

Trudeau Delusional for Blaming Vax Woes on Mulroney: experts

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"This law may be the point of no return for Canada and the innovative pharmaceutical industry." — Paul Lucas, former president and CEO of GlaxoSmithKline Canada.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been blaming past Conservative Governments for gutting Canada's pharmaceutical industry and its ability to produce vaccines, but industry insiders say the truth of the matter is very different. PHOTO BY BLAIR GABLE /REUTERS

For months now, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has blamed everyone for Canada's trickle of COVID-19 vaccines but himself.

Trudeau and his ministers have gone so far as to blame former Progressive Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney — who was prime minister from 1984 to 1993 — for the privatization, or “the selling off“, of Connaught Laboratories. What he fails to mention is that Connaught Labs didn’t go anywhere. It’s now part of Sanofi Pasteur, the world’s largest manufacturer of vaccines. The Connaught Campus in Toronto accounts for one-fifth of the company’s global vaccine sales.

Experts in Canada’s innovative pharmaceutical industry — as opposed to the generic pharmaceutical industry — say Trudeau’s attempt to pin the blame on Mulroney or a more recent Conservative prime minister, Stephen Harper, is ironic, because were it not for Mulroney, the innovative industry likely wouldn’t exist here at all.

Paul Lucas, who was president and CEO of GlaxoSmithKline Canada from 1994 to 2012, started speaking out and wrote an opinion piece in the Financial Post after he heard federal Liberal Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Dominic LeBlanc being interviewed on CTV’s Power Play with Evan Solomon, saying that GlaxoSmithKline had closed its manufacturing facility for vaccines during Harper’s Conservative government, which is false.

“This facility didn’t close, it’s still producing most of the flu vaccine for Canada on an annual basis,” Lucas said during a recent telephone interview.

“I’ve been very concerned and frankly upset about the lies that are coming from the federal government about this whole (COVID vaccine) file,” says Lucas, who was integral to the production and distribution of the Canadian vaccine for the H1N1 pandemic in 2009. All of the vaccine for that outbreak was produced in the GSK factory in Quebec City.

“Trudeau has badly botched Canada’s COVID-19 vaccine procurement,” states Lucas.

“First, he blamed Harper for his own failings. Then he blamed Mulroney and then he blamed the provinces. Then he actually turned on his own vaccine task force. He blamed them for about a day or two. Then he blamed the companies — Pfizer for delaying the delivery of its vaccines in January,” explains Lucas.

“So, you know it’s been a blame game from their end, and he’s got, you know, 50 per cent support of the population in Ontario, so that’s absolutely astonishing to me,” says Lucas, “because people are dying because of his government botching this so badly.”

Canada is at the back of the line in the industrialized world and is even behind some developing countries because Trudeau’s government signed a deal with CanSino Biologics and the Chinese military to develop a COVID-19 vaccine in partnership with the Canadian Centre for Vaccinology at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Given the toxic state of Canada-China relations and the propensity of China to steal intellectual property and break deals, it was a bizarre partnership.

On May 16, 2020, Trudeau announced that the federal department of health had entered into a deal with CanSino. According to documents obtained by Calgary Conservative MP and Opposition Health Critic Michelle Rempel Garner, three days later the government learned the deal fell apart.

Despite knowing on May 19 that China was breaking its deal with Canada, the Trudeau government waited until August 1 to enter into vaccine contracts with Pfizer, behind many other countries. On July 16, Trudeau pretended that the partnership with China was still a go.

According to Our World in Data, as of March 17, Canada ranks 51st in terms of the percentage of citizens who have been vaccinated with at least one shot against COVID-19 — well behind Israel, Chile, the U.S. and even Morocco.

Lucas says not only did Mulroney not destroy the innovative pharmaceutical industry in Canada, he has really been its only champion by bringing in Bill C-22 in 1987 and later Bill C-91 in 1992.

That legislation promoted intellectual property by protecting drug patents for up to 20 years, which led to billions of dollars of investment, research and development to flood into Canada, says Lucas.

So vital were the Mulroney government's regulatory changes in creating a modern and viable innovative Canadian pharmaceutical industry, that in 2007 he was awarded the Health Research Foundation's Medal of Honour — placing him in the distinguished company of Nobel laureate Dr. Charles Best, co-discoverer of insulin; Sir Alexander Fleming, discoverer of penicillin; Dr. Wilder Penfield, founder of the Montreal Neurological Institute at McGill University; and other R&D heavy hitters.

Back in 1968, explains Lucas, then prime minister Pierre Trudeau got rid of patents for pharmaceuticals in Canada, which led to the decline of the innovative pharmaceutical industry in Canada and caused the growth of the generic pharmaceutical industry, “which was in the pockets of the federal Liberal party” and led to Canada having the highest generic drug prices in the OECD.

