Protesting the Right to Protest: Fighting Bill C-51

March 2015...

On Saturday, March 14, 2015 I attended a rally against Bill C-51 in Nanaimo that was hosted by the local Green Party. Protesters gathered downtown on the corner outside of the Vancouver Island Conference Centre then marched to Haafco Sutton Park. There a crowd gathered to listen to a series of speakers, such as local candidates Paul Manly and Sheila Malcolmson, voice their concerns on Bill C-51.

What is Bill C-51?

Bill C-51 is the controversial “anti-terror” act that was introduced by the Conservative government. It was first read in parliament on January 30, 2015 and immediately received backlash from the majority of Canadians. Despite public protests and opposition from many, the bill received royal assent on June 18, 2015 by the Governor General and was passed into law.

Summary of the Bill

The purpose of the bill was to allow CSIS, Canada’s intelligence service, the legal powers to effectively deal with terrorism or terrorist suspects. It gives CSIS the ability to tap into private phone conversations and emails, as well as the power to legally detain citizens suspected of “terrorist activities” and deny them of their rights.

The bill also included amendments to the Criminal Code, the Security of Canada Information Sharing Act, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act, and the Secure Air Travel Act. The writing is vague, with the word “terrorism” used several times without a clear definition. It also targets groups or organizations guilty of engaging in “activities that undermine the security of Canada,” which could include peaceful protesting or acts of political dissent.

Opposition

Those against Bill C-51 would include Conrad Black, Rex Murphy, BC Premier Christy Clark, Federal Green Party leader Elizabeth May, and Federal NDP leader Thomas Mulcair. Also opposing the bill are over 100 law professors, four former Prime Ministers, five Supreme Court Justices, and many Canadian citizens. Critics have pointed out that there are already provisions against terrorism and that this bill would only deprive Canadians of their rights. There are also fears that the act would turn CSIS into a secret police force and push dangerous groups or individuals underground. It has been described as “ridiculous,” “reckless,” and contrary to Canadian values.

Liberal Support

During his campaigning for the 2015 federal election, Federal Liberal leader Justin Trudeau promised to consult the public about the bill and amend sections that were problematic. He still voted in favour “because there are elements in that bill that keep Canada’s safe” (Kliman, 2015). Since Trudeau was elected in October 2015 there has still been no amendments for the bill or broad public consultation.

National Day of Action

Thousands of Canadians in 70 different cities across the country took to the streets on March 14, 2015 to protest the bill. These included major cities such as Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal, and Ottawa. Protesters also voiced their opposition towards the Harper government and included politicians, professors, and Aboriginal leaders.

March 2016

On Saturday, March 12, 2016 I attended a protest outside the front entrance of the Victoria Conference Centre on 720 Douglas street. I was aware of the rally from the event page on Facebook. The main purpose was to hassle the Federal Liberals entering the building into repealing Bill C-51.

The story was covered by Check News in an article that also covered the protest against the Site C Dam that same day and gave a brief summary of both protests. No other news networks seemed to have covered the event.

The protesters included people of different ages, communities, and organizations. Many different groups and non-profit organizations were present, such as Clowns against Child Poverty, Anonymous, the Council of Canadians, and Young Greens. We were networking with each other and promoting their various causes, some handing out pamphlets and recruiting others for their movements.

The overall atmosphere of the rally was positive as protestors peacefully engaged with pedestrians, motorists, and Liberals Party members passing by. Several people were given a chance to address the crowd, such as a member of the Liberal Party, a former Soviet citizen, and Laurel Collins, professor of Social Justice at the University of Victoria.