

Freedom brings with it responsibility

by MARK PAVILONS

“May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.” Peter Marshall

Canadians enjoy a multitude of rights and freedoms.

Most are enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, an impressive document that outlines many fundamental freedoms in our society.

This fact, and that we're so welcoming, tolerant and non-judgemental, makes Canada a destination of choice for newcomers. We're known the world over as a generous, multicultural lot. We're peacekeepers and level heads.

We're not boastful and almost decidedly apologetic.

That being said, no system is perfect. Democracy, by its very nature, is basically rule by the majority. It's making decisions based on what's best for the many, not the few.

And herein lies a flaw, one that has recently reared its head.

Many Canadians who are resisting the COVID vaccination say it's not the vaccine they have a problem with. It's being told, outright, what to do. It's being limited, segregated, isolated and singled out.

The good of the many has served us well over the centuries, but history contains many examples of unintentional consequences.

This philosophy, known as utilitarianism, is what's behind the notion of the “greater good.”

It determines things like ethics and morals by the end result, not the methods used to get there.

Dating back to the 1800s, this approach sort of answered the question, “What good is it?” It's sort of trying to please almost everyone, most of the time.

Differentiating between pleasure and pain (good and bad, if you like) was the basis of social, legal and moral reform. What is the greatest good for the greatest number?

This is the ultimate test question, one that carries a lot of might still today.

Unlike many other doctrines and systems, it's fairly easy to follow. It's also easy to calculate the ramifications. Does it help the most, with the least amount of pain?

But the problems are in its very nature. The end, we can now attest, never justifies the means, ever. If it did, it would give credence to every genocide known in history. The means must justify themselves. Experts say an act can't merely be good if it results in something positive.

Also, the concept of utilitarianism can't protect the rights of minorities and less protected groups.

It's also a matter of hindsight – the results have to be judged after the fact. If we messed up, too bad. We backtrack, rescind and reject.

Freud said many of us really don't want freedom because it involves responsibility, something we tend to shy away from.

So, here we are, with 2021 drawing to a close and an unprecedented slate of events that unfolded over the past two years.

We're still not out of the woods, and judging by COVID cases in recent weeks, we're still in harm's way. You would think the majority of new cases are among the unvaccinated, but a number actually include fully vaccinated individuals.

We're at the point where boosters and even third shots are being planned, to hopefully put this thing to rest.

But will it?

The real answer is we don't know.

As a dutiful citizen, I got both shots as soon as they were offered. As a hybrid person (1 Astra, 1 Pfizer) my acceptance is still up in the air.

I agreed with the direction from on high that the good of the many outweighed the need of the few, or the one.

My main motivating factor was what if I contracted COVID and gave it to someone who became gravely ill? That's something that weighed heavily on my conscious. It was really the only factor. I never thought I'd get it, or fall ill to it. Maybe that's part of my Boomer mentality of indestructibility.

I watched in disbelief the protests, rallies and angry opposition to the vaccine from the haters. I never expected such a reaction.

But, then again, as I mentioned at the outset of this column, people don't like being told what to do.

Even John F. Kennedy once said that "conformity is the jailer of freedom."

I can see such outspoken reactions in communist countries or those with dictatorships, where freedoms are non-existent. Those people don't trust their governments and compensate by acting on their own accord, showing their defiance.

But here, and south of the border, citizens are given so much freedom and so many rights, it's like we're walking around with a "get out of jail free card."

In order to co-exist in a free society, we have to take others into consideration. We have to understand and promote freedom of speech, religion, association, and more. We have to respect language rights, and gender issues. We have to fight discrimination and rally for transparency.

For the most part, our system works. It's fair and impartial. It may be slow, but it's all we have at the moment.

That doesn't mean it can't change, given the right set of circumstances. Laws are updated all the time, when new information, or new pressure from society arises. It can't always be easy for law-makers, senators and top-level officials to do what's best for the majority without stepping on some toes.

The pandemic is our latest stress test of democratic principles.

Failures in our past have included internment camps, Residential Schools, spreading hate and more.

It took public engagement to eliminate the Ernst Zundels of our country, and extend rights to same sex unions and members of the

LGBTQ community. It took grassroots upheaval to insist we have the right to decide how we die.

Undoubtedly, we will look back on the COVID?pandemic with some opened eyes and analyze our actions, or inactions. Yes, we sought to protect the good of the many. Hopefully, it will be worth it in the end.