

The Coronavirus Pandemic - A Deja Vu

By John (Jack) Jackaman

As a person who was born in 1933, I have been following the instructions and directions of my Canadian government to isolate myself during this latest world pandemic. Isolation gives one an opportunity to think, particularly when undertaking routine house and garden chores. I am fortunate to live in a country cottage with a one-acre garden and only one close neighbour. Our past winter's several windstorms littered my grassed areas with branches and other debris that has had to be raked several times. This rather mind-numbing task allowed me to muse and remember my myriad past experiences in what has been a very active and fascinating life.

However, throughout these mental gyrations my thoughts continued to return to how the younger generations are going to cope with what may be significant and long-term changes in their lives. So many, particularly those young people in middle-class communities in many western nations, have enjoyed extraordinary lives without any notable setbacks. It has been normal for them to enjoy gap years before they attend universities and travel the world. High school car parks are full of students' cars. In my own family we had at one point five automobiles parked in my driveway before my three children departed the nest. The baby boomers in particular have enjoyed quality lifestyles by growing up in Canada in its boom years and have good pensions and the opportunity to own their own homes. Although Canada has been involved in a Cold War, many peace-keeping and peace-making operations and a few economic problems, most boomers have not been directly affected. The Dot Com and banking problems were eventually solved and the stock market in the long term has thrived.

It is only in recent years that housing prices have soared making house ownership impossible for many. Long term pensionable jobs are now in the past but there are still good jobs available but only to those with advanced education in the digital, scientific and medical fields. For those young folks who chose to not complete their education or did not go further than basic high school, they now are faced with minimum wage jobs in the service sector. This has been a wake-up call to many and now suddenly their world has moved into a disaster situation with millions unemployed in almost all sectors of the nation's work force. Many young folks seem to be unaware that their lives have changed forever and do not realize that the Covid-19 virus is extremely serious, and many in their age group may be casualties in this pandemic. Initially the blatant disregard for following government instruction for social isolation and keeping away from other persons by at least two meters and washing one's hands was very evident. It finally caused governments at all levels to make these instructions legal directions with significant fines for those who disregard them. We are now in a situation with most of our economy shut down, including sports events, large community events, schools, all industries other than essential ones, shops and pubs. Only grocery and pharmacist stores are open for business.

The present situation must be an enormous shock to young folk as their world has turned upside down, and they have no experience of really hard times in their young lives. This brings me to my own personal outlook and how many older folks of my generation seem to be coping reasonably well. The elderly in a social club I belong to seem to take the situation in their stride. I suspect that they have been through very different lives in the past. Many served in WW 2 and the Korean War, and others were reared on isolated prairie farms and walked miles to attend one classroom schools. They too lived through local and family disasters so being confined to their homes is something that they are used to, and now, in part, may be due to physical limitations and personal circumstances.

I must admit I am not pleased that at 87 my twilight years are being spent isolated, and I have had to cancel trips to the UK and to South Africa to attend a granddaughter's wedding. As the happy couple, now living in Canada, could not fly and attend their own wedding in South Africa, it has had to be delayed. On the other hand, I have enjoyed throughout my life a prosperous Canada, have good pensions, own my own house and have no debts whatsoever. The pandemic for me is just an inconvenience, but to the many young couples with large mortgages and significant credit card debt it is a disaster. Two steady incomes are critical to their survival. Many are single mothers and dads, and those working in jobs that do not have unemployment insurance are in extremely difficult situations as they live paycheck to paycheck. Others trying to survive on Canada Pension and Old Age Security are already having financial difficulties. Fortunately, we have a government that recognises these problems and is making every effort to put money into people's pockets by introducing significant financial support to industries, businesses and workers. It has to be recognized that once the pandemic is over there will be years of recovery just as there was after the Great Depression and World War II.

As I thought back in time, I suddenly realized that it was a sort of Deja vu for me. I felt I had been through similar circumstances in my past, sometimes without realizing the situation until becoming a young adult trying to find my own way in life. I was born just after the Great Depression, and my parents were in the middle of building their lives as the world recovered from this huge economic disaster. It must have been a considerable challenge as they began married life, and I was born, and four years later my sister arrived on the scene.

Then yet another disaster struck and, in 1939, Britain went to war with Germany. In 1940 my father was called up and served in the RAF for four years and subsequently crossed over to France soon after D-day and followed the Canadian Division up through Belgium, Holland and into Germany. My mother was left in London in our small terraced basic home of the time to adjust to a significant drop in the family income. Food and clothing rationing was introduced and then she had to face the London Blitz followed by the flying bombs and rockets in the latter stage of the war. With two young children to feed and clothe it would have been difficult. She would send us off to school not knowing if we would return safely. By then I was old enough to be aware of the situation, but as a young boy it was just normal life. Helping to dig a hole in the garden and install an Anderson shelter and later to sleep under a Morison steel table with a spring bed underneath was part of life. We had ack-ack guns deployed in the garden allotments behind our house, and I can remember the shrapnel from these guns breaking some of the tiles of our house

roof and gathering quite a collection that were to be found all around our neighbourhood. I can remember seeing the first German bombing raid on Croydon Airport and observing the Battle of Britain in the skies above me and meeting my first German who had bailed out over a small village in Surrey. He was being held in a police car, and I can remember he looked just like us.

