



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Toronto, ON

Day 1

March 30, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 3: Catherine Swift

Full Day 1 Timestamp: 05:09:14–05:38:20

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2fgrx6-national-citizens-inquiry-toronto-day-1.html>

[00:00:00]

Shawn Buckley

So, our next witness today is Catherine Swift. Catherine, can I get you to state your full name for the record and spell your first and last name for the record?

Catherine Swift

Catherine Susan Swift, C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E, S-W-I-F-T. Like Taylor.

Shawn Buckley

Thank you. And Catherine, do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Catherine Swift

I do.

Shawn Buckley

Thank you. And I'll say it's nice to finally meet you in person, we've spoken several times on the phone. Now, you are currently president of the Coalition of Concerned Manufacturers and Businesses of Canada. And I need you to speak, not nod, because we're being recorded.

Catherine Swift

Yes, I am.

Shawn Buckley

Can you just give us a brief idea of what the CCMBC does?

Catherine Swift

We're basically an advocacy organization for businesses. We started off being exclusively representing manufacturers, but in the last couple of years we've branched out to other sectors of the economy. Most of our members are still in Ontario, but we do have some elsewhere in Canada. But we're still largely Ontario-based. And basically, we just advocate on the issues that are most important to business at any given time: taxation, regulation, red tape, energy. Energy issues have been huge lately as manufacturers in particular consume quite a bit of electricity, for example, and other energy sources. But there's a whole range of different issues that we end up getting involved with and we're quite independent relative to other business organizations. Most business organizations are somewhat financed by government and they often end up more as a representative of government than they actually end up as a representative of business. So, we very deliberately don't do that.

Shawn Buckley

And you used to be at the Canadian Federation of Independent Business?

Catherine Swift

Yes, I was the President and CEO of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business for 20 years. And I was chief economist there, and some other positions for another seven, so I was there almost 30 years.

Shawn Buckley

Right, and prior to that you were in government and banking; you have a long history as an economist and then running basically business organizations.

Now, you have surveyed a number of the CCMBC members to get their feedback on how government COVID policies affected them. Is that correct?

Catherine Swift

Yes, that's correct.

Shawn Buckley

And we've invited you here today to share with us what businesses are reporting back to you. So please do share with us what you've discovered.

Catherine Swift

Yeah, I sort of divided the responses I got. I surveyed about 23 businesses total and I divided the responses into the really common ones that virtually everyone had, and some of the more anecdotal stories that might have been unique to one business or two businesses.

In terms of the common issues, the three most common issues: I would have to say the number one issue was issues with employees. Now, there was quite a diverse range of issues with employees and that's not surprising. In these types of businesses, I might add that most of our members are probably small to medium-sized businesses. So, the business owner typically has a lot more interaction with the employees than you'd find in a big corporation where people don't even meet the CEO in their entire careers and whatnot. So, they have more of a personal connection with their employees. And the number one issue was the government assistance discouraging employees from working. And despite how many measures the employer may have put in place to – and people were scared, let's face it, there's no question about that. But no matter, employers tried to do their best to have their employees realize they were running a very clean, very safe workplace in all kinds of different ways. But the fact that the government assistance – and also not just the magnitude, but also the duration of the government assistance, because it went on and on and on long after, really, there was a big concern about COVID. And also, the fact that there was very little – and we know this from other sources – very little qualification for these monies. They were basically distributed very freely. And we know a lot of 16-year-olds that never worked in their life got CERB and whatnot. But that was frustrating for employers.

Most of these businesses – in fact, almost all of them – stayed operating. They were all designated as essential. So, they weren't closed. Of course, the closed businesses had a whole different set of issues.

[00:05:00]

But those employee issues were very extensive. And we found naturally there were a lot of cost increases that businesses had to comply: putting partitioning in, changing the spacing of employees in their workplace. Some of the employers had vaccination within their workplace, if that was possible. Others facilitated employees getting to vaccination if they wanted it. And so, there was an increased cost. And there were some government programs that were supposed to cover some of those increased costs. But most of them didn't find them sufficient or found they were just so difficult to apply for, they just got frustrated and said, “forget it, I'll just absorb the costs of that.” So, the employee issues were very, very extensive.

One other factor I heard was the demonization of unvaccinated employees within the workplace and how it was divisive within a workplace for that reason. And one business gave me the example that they happened to have a union and the union couldn't decide whether they were going to defend the unvaccinated. So, one day they'd be on their side, then the next day they'd be vilifying the unvaccinated and siding with – and they said it was just so chaotic and divisive for that business. It really was problematic for the operation of that business. So that was kind of an odd result that happened there. So that issue.

