

# Canada and the pharmaceutical industry in the time of COVID-19

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the close relationship between the Canadian government and the pharmaceutical industry when it came to both domestic and international issues. Domestically, the government chose to prioritize advice about vaccine acquisition from a panel of heavily conflicted people; it signed contracts worth billions of dollars with companies for vaccines but the contents of contracts were largely kept secret. The government also committed over CAD\$1 billion in funding for research on COVID-19 but without any requirement that any forthcoming intellectual property or diagnostic and therapeutic products had to be accessible and affordable in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). On the international stage, Canada did not support the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool that aimed to provide a one-stop shop for scientific knowledge, data, and intellectual property to be shared equitably by the global community. It delayed donating vaccines to LMICs and bought vaccines from a facility designed mainly to provide vaccines to that group of countries. The government did not dismantle roadblocks that prevented a Canadian company from sending vaccines to Bolivia. Finally, it was ambiguous about whether it supported a patent waiver for COVID-19 technologies at the World Trade Organization.

Near the start of the pandemic, two events occurred that would define Canada's approach to the pandemic both domestically and internationally. First, the federal government created the COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force with a one-year mandate (subsequently extended) to provide it with advice around a range of vaccine-related issues. These included prioritizing vaccine projects seeking support for activities in Canada, attracting to Canada promising non-Canadian vaccine candidates, or partnering with developers of non-Canadian vaccine candidates and facilitating solutions to manufacture the most promising COVID-19 vaccines in Canada. In setting up the Task Force, the government made a conscious decision to include people who might have current or past ties with companies engaged in vaccine research and/or manufacturing. Second, Justin Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister, along with other world leaders, authored an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* that proclaimed "...we must urgently ensure that vaccines will be distributed according to a set of transparent, equitable and scientifically sound principles. Where you live should not determine whether you live, and global solidarity is central to saving lives and protecting the economy". This article draws on a 40-year history of analyzing the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and the Canadian federal government, as well as a close reading of the academic and mass media literature and reports from government and civil society organizations about how Canada dealt with the pandemic at the domestic and international levels. It will examine how the ideology that produced these two early events unfolded, intertwined, and ultimately

revealed the relationship between the Canadian government and the multinational pharmaceutical industry.

## **Conclusion**

The actions of the government described here should not be seen as isolated events but rather as a continuation of the relationship between the Canadian state and the pharmaceutical industry. When there are choices to be made, they reflect a set of underlying values, values that can be analyzed. Private values are antithetical to democracy; they speak to the need to earn a profit, not to protect public health. When government adopts the values of private industry, it is in essence telling its people that the needs and values of the private sector take precedence over their health. When the former came into conflict with the latter during the pandemic, the Canadian government took the side of the industry. On the domestic front, Canada prioritized secrecy, an acceptance of COI, and a free-market system when it came to vaccines. Internationally, Canada continued a two-decade tradition of favouring IPRs when they came into conflict with promoting access to vaccines in LMICs. When the Liberals were elected in 2015, Justin Trudeau proclaimed that “Canada is back”. The pandemic showed that the government never left the side of the pharmaceutical industry.