Our home in Thornton Heath and the Croydon area was hard hit. A large number of V1 and V2 Rockets hit these areas of South London. 162 flying bombs landed. 1,032 houses were destroyed and 56,968 were damaged. 215 people were killed and 1,996 injured. The V2 rocket caused a further 9 deaths and injured 45. During this period, we continued to live in our avenue; however, soon after D Day in 1944, when my father went overseas, my mother packed us all up and took us north to Scotland to stay with her sisters who had married Scots. By this time, the worst of the V1 attacks had ended as Allied troops overran launching pads in France. We arrived back in the Croydon area to experience the V2 rockets that were launched from inside Germany.

Growing up in wartime Britain meant that I had a different approach than my own children to those adults I looked up to and admired. My heroes were not the well-known sports athletes, but the famous fighter pilots of the day - Douglas Bader, Johnnie Johnson, "Cats Eye" Cunningham, Bob Braham and the like. The newspapers were full of wartime news, so when the war finally ended, I remember asking my mother whether newspapers would continue to be published as there was no longer any war news.

It was in my early and late teens that I was to experience and understand the actions taking place in Britain as it recovered from the war years. The millions of returning servicemen were filling jobs and to a young man who wanted to get married and have a home of his own it was a difficult job market. Having a home of one's own was an impossible dream. What automobiles were on the roads were prewar models, and new ones were reserved for export. Even in 1954 certain food items such as meat and sugar were still rationed. Ultimately these conditions led to my decision to immigrate to Canada. By the 1960's Germany had rebuilt their bombed-out cities, and their industry was booming, thanks in part to the American Marshall plan. In London, it was a long recovery and there was still evidence of the aftermath of the blitz and subsequent bombing.

I am not sure if one can compare the recovery of Britain after the war to the one that will take place at the end of the present pandemic, but there is a contrast. We were poor, and I had never had anything brand new. An old used bike was my only means of transportation. Our house had individual coal fires in each room, but usually only the one in the kitchen was lighted. The tiny bathroom was very basic; hot water was severely limited and the electric immersion heater was only turned on for weekly bath nights. We were the only house in our road of terraced houses that had a private car. My father had returned to his job as a salesman for Symington's, a soup manufacturer, and a small Morris Minor came with the job. Unlike our neighbours, we also had a telephone that was used by my father to phone in the orders each day that he had received. It was rarely used otherwise except to call the doctor. Charges were made even for local calls so social use was not encouraged.

Contrast this to young teenage Canadians, many of whom drive themselves to high school in their own cars. Many look forward to the end of their basic education to the gap year where they go on exotic world trips. They have enjoyed, for the most part, the comfort of a modern home with their own room and even bathroom. Food is plentiful and the washing of clothes is undertaken with ease by the use of washing machines and dryers. Best of all, the home would be centrally heated. Computers and cell phones are all part of their lives. When I came to Canada, one had to book a telephone call to the UK, and a few days later your phone would ring. You were given three minutes to talk to family, and it cost the earth. I am always amazed that with my own i-Phone, I can press a couple of buttons and be talking to my daughter in South Africa. When using my computer, I can chat and see her at the same time, all at no cost.

I can only hope our younger generation is observing recent events: life is not a bed of roses, and they can move into difficult times almost overnight. The recovery from this event may take time, and the world they live in has changed. They will, like me in the post war recovery times, have to live with it as best one can. Things will change, and better times are on their way. Hopefully now that they have experienced an event of such major unprecedented proportions, they will prepare themselves for the future and mitigate or avoid future disasters.

I can now hope that the recovery from Covid-19 will go smoothly and will not last a long time. Our younger population are already showing concern for the environment and hopefully this will continue. I am sure that the incredible decrease in air pollution over the big industrial nations of the world since the worldwide industrial shutdowns have taken place has been observed. We now have wildlife wandering around our big cities, and the canals in Venice becoming clear with fish observed swimming in them. These are obvious indications that we, mankind, are responsible for the situation we are in concerning the environment. It would seem to confirm that our world must free itself from carbon-based energy and convert as much as possible to solar energy. If we do not move in this direction it will, in just a relatively short time, continue our march to increased air pollution, significant weather changes, and sea levels rising to catastrophic levels. By then, even more draconian decisions will have to be made if human life is to continue to thrive on this speck of dust in the enormity of space.