And I don't know if you want me to get into all the anecdotal stuff now, or exactly how you want to, because there were a number of—

Shawn Buckley

I actually think when you're on a topic, that might be helpful. So, you're talking about, you know, employee issues and some specific examples on how the benefits basically were too generous and too long. And that created, I presume, employees quitting or staying at home rather than coming to work, so some examples on that would be helpful.

Catherine Swift

Yeah. Well again, a lot of people decided they liked staying home. And again, that's understandable, and that was facilitated obviously by the benefits, and so the difficulties in operating were problematic. There was also the case that, when the money was sloshing around so very liberally, literally and figuratively, that people found they would know in their neighbourhood, say, that somebody was getting benefits. And everybody was sort of aware and almost competitively comparing what was going on. Because some businesses, if they could afford it, actually shut down for periods of time and that would naturally mean that our members' businesses were looked upon as problematic because they kept operating. And so there was a number of really interesting, I guess, impacts there.

Some of the employers were of course trying to support their employees as best as possible. And they did feel – and I suspect you've heard this from other people – that the alarmist news, constant, constant drumbeat of alarmist news, death counts every day, and all this was way over the top. In the case of media, you can expect that, but governments were very unhelpful as well. They sort of went to the extreme instead of possibly being a little more moderate in their approach.

Something also with the CERB benefits that was commented on, and partly the notion of them going on longer than they really needed to, they seemed to be very politicized as well. A lot of employers felt they were more a tool for the government to try to gather votes than to actually be necessary, and actually – and of course a lot of money was spent as well, a lot of tax dollars was spent – so they almost weren't even pandemic-related anymore. They became a political tool to encourage people to vote Liberal. In terms of—

Shawn Buckley

Can I just stop you there, I just want to make sure that we understand what you're saying. So, can you share with us maybe a conversation or two? You don't have to disclose the person or persons, but I just want to make sure we understand. Because I believe you're saying that business owners are reporting back to you that, at some point, having to take these measures felt more like a political exercise than a public health exercise. And I think that's an important point for us to understand.

Catherine Swift

Yeah. Well, it was just that they lasted much longer than – they were renewed, and then of course we did have a federal election in 2021. So, the linkage with that federal election seemed to be pretty direct, so that was the sense that a lot of businesses had.

[00:10:00]

I just want to mention the other two of the big three, so to speak: naturally, supply chain. Everybody knew there was massive supply chain problems, costs increased dramatically, tripling, quadrupling costs for materials and, if you could get it at all, things like lumber, steel and so on. Also, naturally, personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitizer, all of those kinds of things were difficult; and everybody I think faced that. One of the almost funny stories was that a number of businesses found toilet paper was being stolen out of their business washrooms, so they had a terrible time trying to keep toilet paper in the

washrooms. One business in particular said he just decided he would he would give employees so much toilet paper every week and they were responsible for keeping it, because it was just getting crazy that he couldn't keep toilet paper in the washroom. So, I thought that was a totally unexpected outcome, at least in my view.

So, yes, the supply chain problems were extremely problematic. And interesting enough, a lot of them are just starting to be resolved fairly recently. So, even though we think the pandemic has been largely – the worst part's been largely over for a year or so, the problems continued with things like the supply chain.

Shawn Buckley

Can you give us an example?

Catherine Swift

Well, lumber quadrupled, for example. A lot of the manufacturers naturally use a lot of those types of materials as inputs. So, it was massive price increases or just unavailability, period. So naturally that meant they had to either slow down their operations or temporarily postpone, and so on. So, that really affected people a great deal and increased their costs, and they couldn't necessarily increase their prices to accommodate that.

The other big issue was transportation-related, and this was very much a policy driven problem. Because, for example, a lot of these businesses do business in the U.S. And U.S. truck drivers were about 50 per cent vaccinated. So, when they imposed those constraints at the border that the truck drivers – sitting in their cab alone all day, not probably seeing hardly anybody – needed to be vaccinated, that immediately took a whole pile of these truckers right out of the equation. I heard of many, many businesses that did business in the U.S. that couldn't get somebody to ship to the border from the US because they would mostly be American truck drivers.

Shawn Buckley

Can I interrupt you? At the time, we never imposed a requirement on Canadian truck drivers driving within Canada to vaccinate, did we?

Catherine Swift

Not domestically, but to cross the U.S. border we did.

And another interesting observation that one business made was he believes the government overstated the extent to which Canadian truck drivers were vaccinated. You might recall there was talk of 90 per cent or so, so the government said, “well, this policy won't be horribly damaging because most, the vast majority.” He felt it was probably more like 60 per cent that that was actually true about. And we never really saw any reputable data on that. So, you know, there was no one to sort of challenge it one way or the other.

