

I stood in line for a vaccine. It was grand, just like Canada's ice cubes

by Conrad Black



After weeks of bemoaning the desolate public policy landscape of Canada, I feel a compulsion to write something positive; Canada, after all, is still a good country and a place where pleasant surprises still occur. As a change of pace, I want to write in praise of those administering the COVID vaccine. My visit to St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto on Monday to receive my second COVID vaccination was an uplifting experience. I was advised by text that my previous appointment had been moved forward a month and arrived ahead of time, prepared for a lengthy wait and a certain amount of amiable confusion, as occurred at my previous appearance for my first vaccination. The line outside on Queen Street moved fairly

steadily and was filled with people speaking a variety of languages that are not official in this country, through their masks, but all were in good humour.

Canadian queues are among the things, like ice cubes and hockey, that Canada does better than anyone else. (American and British ice cubes are irritatingly insubstantial). Americans don't particularly like lining up for things and it is such a competitive and individualistic society that while queues are rarely disorderly, there is often a cautionary air of impatience and even a hint of jostling. The British queue is robotic and silent, but with an air of sanctimony, presumably derived from comparisons with what the British encounter when they queue in France, Italy or Spain. There is an unspoken competition in the British queues over who can be the most stoical and demonstratively patient, and who can be the first to remind someone that queue-jumping is, next to cruelty to animals, the most abominable offence in Britain. Queues are effective in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, but they are stultifying; people don't speak much and there isn't a great deal of variety among them. In the queue at St. Michael's, people were of all ages, with a full range of apparel from quite stylish women to a hoary man in authentic blue overalls. The most intriguing person in our line was a lady in an automated wheelchair who every couple of minutes embarked on a broad circular reconnaissance movement that always brought her back to several places behind the position in the queue that she had vacated, and we all, without histrionics, moved back to ensure that she had not lost ground from her perambulation. To anyone who has experienced the physical and verbal combat of trying to advance fairly to the front of any notional line-up in Italy or even southern France, not to mention, drawing from my own experience, such places as Egypt, Israel, Senegal, Brazil, Spain or Indonesia, a Canadian queue can be a somewhat enhancing experience that incites national pride.

The supervisory personnel at St. Michael's were exquisitely courteous and friendly and I was directed to a perfectly comfortable chair at exactly the time that I had been advised when my vaccination would occur. A couple of nearby people on the same mission happened to be readers of this column and I enjoyed very interesting conversations with them as we awaited our turn. Signage and public address references to the Cardinal Carter wing of the hospital put me in mind of my late, great friend, Gerald Emmett Cardinal Carter, a wonderful man whom I miss every day. When I last saw him, it was on his deathbed in the Cardinal Carter suite of the Cardinal Carter wing, for the construction of which I did a modest amount of fundraising. There was a little nostalgia, even in this mundane expedition. The little bay of chairs where I was sitting was managed by a most efficient and agreeable man who asked only sensible questions and soon administered the most painless penetration with a needle I have ever had. I'm not overly squeamish about these things but when he asked me to keep my finger on the little piece of gauze, I wasn't sure if he had already inoculated me. He asked me to remain exactly where I was for 20 minutes in case any negative reaction might occur.

None did; I've never had a problem with any inoculation. As far as I know, I'm not really allergic to anything and I have been blessed with good health all these years. As I was on the ground floor beside quite tall windows, I had the opportunity as I waited to take in the cityscape. After a couple of minutes, I realized how astonishingly free of litter the busy street corner of Queen and Victoria streets is. (The street names are redolent of Toronto's profoundly Anglo-colonial urban origins.) From my chair, I searched every corner of the panorama along all of the converging streets without seeing anything that would qualify as rubbish. Similarly, the passersby, while not flamboyant (English-speaking Canadians rarely are), were of all ages, races and about equally divided between the two discernible sexes, but none seemed angry,

purposeless, down-at-the-heel or overly self-conscious. From that vantage point, Canadians, or at least Torontonians, came across as well-adjusted and passably contented people.

At the risk of being portentous, this is the Canadian condition: good, rather well-educated people, derived from every imaginable ethnic group, a low violent crime rate, politics relatively free of financial corruption, a general absence of racial or other inter-group tensions, a respectably good justice system, especially compared to America's prosecutocracy and carceral state. Canadians generally enjoy a good quality of life. Canada is always among the leaders in international surveys of desirable places to live. What is missing is drama, which in national terms usually translates as current or historic violence and political upheaval. Monuments to, and reminders of, such violence litter the landscape in many countries. Some commemorate recent violence, like the 9/11 memorial in New York. Others historic, such as U.S. Civil War battlefields, the Tower of London, the Verdun and Normandie war cemeteries of France, the great boulevards and Napoleonic monuments of Paris, and the countless locations in Rome and throughout Italy; or the architectural evidence, grouped closely together like the rings of a tree of successive regimes, in Berlin.

Canada is quiet because it has a genius of its own: there is almost no political violence because the Canadian tradition has always been one of endless good-faith negotiations. That is not to say we don't have our issues. Our prime minister has subscribed (falsely and with no plausible authorization) on behalf of all of us to the supposition that Canada committed the heinous crime of attempted cultural genocide against Indigenous people. The government of Quebec is purporting unilaterally to modify the Constitution Act, 1982, to which it has never officially subscribed, as it purports to abolish the use of the English language in federal government buildings and in the workplaces of federally chartered companies such as

the CBC and the chartered banks. Yet these are things we will work out in our own fashion. We win the trade-off: no person of sound mind wants the sort of rampant crime and frequent rioting that besets the United States, or war that is commemorated in monuments across Europe, from the Valley Of the Fallen near Madrid to the Kremlin.

There is no excuse for the fact that every Canadian man, woman and child has a per capita income that's \$10,000 below that of Australians, and this is a country where I was fired from my weekly spot on a radio station for defending Canadians against the charge of "systemic racism." We will pay a price if our admirably quiescent nature degenerates into complacency. But the view from the vaccination lounge of St. Michael's Hospital last week was serene and placatory.

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