

Borders, Boundaries and Being Bamboozled

by SHERALYN ROMAN

As I write this, we are in the midst of yet another election in Canada, an election I have already plainly stated need not have happened, in my humble opinion.

I have no idea what the outcome will be, what I suspect however is that very little will actually change for the majority of us ?average? Canadians. We are also awaiting news on whether we will soon be able to drive, not just fly, across the border to visit our neighbours to the south. In a policy that makes very little sense to me, we've flung open our borders to US travellers despite the fact that they are once again facing high COVID numbers, all while the US is denying entry to us!

In the absence of being able to comment on either of these two outcomes given press deadlines, what I will say ? with a reasonable level of confidence ? is that current border divisions recently really tested my boundaries regardless of who wins the election Canadians are being bamboozled if they choose to travel.

I recently made a personal decision to travel after much soul-searching and for very personal reasons. I believed that I had given the matter significant and careful thought and that as a double-vaxxed and masked traveller I had (and would) take every reasonable precaution. The plane flight was unremarkable and I had planned on spending the majority of my visit in a remote, lakeside location with little contact with Americans. Here I would continue to work remotely but with a much better view, share valuable time with family and perhaps dine out on a patio or two. Little did I suspect the significance of the difference in boundaries between the Canadian and American border. Frankly, it's left me questioning who is doing this pandemic thing ?right.?

I wouldn't say Americans are apathetic. They do talk frequently about ?the COVID? and folks they know who have caught it, fought it or died from it. How they talk about it however, has far less to do with fear of it. I believe Canadians have a healthy respect, and yes, a fear of the virus, despite the fact our numbers are so much lower. (Even when taking into account population differences.) Americans, I came to discover, have moved on. They go out for dinner both indoors and outdoors and in many locations neither patrons nor servers wore masks. Church parking lots were full on Sunday and one nearby town was hosting a ?Sip and Savour? event that had the downtown corridor closed off to vehicular traffic and large numbers of people meandering about. Very few masks were in sight. At no time did I feel singled out, pointed at or questioned, nor did I attract any anti-maskers making me feel uncomfortable but, my personal boundaries were pushed to the limit and on one occasion I had to leave in order to prevent a panic attack. It may seem a little extreme but when you've done virtually nothing for 18 months, loud noises and crowded places feel not just threatening but ? well ? loud and crowded. I'm just not used to it anymore! I would venture to say that for many Canadians, you might find real life noisy and after such a long time housebound the impact of attempting to venture out will test your boundaries too.

As for the bamboozling, it's the only reasonably polite word for what the Canadian government is doing to travellers leaving the country. Talk about testing the boundaries of my faith in the Canadian health care system! Prior to visiting just about anywhere, one must take a COVID test and, of course, I agree with that 100%. It protects you, your fellow travellers and those in the destination country. There are a variety of tests that can be taken (who knew) including rapid antigen and PCR-molecular. Now I understand and respect that I made the decision to travel and that there is a cost associated with this. I'm not rich and between the pandemic and current finances my decision was not undertaken lightly. What I did not anticipate was paying the equivalent of the downpayment on my first car for the dang test! I also didn't know I'd need a degree in website interface technology to complete the enrolment process. We Canadians can be smug about a great many things in terms of how we have handled the pandemic but obtaining a COVID test for travel purposes will test the very limits of your patience and when compared to the American experience ? you'll realize just how much you've been fleeced.

Leaving the country requires you to obtain a test from a licenced and approved source. Predictably, depending on where you live, there are few or only one to choose from. You must complete an extensive questionnaire including submitting every number you've

ever been assigned from birth. Health card, SIN#, birthdate, Passport, Nexus, Driver's License, I've probably forgotten a few. Dates of travel, addresses you're visiting, flight info ? the list goes on. All of which is fine, I get it, contract tracing. The real source of aggravation comes once you've completed every damn box, it takes you to the payment page and the charge is \$224 after taxes. For a 15 second nasal swab! You will not be given the appointment til you pay. Then, adding insult to injury you are redirected to the site where you actually book the appointment at which point you are required to duplicate ALL the information you just submitted to the first website. When you're done folks ? you still don't have an actual appointment, the pharmacy closest to you will call and book it sometime ?within the next 24 hours.? Pure insanity. Should a family of four wish to take a vacation from this crazy world we are living in, they'll have to add close to an extra \$1,000 to their vacation costs! As to why the two booking websites don't exchange all your personal information I have no idea. Why the exorbitant cost for a nasal swab? Woe betide the Canadian who chooses to travel because you'll be bamboozled out of \$200+ bucks before you ever leave for the airport.

For comparison purposes, guess what happened to me when it was time to come home? I drove to a CVS Pharmacy across the street at my scheduled appointment time that took all of 10 minutes to book online, the only real delay being that the system didn't seem to know what to do with my Canadian postal code. I waited in a drive-thru line, safely in my car, and when it was my turn, an RN who's only job it was to ?administer? the tests, explained the process, handed me a bag with the swab, directed me on how to do it and how to place the swab in the vial and return it to the bag. She told me I would get the results in 24-36 hours. It was simple, relatively quick and guess how much it cost me? Nothing! I paid \$0 dollars in a country where I am not even a citizen to get the exact same molecular test and I did it from the comfort of my own car! I think we're doing something wrong when a country we constantly criticize for their approach to health care offers up the same safe travel testing for free but my ?free? Canadian health care charged me \$224 dollars!

Now before I go, all you folks who might be tempted to say, ?If you choose to travel you should pay the price,? I don't disagree. There's a cost associated with almost anything in life and why would this be any different? But, much like how the LCBO and Beer Store have a monopoly on beer and wine with resulting higher costs in Canada than what our American neighbours might pay, it seems the Canadian government has granted some kind of monopoly on travel COVID testing and it might just be enough to prohibit many Canadians from ever travelling again ? COVID or not!