



Interview with Canadian Entrepreneur Stéphane Bilodeau on the Management of Covid19 in his Country

Interviewer: Cécile Philippe

CP: Canada is, I believe, an exception, since both the elimination strategy and the mitigation strategy for Covid are carried out on the same territory. Can you explain this particularity?

SB: My country, Canada, has indeed implemented a diversified strategy. In six provinces, the strategy is close to that of France. Called mitigation, it aims in a way to "live with the virus" with the incessant alternation of cycles of lockdowns and reopening. In other places, namely the 4 Atlantic provinces and the northern territories, the elimination strategy has been successfully adopted. The Atlantic "Bubble" has managed to reduce local transmission to zero "uncontrolled" cases. Of course, the virus does slip through the cracks from time to time, but as the number of cases remains very low, this is not a problem. Control is quickly regained because the test/tracing/isolation approach, combined with aerosol protection measures and strict border control, works. It allows us to bring community transmission down to zero so that we can, as soon as possible, start living normally with each other again in a controlled manner.

CP: Seen from France, this Canadian situation is quite impossible to imagine. After the first very strict lockdown, the idea of territorialisation was raised but the territories were not allowed to opt for different strategies. What factors do you think made this experiment possible?

SB: One of the important tools in the fight against the virus and its variants is the ability to control borders. This is the responsibility of the federal government. If the four Atlantic provinces and the northern territories have been able to carry out their strategy effectively, it is because to this day, the 8,891 km of Canada-US border remains strictly controlled, as do the ports and airports. This is all the more remarkable given that an average of USD 1 billion of goods and services enter every day by car, truck, plane or ship. In the other direction, the US accounts for $\frac{3}{4}$ of Canadian exports. The establishment of these border controls has required intense discussions between US and Canadian authorities since the beginning of the pandemic. Given the magnitude of the issues at stake, their determination is to be commended.

CP: What are the health and economic outcomes in both areas?

SB: From a health and economic perspective, the Atlantic Bubble is doing better. As of 30 July, the number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants was between 130 and 601, compared to between 2,912 and 5,299 in the other six provinces. This translated into a much lower number of deaths ranging from 0 to 10 per 100,000 population compared to 34 to 131 deaths in the 6 provinces conducting the mitigation strategy.

Economically, the decline in GDP in 2020 was 2-3% lower in the Atlantic provinces. The differences between these two Canadian blocks are major, but on all other aspects they are very similar.

CP: A form of balance seems to prevail with each territory pursuing its initial strategy. Have the benefits of elimination not convinced all Canada?

SB: After 15 months of fighting the virus, the strategy in the Atlantic Bubble has shown its superiority. We are at an interesting moment in the management of the pandemic since a significant part of the population is now convinced of the superiority of the elimination strategy, as evidenced by a letter addressed to the authorities last April signed by more than 7,000 Canadian citizens and scientists. However, the relatively successful roll-out of the vaccine, with over 59% of the population covered, has led to the belief that the vaccine alone would be sufficient to eliminate the virus and that there was no need for a change in strategy. However, we now know that neither border control nor vaccine alone is sufficient. They need to be integrated into a strategy that tactically mixes the different measures.

CP: You are an entrepreneur and believe that the business community should be as convinced as you are of the value of the elimination strategy. What attracts you to this strategy and what arguments do you use in these circles?

SB: I am indeed a Cleantech entrepreneur. For more than 25 years, I have been working to minimise the risks of the projects in which I invest. I use not only my experience, but also data, science and experts to optimise resource investments and minimise risks. The data and science show that the virus elimination approach is the least risky in every way. We need to stop procrastinating and act now to reduce the long-term consequences of this virus and, most importantly, to consider a return to a more normal life.

CP: Canadians are on their way to becoming the most vaccinated people in the world. This is a feat that is the envy of many countries. Can you describe your strategy and the public's attitude towards vaccination?

SB: More than 71% of Canadians have received 1 dose and almost 60% are fully vaccinated with 2 doses. This is indeed a success story and we owe it to good anticipation by our federal authorities. Since Canada is not able to produce its own vaccine, this seems to have contributed to the idea that it was necessary to obtain its independence in this area in other ways. So the strategy was to buy from a very large number of producers. The federal government ordered a total of 358 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine from 6 suppliers by November 2020. This was a winning strategy as only 3 of the suppliers would be in a position to fulfil the orders. With 9.5 doses per capita, our country has reserved the most vaccine in relation to its population. The vaccination process was thus able to begin quickly and efficiently. The downside of this strategy is that Canada has wasted tens of thousands of doses of vaccine and must decide what to do with the surplus in order to help countries with vaccine shortages.

CP: Infections have started to rise in some provinces. What are the government's plans at this stage?

SB: That's the big question. There are conflicting messages from province to province. In Alberta, the Premier declared the pandemic "over" a week ago, even though that province is the one most at risk from a fourth wave. The Quebec government is continuing to lift restrictions on the grounds that Quebecers are largely vaccinated, even though they are less vaccinated on average than the rest of Canada. Conversely, the attitude remains very cautious in Ottawa and the Atlantic provinces. We are

undoubtedly at a turning point in the epidemic in Canada. We are witnessing the unfolding of a successful elimination strategy that can help us avoid repeating the same mistakes. But it will probably take some time for everyone to understand.

Cécile Philippe is President of the Institut économique Molinari, a Franco-Belgian think tank that is actively following the health crisis. She holds a PhD in economics and recently published a study on Covid-19 available at <https://www.institutmolinari.org/2021/04/03/un-an-apres-la-strategie-zero-covid-protege-mieux-populations-et-economies>.