

Freedom and democracy taken for granted

by Mark Pavilons

We are quite lucky in this country, the True North Strong and Free.

We know it, say it, but many of our citizens don't likely grasp the true meaning.

We take democracy and our rights and freedoms for granted. Didn't we have these all along?

Well, we operated as a free and open country, under the Canadian Bill of Rights, passed in 1960. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms only came into existence in 1982 and it's an integral part of our Constitution.

We Canadians are guaranteed freedoms of conscience and religion; belief, opinion, expression and a free press; peaceful assembly, and voting rights, to name a few.

These are essential to a responsible, accountable democratic and fair system.

Canadians fought in two world wars and other conflicts to preserve it.

As we've seen in Russia and the Ukraine, many citizens around the world don't enjoy these same fundamental rights.

They can't gather and protest, as Canadians do on a weekly basis. They can't speak their minds.

They can't always vote in an election. Some countries merely appoint leaders, and in others where illiteracy is high, photocopied ballots show photos and names of the candidates and that's about it.

In many countries still today, the press is monitored, censored and rewritten. Can you imagine reading a daily newspaper that has been altered by bureaucrats, changing events to suit their purpose? That's a form of propaganda, a method used by the Nazis during the Second World War.

Citizens in more countries than you can count are misled, lied to and purposely kept away from the truth and happenings going on around the world.

Most of the younger generation (under 30) may have little, or no sense of history. Most Boomers do.

I learned from my parents. My father escaped Latvia at the end of the War, which was simply taken by the Soviet Union, along with their Baltic neighbours Lithuania and Estonia.

My dad's relatives lived under the thumb of Communism for decades, until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. It was only then that my dad could have an open and frank conversation with his relatives.

Prior to that phone calls and letters were monitored, altered and even disconnected.

I remember my dad showing me a letter returned to him ? it had thick black pen marks over several sentences and paragraphs. Every mention of the free life in Canada were deleted. That image is etched in my brain ? a stark reality of totalitarian regimes.

My dad hated the ruling powers of the Soviet Union until his dying days. He'd be rolling over if he was what was happening today.

The Baltic states are understandably worried that Russia is knocking at nearby doors. Like the Ukrainians, the people of those countries would do anything to prevent a return to Russian control.

My mom was a teen during the war and in trying to flee to the west over the wall she was assaulted by Russian soldiers. She and my uncle narrowly escaped machine gun fire by Russian soldiers.

To this day, my heart bears the scars of what my parents endured.

I have always been optimistic, in that all world nations can come together, cooperate and end imperialistic, totalitarian dictatorships, so people can be free.

It would seem that isn't true, as Russia's actions have clearly shown. We may not know the real reasons for Putin's aggression, but most see it as pure greed, imperialism and control over the masses. So much for these being archaic concepts.

And Russian citizens themselves seem to agree.

What Canadians also can't fully grasp is being a 'newcomer' to a foreign land. Our country is home to countless European and world cultures of citizens from every corner of the globe.

They love Canada but they never lose their love, dedication and commitment to their homelands. They are first and foremost Ukrainian, German, Polish, Italian, etc. And those cultures are encouraged to live on and blossom here, making our country the beautiful mosaic it is.

This was evident in the fact some Canadian citizens actually travelled to Europe to support Ukraine, even pick up arms to defend it. That takes unbelievable resolve, guts and courage.

My mom, and likely many British citizens, told stories of hiding out in subway tunnels when bombs dropped from the skies over Europe.

Today, Ukrainian citizens are holed up in similar places, huddled for safety. Can any of us imagine such a thing happening to us today?

I have managed to email an acquaintance I made through eBay, who lives in Ukraine. These are some of his recent words:

We were given machine guns and some other weapons. I'm fine, although my family has been living in the basement of the house for seven days ... it's terrible.

After the victory over Russia, the world will be completely different. We will win!?

Cryptic words to be sure.

Again, can you imagine adult males in this country given assault rifles and asked to defend the land? Can you imagine our politicians donning flak jackets and walking the ruins of once beautiful historic cities, vowing to fight to the bitter end?

It's so sad that lives are being lost, like pawns in a much bigger game of chess. Nothing good can come out of this conflict.

When it's over, all that will remain is sadness, despair and loss. It will go down in history as a time when democracy was tested and people rallied in the face of insurmountable odds.

We're still reeling from the effects of the pandemic. How long will the ramifications of this newest European conflict echo through

our collective hearts?