But naturally, the fact that Canadian truck drivers all of a sudden also needed, you know, supposedly to be vaccinated across the border caused an awful lot of problems in addition to the U.S. situation. And again, we saw – one example I actually heard quite frequently was costs for, say, a load, like one tractor-trailer, went from about \$1,500 to about \$8,000. So, it

was a very significant increase. And it was just shortages. There were just shortages of drivers, that was the problem there. And that was 100 per cent policy created. That didn't have to happen. And those, I think, were certainly the big three issues that virtually all businesses faced in one way or another.

Another complaint we heard quite a lot of was about the programs that were directed to businesses themselves. So, some of them were wage subsidies to retain employees. But one thing that really was problematic for an awful lot of businesses was that the government – notably the feds, sometimes Ontario was involved as well and sometimes other provinces, but it was notably the federal government – was paying companies to manufacture, say, PPE.

[00:15:00]

Because there were shortages, because they didn't keep sufficient supplies in the various government agencies that are supposed to do that. And I heard a number of examples. There was one particular example that 3M was given \$40-odd million, it was big chunk of money split between Ontario and the federal government. There were all kinds of smaller firms that easily could have done that. 3M, it was to make N95 masks. And 3M, they built a whole new facility to do this when existing Canadian companies were well capable of doing it, but they weren't Liberal enough. They didn't have that partisan connection. They didn't donate to the Party. I also heard that there was an auto parts manufacturer that was paid to switch production to masks. And again, it was ridiculous. There were already firms out there that could easily have ramped up production, but they weren't in the right riding. It was a partisan decision, not a sensible health-based or, you know, sensible business decision. So, that was a very common issue I heard as well.

And also, just eligibility. And we know this because we've seen some case studies about how businesses didn't need the money, but nevertheless were still giving out bonuses; so highly profitable, but they were accepting government money. And there was such little oversight on the part of government to the individuals and businesses that they were shelling out money to that much more got spent. And obviously this had competitive implications for businesses as well. So, sometimes their competitor would get some contract which made utterly no sense, and it would damage someone's business as a result.

Something we did as an organization actually was, we shared a lot of information among members. Sometimes some particular commodity that was in demand, one happened to have a stockpile of and could help others and so on. And we also attempted to deal with the Ontario government in particular in terms of trying to suggest some best practices, because a lot of these policies made zero sense from a business standpoint. They didn't consult business, they just put in some top-down kind of policy, obviously without thinking about it very much. And it caused all kinds of problems. This 3M example of the fact that they built this new factory: a neighbouring business actually had to shut down twice at a very inconvenient time – and they wouldn't change it – to permit this new plant to be connected to the electricity grid. So, that's just again a particular example, but they weren't listening to business at all; they were just applying these policies willy-nilly over the top and often in a kind of way that made people even more worried than they had to be.

This is also another red tape-related issue: some businesses were required to do daily assessments, temperature-taking and that kind of thing, and actually filling out paper and some of the businesses said, “where did all this paper go? I can't believe anybody actually

looked at it because it was just so voluminous.” It just seemed like a stupid policy to be doing, as they felt that it wasn't even getting used by government once it was done. The inconsistency as well, this is something for the future: every government in Canada was doing different stuff and there was no commonality. Businesses that operate in more than one jurisdiction had different rules apply to them and it was absurd to try to implement all these different kinds of rules. In future, businesses should get their act together and coordinate policies and have consistent policies, instead of making businesses jump through all these hoops that are different depending on where you're located. So that was another factor.

We had a number of comments on the healthcare system in general. One business actually had an employee that was ill, couldn't get treatment in the hospital and passed away when normally that particular health issue should have been treatable. So, this business owner very much felt – obviously the person lost their life – and they felt that if times had been normal and the hospitals hadn't been so inefficient, then they would have been saved.

Another gave the example of one of their senior employees whose mother ended up having to go into a hospital for some reason, caught COVID when she was in hospital, and passed away. And the woman was so worried because this had happened to her mother that she retired much earlier than she was planning to do.

[00:20:00]

And the business lost a senior valued person as a result. So, the problems in the healthcare system obviously had a pretty big effect on businesses, as it did on all of us.

What haven't I touched on here? I guess some of the other anecdotal issues that I can mention: I had the complaint frequently that the federal government in particular, but some of the provinces as well, and much of the media reporting, created almost a hysteria. You would think a government role would actually be to calm people down, but no, it seemed to be quite the contrary. And because none of them looked like they had any clue what they were doing, even though they all have departments that are supposedly tasked to deal with this, it created more problems than it solved. One business mentioned that they happened to have an engineer employee, but he became so absolutely paranoid that he poisoned the entire workplace for this particular business and created an awful lot of problems, and that was just one person.

