejorative use of woke. NDP Member Alexandre Boulerice set the tone, stating, "Anything the Conservatives do not like they call 'woke'." Boulerice, A. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard 151*(173) [Electronic transcript]. Boulerice's remarks highlight woke's lack of clear definition and its use as a catch-all for Conservative disapproval. Liberal MP Jenica Atwin took a different approach, asking Conservative MPs Brad Redkopp and Pierre Poilievre to define woke. While Atwin sought to push back against the term's vagueness, her question

inadvertently provided Poilievre with an opportunity to solidify his preferred definition of woke as referring to an imagined means of control and division, replying, as quoted earlier, that woke is about "control" (ibid).

The exchange between Atwin and Poilievre highlights how the "Questioning" challenge—while aiming to push back against the vagueness and negative connotations of woke—can inadvertently provide a platform for Conservatives to entrench their preferred meanings further. In this regard, it is important to heed Lakoff's (quoted in Salon 2017) point that "if you negate a frame, you have to activate the frame because you have to know what you're negating. If you use logic against something, you are strengthening it". While these challenges push back against the negative connotations and vagueness of woke, they stop short of explicitly calling out how the term has been co-opted and weaponized by far-right discourse to discredit and silence progressive voices. By not directly addressing the far-right origins of the pejorative use of woke these challenges fail to confront the creeping normalization of far-right rhetoric in Parliament by Conservatives, allowing it to remain unchallenged and potentially gaining further legitimacy.

Far-right (n=1): There was only one instance in the corpus where an MP connected the parliamentary usage of woke to evolving far-right rhetoric. This connection is important to highlight because it challenges the notion that far-right ideas are separate from mainstream party politics and posits that these ideas are deeply entangled with the language and strategies employed by political actors. The single instance was made on May 3, 2023, by then Housing Minister Ahmed Hussen:

> (13) Yesterday, he stood in the House and attacked what he called Canada's "woke mayors."
> Conservative cuts and that type of far-right rhetoric will not build one affordable
> housing unit. Unlike the Conservatives, we know that we need to work with our

municipalities to get more homes. Hussen, A. (Speaker). (2023). *Edited Hansard*
151(190) [Electronic transcript].

This single instance of directly calling out the use of woke as far-right rhetoric is significant because it demonstrates an awareness of the term's origins and its strategic weaponization. By explicitly linking the Conservatives' use of woke to far-right rhetoric, Hussen momentarily disrupts the normalization of this language and highlights its problematic ideological underpinnings. Yet, Hussen's challenge is limited in effectiveness, as he quickly pivots to positive self-presentation and fails to further elaborate on the implications of far-right rhetoric infiltrating parliamentary discourse.

In sum, the "Challenges" made by Liberal, NDP, and Bloc Quebecois MPs reveal a spectrum of push-back against the Conservatives' weaponization of the term, ranging from positive self-presentation to questioning its definition. However, these challenges collectively fail to effectively counter Parliament's normalization of far-right rhetoric.

4. Conclusion

Far-right, mainstream, and parliamentary discourses have weaponized the term woke to disarm its original meaning, and this discursive détournement reflects a growing global shift towards more far-right positions and the increasing appropriation of far-right tropes, value systems, and communicative strategies by the mainstream right-wing of politics in many countries. By tracking the evolution of woke in parliamentary discourse, this analysis has shown how the term has been quickly and radically shifted from its roots as a means of highlighting awareness of racism and broader social justice struggles to something that is framed as both anti-Canadian and a nefarious authoritarian Other. Conceptual flipsiding, as applied in this context, serves to amplify political polarization by redefining social justice and Liberal positions as oppressive, oppositional forces to national values. These discursive strategies, almost exclusively deployed by Conservative MPs, delegitimize progressive ideas

and movements, contribute to the broader polarization of Canadian politics, and frame such ideas as fundamentally anti-democratic—positioning them as threats too dangerous to be included in democratic debate. Particularly concerning is the use of woke to craft an authoritarian Other, whereby the Conservative Party is positioned as the only political defender of freedom against this looming totalitarian threat. This strategy, most prominently deployed by party leader Pierre Poilievre, demonstrates how mainstream conservative politicians can bridge with and normalize far-right rhetoric while maintaining institutional legitimacy. In doing so, "liberal-democratic notions [are] being purposefully misused by illiberals while thus effectively hijacking the democratic language" (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023, 420).

Our findings also support Krzyżanowski et al.'s (2023) observation that anti-democratic and post-democratic action is increasingly normalized within democratic processes and institutions, often through illiberal actors' strategic misuse of liberal-democratic notions. The weaponization of woke in Canadian parliamentary discourse exemplifies this broader global trend of conceptual flipsiding, where political actors strategically invert the meanings of terms associated with liberal democracy to deny certain rights while claiming to protect others. By tracking the evolution of woke in Canadian parliamentary discourse, this analysis demonstrates how the term has been quickly and radically shifted from its origins in highlighting awareness of racism and social justice struggles to something that is framed as both anti-Canadian and a nefarious authoritarian Other. This process, as observed in various international contexts, serves to normalize and hegemonize divisive, intolerant far-right ideologies without explicitly asserting them, thereby enabling the legitimization of exclusionary politics (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024).

This analysis of conceptual flipsiding in parliamentary discourse opens important directions for future research. While our focus on woke in the Canadian context reveals key mechanisms of democratic language manipulation, future studies might examine how other progressive terms undergo similar processes of conceptual inversion across different national contexts. The transformation of woke follows historical patterns seen with terms like 'political correctness' and 'social justice warrior' - progressive concepts strategically redefined by the right as threats to freedom and social order. It would be particularly valuable to explore how these terms interact with concepts like 'freedom' as they are systematically recontextualized for illiberal ends, building a longer historical understanding of how democratic language is appropriated and inverted.

Some Canadian MPs effectively challenged the normalization of far-right rhetoric in Parliament through their counter-uses of woke. However, these counter-frames often enabled rather than contested the insidious creep of far-right ideas in Canadian politics. By failing to explicitly identify how the mainstream right abnormalized and hollowed out woke, these push-backs legitimized the term's redefinition. When politicians accept woke as a valid criticism and take offence as an insult, they demonstrate 'complicit civility' (Stuckey 2022). This acceptance allows far-right actors to spread their rhetoric and legitimize their politics within democratic institutions without challenge.

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