

A path out of the coronavirus Lockdown

The shutdown has to be rolled back, prudently and according to local facts, and with redoubled vigilance for the elderly and infirm.

by Conrad Black



It is time to re-evaluate Canada's anti-coronavirus policy. As there is no prospect of any vaccine for many months or longer, we were always going to have to take our chances with this virus eventually. As in many other activities, what has happened in Canada has tracked events in the United States, especially as the Canadian media relentlessly parrots the anti-Trump American media. Our press are apparently oblivious to the fact that as U.S. President Donald Trump assaulted the entire political establishment of both parties four years ago, highlighting his contempt for the national political media, gullible or biased Canadians are not reflecting American journalistic wisdom, just the vehemence of one side in a life-

and-death struggle between the incumbent president and the bipartisan post-Reagan political establishment he pledged to displace.

As President Trump greeted the initial discussion of the coronavirus rather complacently, the American media whipped up public fear and amplified the absurd speculation of London's Imperial College of Medicine that more than two million Americans could die of the coronavirus. A game of political leap-frog began and Trump set up a task force officially headed by the vice-president and including a number of prominent epidemiologists and public-health administrators. The administration then led the charge to shut down the United States, in order to "flatten the curve," by issuing guidelines and recommendations on how to limit the spread of infections. The Democratic party elders resuscitated the moribund campaign for the presidential nomination of former vice-president Joe Biden and in an impressive display of professional machine politics, and carried him to the finish line, to avoid the nomination of completely unfeasible Marxist Sen. Bernie Sanders. While these manoeuvres were being executed in the U.S., Canada, though incidences of the coronavirus were relatively fewer, followed the lead of the U.S. and other Western countries and imposed an almost hermetically sealed shutdown.

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The Democrats settled into the instant economic crisis with audible dreams of keeping Biden in his basement until election day and portraying Trump as the Herbert Hoover of this century's Great Depression. Trump cushioned the economic consequences with an immense financial assistance plan in which now more than \$2.5 trillion have been committed to paying small employers their payroll costs as long as they transmit the proceeds to laid-off employees, and escalating

tax deferments for larger businesses, with special packages for such hard-hit industries as airlines. In addition, a liquidity facility that could be worth an astounding \$4 trillion is being provided by the Federal Reserve and the U.S. Treasury.

Canada again followed a parallel scenario, though its economic assistance plan was less generous and more complicated and has aroused noisier howls of discontent than in the U.S. The Democrats, after attempting unsuccessfully to stuff a lot of benefits for organized labour and uneconomic green energy into it, agreed to the package as a humanitarian arrangement during the anticipated multi-month shutdown. As of this week, there are 26 million Americans who have been disemployed by the public health crisis, in a workforce of nearly 165 million, which was enjoying full employment a few months ago (more than a million more positions to fill than unemployed people).



A novelty dollar bill with U.S. President Donald Trump's image is displayed on the shelf of a barbershop in Mustang, Okla., which reopened personal care businesses by appointment only, on April 24, 2020. Nick Oxford/Bloomberg

Trump mobilized the private sector and is facilitating the development of easily administered immediate-result testing devices and vastly increased production of ventilators. Despite Democratic efforts to claim that the testing incompetence he inherited from the Obama administration has retarded progress, it hasn't. A person may test negatively today and positively tomorrow. (A recent random sampling of 3,000 people indicates that as many as 20 per cent of the population of New York may have been exposed to the coronavirus.) However, Trump was not going to carry the can for economic devastation; he changed course again and recruited hundreds of celebrities in every field to join him and his scientists in presenting a three-stage plan for the reopening of the country.

The Democrats have been boxed in: they were reduced to demanding a long-term shutdown – six months according to the perpetually fatuous mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, 18 months (until a vaccine is discovered) according to Zeke Emanuel, Biden's medical adviser and think-alike brother of Chicago's spectacularly failed former mayor, Rahm Emanuel. They are in a hopeless position. Trump tweeted authoritarian Democratic governors, "Liberate Michigan," etc., which some naive Canadian observers took as an incitement to violent rebellion. In fact, Michigan has had some of the strictest lockdown measures in the country, banning travelling between houses to visit relatives in many cases, along with the sale of non-essential items, such as paint. Police have even gone into private residences to look for unauthorized house parties. It is to these depths of authoritarian (and almost certainly unconstitutional) absurdity that the lockdown regime is reduced. The Democrats raged against South Dakota's governor for not shutting her state down (where there has been one coronavirus death). They want vertiginous unemployment and have a candidate who has trouble with a coherent answer to friendly questions that they can keep in his basement.

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Presumably, Canada will follow again. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has had his election, but he has a minority government. There is a desperate economic crisis in Alberta without the coronavirus as the oil industry is in dire straits (thanks to Trudeau's policies aggravated by international events), and the strain on the banking system will be considerable, in a country that has not had a major bank failure since 1923. The fear over the virus is not subsiding spontaneously, but the unsustainable economic facts will clear our minds. We can avoid a huge spike in deaths as restrictions are lifted as long as the immune-challenged are sheltered and elemental precautions are taken. Sweden has not had a comprehensive shutdown at all and has a fatality rate per

million of population of 211, against the U.S. (156), U.K. (293), France (332), Italy (429) and Spain (482). Canada's is 60, among the lowest believable numbers from the Northern Hemisphere, which means someone is doing something right. This is one Canadian who has died from the coronavirus for every 17,500 people in the country. All deaths are sad and many are tragic and life cannot be monetized. Sane public policy requires however, that we also keep in mind that Canada has also self-inflicted over a million unemployed and stock market declines of \$670 billion in two months, a staggering \$330 million for each of the nearly 2,200 lives that have been lost to this pandemic in Canada. The vast majority of those who die from COVID-19 are over 65 and have other problems that increase vulnerability. This segment of the population is comparatively easy to protect (though the prime minister is right that the armed forces in homes for the elderly is not a long-term solution).

Canada has done well. The shutdown, here and elsewhere, can be justified, but the continuation of it cannot. It has to be rolled back, prudently and according to local facts, and vigilance for the elderly and infirm must be redoubled. Exaggerated doom and gloom will evaporate with the revival of life and the retention of manageable infection rates. These are painful times, but we have only one practical choice.

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