Another story that was, again, a little bit strange was that people were so worried about coming to work, but then they'd encounter each other in the local Walmart. Because they didn't know what to do with their time, so they'd go out shopping or something like that. That was interesting. And the fact that a number of them said some of their suppliers were small firms, and even though they weren't at-risk businesses, they were nevertheless shut down. And it infuriated them to see the Walmarts and the Costcos and the Home Depots and so on remaining open when some of their smaller suppliers that they dealt with for ages were closed, or were shut down, and there was absolutely no reason that should have happened. So, that was another problem that arose.

One business mentioned that, you know the old adage that 20 per cent of the people do 80 per cent of the work; and he said, during the pandemic it became more like 10 per cent of the people did 90 per cent of the work because of all the changes. A lot of businesses were still looking to hire, even during the pandemic because they were losing some employees to

various things. But they were competing with government that was basically paying people to stay home.

Another interesting observation was that, in 2020, for a few months, the CRA told businesses that they didn't have to make source deductions. It was supposedly to provide a break, I guess. But of course, they were ultimately due and they had to catch up later. And so, businesses had problems after the fact because naturally, they had to pay a lot more for those source deductions than they would have had to if they'd been able to just do them on their regular monthly basis or quarterly basis, depending on the size of the business.

I think those are most of the main points that I found with my interviews of these different businesses, so perhaps there are some other questions that you might have?

Shawn Buckley

I'll open you up to the Commissioners. But I did want to ask, because you're well-positioned to answer the question: what do you think government should have done or could have done differently to make things more reasonable for these businesses? And I get the impression from your evidence that there was a lot of frustration that things didn't seem fair or thought through. I mean, even just small suppliers being closed and yet bigger suppliers, where you'd think people would be more at risk being left open. So, I'm just curious what your thoughts would be.

Catherine Swift

Yeah, I think there's a few things that governments could do better. Again, consulting with business to see what would work for them. Not that that would be a perfect solution, but they virtually did no consultation with business. And in our particular case, we were providing government with information as to best practices, what we thought would be better ways to do it. They did none of it. There was clearly no responsiveness to that. So, that was obviously a problem because I think they could have had a lot better policies if they'd listened to business.

The consistency issue: why couldn't governments get together and do things comparably in different parts of the country,

[00:25:00]

municipal, federal, and provincial? So that they didn't impose different rules all the time, much of which didn't seem to make any sense at all. The partisan element of it definitely came into play. And granted, to be fair, of course none of us – you had scientists disagreeing with each other, you had doctors disagreeing with each other, and the so-called science on it was not settled, I guess you could say. But often political considerations seemed to override the science that they did know about. So, that would be something: in future, try to justify these things, not just throw everything at the wall and see what sticks.

But most of it is really consulting instead of a top-down approach, just talking to people and being responsive, of course. Because that one person that just asked them to delay the closure of his plant by a week, and they couldn't do that. Why not? That kind of thing, to me, just seemed utterly ridiculous. And so, they put a major cost on his business because of having to shut down at a very, very bad time for that particular business. So those are

certainly, I guess, some of the main things that could and should be done better next time. It's funny, too, because when you think, you know, what we initially heard in the pandemic was it was no big deal. And, "oh, we've dealt with SARS. We dealt with SARS back in 2004, so we're all equipped." But there's departments in every single government whose full-time job is to deal with this and clearly none of them were doing their job. None of them were doing their job. So, going forward, one would hope there's better oversight of that and that people will actually have sufficient PPE, for example, in storage and be much better prepared for these kinds of issues.

Shawn Buckley

Thank you. I'll open it up to the Commissioners for questions.

There's no questions, okay. You were too clear and succinct, Catherine. Thank you very much. I just I had one follow-up question, because you indicated that you know we had communicated to government, so I assume you're talking about the CCMBC. Do you recall what some of the communications were to the government?

Catherine Swift

Yeah, actually, I'm going to provide those to you. I've been collecting them the last few days, because people had to go back in their history.

But they were some of the things that I've mentioned: the notion of having consistency in policies. Giving firms notice, too, that was one: you can't implement something in five minutes reasonably. So, giving firms notice, if there were significant changes, which there were throughout. There were some programs that intended to compensate businesses for things like having to put in partitions. I know one firm said they put in automatic doors, so nobody had to touch anything, accommodations like that. Make those programs simpler. Because they were so convoluted to deal with, an awful lot of businesses just said "forget it. I'll just spend the money, because this is so ridiculously bureaucratic to have to deal with it." So, simplifying that would be a good example.

But I'm going to be able to send you some stuff once I sift through all these emails that I've gotten from people.

Shawn Buckley

Super, so we'll add that then as exhibits when you collect those. Well, Catherine, thank you very much for attending. On behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, we thank you very much for your input.

Catherine Swift

Great. Thank you.

[00:29:06]