

How global consultancy firm McKinsey helped craft Quebec's profits-before-lives pandemic policy

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Recent revelations showing that McKinsey, one of the world's largest consulting firms, helped determine essential elements of the Quebec government's disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic provide a graphic illustration of the dictatorship that big business exercises over society.

In its interactions with the government of Francois Legault, McKinsey articulated the principles that have guided Quebec's COVID policy: the prioritization of corporate profits over public health; exclusive reliance on vaccines instead of a comprehensive strategy to eliminate the virus including mass testing, contact tracing and quarantining; and the premature and hasty reopening of schools and non-essential industries to bail out financial markets and investors.

The toll of this criminal policy, fully endorsed by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, is nearly 17,000 official COVID deaths in Quebec and nearly 46,000 nationally, almost all of which were preventable—not to mention the 20 million victims of the pandemic worldwide.

McKinsey is a US-based company that employs 30,000 consultants and support staff in 130 offices across 65 countries and has annual revenues of \$10 billion. Associates of the consulting firm become prominent government officials or rise to senior positions in the world's largest companies. Such is the case of Dominic Barton, who went from McKinsey's top boardroom to head Canada's embassy in China and is now the chairman of the board at Rio Tinto. McKinsey charges governments and big business exorbitant fees for "strategic management" advice that leads to the privatization of public services and brutal attacks on the working class.

Working with the most predatory companies and reactionary governments, McKinsey has been involved in a number of scandals. It advised cigarette manufacturers as they knowingly developed a more addictive product. It was working with Purdue Pharma as it developed its ultra-

aggressive sales techniques for Oxycontin, the painkiller at the root of the U.S. opioid crisis (in 2021, McKinsey agreed to pay US states \$600 million for its role in the crisis). And it backed the U.S. Border Patrol as Trump implemented his brutal anti-immigrant measures.

On September 30, just days before the October 3 Quebec election, Radio-Canada revealed that the Legault-led right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government paid McKinsey more than \$6.5 million for consulting services related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under two untendered contracts signed on April 2, 2020, and July 28, 2021, the firm played a key role in managing the pandemic in Quebec. It advised the Legault government and Quebec Public Health on communications, the purchase of protective equipment, testing strategies, and staffing shortages in residential and long-term care centers (CHSLD).

For a few days, the media and the political establishment made much of the most obvious aspects of the incestuous relationship between the government and McKinsey: the firm's \$35,000-a-day fees, its access to confidential information, its preparation of documents bearing the letterhead of the Quebec government, its failure to disclose its conflicts of interest regarding the Pfizer vaccine while working for the pharmaceutical giant, and the Legault government's general lack of transparency regarding McKinsey's role.

These criticisms were superficial and hypocritical. Quebec Conservative Party leader Éric Duhaime, a man close to anti-vaccine circles who supported the far-right "Freedom" Convoy, criticized Legault from the right and called for an independent public inquiry because of the conflict of interest with Pfizer, no doubt hoping to use the opportunity to attack the proven benefits of vaccines. The leader of the Quebec Liberal Party, Dominique Anglade, supported this request for an inquiry, focusing on the sums of public money paid to McKinsey, a criticism that has little credibility coming from this multi-millionaire who was herself employed by

McKinsey from 2007 to 2012 to advise “the leaders of large corporations.” Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois of Québec Solidaire, the party of the pseudo-left in Quebec, criticized McKinsey’s intervention from the point of view of Quebec nationalism, lamenting that the Legault government had listened to an “international firm” rather than “Quebecers on the ground.”

These criticisms were intended to obscure the most important point to emerge from these revelations. Namely, that the mandates given McKinsey, when Quebec was in the early stages of the pandemic, *were aimed at ensuring a quick ending of anti-COVID lockdown measures and the reopening of the economy.*

On April 2, 2020, the day the Legault government signed an agreement with McKinsey to “implement a methodology to operationalize decisions surrounding the lifting of the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation measures,” seniors were dying by the dozens every day in CHSLDs (long-term care homes) and the province was recording one of the highest mortality rates in the world.

On April 22, McKinsey released a plan developed with the Direction de la Santé Publique (DSP) that presented the reopening of schools as “feasible” and recommended, in order to get the public to accept this deadly idea, a “specific communication strategy about children and the resumption of school and daycare” that would use “influential health actors” such as pediatricians. Later that day, Legault announced that a plan would soon be presented for the reopening of Quebec’s schools. The next day (April 23), the Association des Pédiatres du Québec published an open letter stating that “the gradual return to real life [i.e., the reopening of schools and daycares] for our children is not only desirable, it is necessary.”

The documents obtained by Radio-Canada reveal a host of other examples of convergence between the “advice” provided by McKinsey behind the backs of the population and the “decisions” of the CAQ. From the very first weeks of the pandemic, the consulting firm was steering the Legault government towards the policy favoured by big business and the political establishment: reopening the economy and putting profits ahead of human lives. This criminal policy would be brutally implemented by a right-wing CAQ government that boasts of its pro-investor policies.

McKinsey has played a major role in the pandemic’s management by a large number of Western governments, whether in Europe (Germany, France and Great Britain), in the United States where McKinsey has advised the federal government as well as many states and large cities, in Canada (Quebec and Ontario) or in Mexico. There is no doubt that this is only the tip of the iceberg and that

McKinsey’s relationships with other governments around the world are being kept secret.

In several cases, questionable or outright illegal practices have been exposed—notably in Ontario and France. But beyond the nauseating whiffs of corruption and fraud in each individual relationship, what they have in common is the implementation of the same murderous policy of prioritizing corporate profits over human lives.

McKinsey also published reports throughout the pandemic that sought to portray the hasty reopening of the economy and the refusal to adopt a Zero Covid elimination strategy based on long proven public health norms as reasonable, even scientific. The paper, “Pandemic to endemic: How the world can learn to live with COVID-19,” published in October 2021, suggested that the cost of the health measures needed to stop the spread of the disease was too high, that “most societies ... will need to learn to live with COVID-19,” and that it should be accepted as “an ongoing part of the infectious-disease landscape, or endemic, as tuberculosis is today.”

In another June 2022 report titled “When will the COVID-19 pandemic end?”, McKinsey attempts to make the blatant lies of the ruling class look credible, including that the virus has become “endemic,” that the new variants are “mild,” and that the disease has become less deadly and can be contained by a strategy based solely on vaccines and other drugs such as Paxlovid.

By inserting itself into governments to dictate the pandemic policy desired by big business and giving it a veneer of legitimacy in its publications, McKinsey has spearheaded the capitalist ruling class’s offensive to keep business functioning at full throttle during the pandemic, no matter the cost in human lives.

McKinsey’s true crime is not advocating the use of life-saving vaccines whilst in a conflict of interest or charging \$35,000 a day in fees. Rather, it is its role in social murder—in shaping and implementing the pandemic policies of Quebec and other capitalist governments that have flouted science-based public health measures and thus inevitably led to successive waves of mass infection and death that have taken millions of lives.



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