“The Liberal party was always very opposed to the innovative pharmaceutical industry and Mulroney was really the guy who tried to turn it around, and he did, but the Liberals came back in with (prime minister Jean) Chretien (in 1993) and we were back in the Dark Ages,” explains Lucas, who says he can speak openly because he retired in 2012.

He says, “Harper improved things by passing new data protection laws, which helped the industry in terms of intellectual property protection.

“Now this Trudeau government’s come in and I mean, they’ve been anti-, anti-, anti-innovative pharmaceutical industry,” says Lucas.

When Mulroney ushered in “Canada’s golden age for bio-technology in Canada,” he brought in the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board, (PMPRB), which ensured there was a balanced ceiling to what companies could charge for their new medicines to protect consumers but also to encourage more research and development.

Lucas says Trudeau’s government appears poised to put the final nail in the coffin of the innovative industry by making amendments to the PMPRB’s Patented Medicines Regulation, which has been delayed twice, and is now expected to come into effect on July 1.

“This law may be the point of no return for Canada and the innovative pharmaceutical industry,” concludes Lucas. “I hate to say that, but it could very well be the last straw in the relationship between the innovative industry and this country.”

Pamela Fralick, president of Innovative Medicines Canada, says as the industry’s representative in Canada, they have tried to get the ear of the federal government, to no avail.

“The cost containment measures in these new regulations are so extreme, as third-party assessments have determined them to be, it really is going to put Canadians at a huge disadvantage for gaining access to the most innovative drugs that are out there,” says Fralick, who was the president and CEO of the Canadian Cancer Society before joining IMC.

“This year alone, 39 new medications — for the treatment of cancer, Parkinson’s, and HIV, to name a few — have not been submitted to Health Canada for approval due to the uncertainty created by this proposed policy change,” she adds.

“It takes on average about \$2.5 billion to bring a product to market and usually 10 to 15 years, so it’s a lot of time and a lot of risk,” she explains.

“Most of the research and the products these companies produce never make it, so when you make something that does, you have that 20 years of patent protection to bring it to market and recoup your investment.”

When was the last time, asked Fralick, that the generic pharmaceutical industry created a new vaccine? “Of course it doesn’t happen. That’s an oxymoron. They don’t do innovative work, so if you want innovation — vaccines for COVID-19, for example — you need to have the innovative pharmaceutical world being very functional and vibrant.”

Thankfully, many other countries are not so antagonistic to the industry or the world would be stuck in COVID-19 lockdowns for years to come.

“Our concerns about the federal government’s new regulations is that they go far too far in cost containment and they don’t respect or I guess even accept that maybe Canada should want these companies to invest in this country. We already do invest a lot, by the way, but we could compete globally for a lot more investment if we had an environment that was a little bit more favourable to the innovative business,” said Fralick, adding that the industry employs 30,000 Canadians in high-paying jobs and contributes \$19 billion to the Canadian economy.

She says over a time span of two years, 30 global CEOs from multinational pharmaceutical companies have written to Trudeau four times seeking a meeting

— from February 2018 to February 2020 — just weeks before COVID-19 started to wreak havoc on countries outside of China where it originated.

“Not only didn’t they get a meeting, the prime minister never even responded. For the first letter, what we got back was an unsigned memo from the correspondence unit of the strategic policy branch of Health Canada,” says Fralick. For the other three letters, Trudeau’s office never responded at all, neither did his health minister.

Is it any wonder Trudeau was so hesitant to pick up the phone and call Pfizer’s CEO, Albert Bourla, when shipments of its COVID-19 vaccine were delayed in January as the company expanded the capacity of its plant in Belgium?

“So, whether it’s Pierre Trudeau, or Justin Trudeau or whether it’s Jean Chretien, they just have not been open to the idea of a vibrant life sciences sector,” says Fralick, and that affects the entire “ecosystem” of the sector, from little startups, like Calgary’s Providence Therapeutics or Vancouver’s AbCellera.

One current pharmaceutical executive, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said: “Every time Trudeau tries to blame Mulroney for his own government’s failures in procuring COVID vaccines in a timely manner, my colleagues and I all think, ‘Can you believe this guy? He can say white is black and black is white and no one challenges him.’”

Lucas says you’d think Trudeau and his ministers would have learned about the importance of the innovative pharmaceutical industry as a result of this pandemic.

“There’s no relationship between Trudeau’s government and the industry. It’s worse than non-existent — it’s hostile as a result of the federal government’s attitude,” says Lucas.

So, not only are Canadians at the back of the line for life-saving and economy-boosting vaccines, but Trudeau's hostility to the life-sciences industry is also killing off our potential of fighting off future pandemics and building a lucrative industry at the same time that can help the whole world.

Too bad there's no vaccine to inoculate us all against this kind of government incompetence.

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