

Coronavirus hysteria will soon come to an end

Soon, the U.S. election will be over, and whatever the result, the rationale for the Democratic anti-Trump press (faithfully parroted by the Canadian media) to incite public hysteria will be over

by Conrad Black



One more time, I inflict upon readers my grievous reservations about the response of this and many other countries to the coronavirus. The basic facts are that the coronavirus is not fatal to 99.997 per cent of people under the age of 65, and not fatal to 94.6 per cent of people above the age of 65. The vast majority of people of all ages, including the elderly, have zero or minimal symptoms when afflicted by it. The approximately 98 per cent of people who do contract the coronavirus and survive it appear to be thereafter largely immune to it, at least for a time. It is of the nature of this virus that it cannot be prevented from spreading; the only

durable cure for a whole society is a vaccine, and as many as seven largely effective vaccines are in the final stages of development and some will likely be available by the end of this year. New Zealand triumphantly announced a couple of months ago that there were no remaining coronavirus cases in the country and, accordingly, its restrictive measures were being relaxed. Parliamentarians threw order papers in the air and there were street parties and nationwide festivities, but within a couple of weeks, and despite screening processes for arriving people, the coronavirus had returned. The process for discovering, testing and distributing a coronavirus vaccine has been the subject of such intense and universal interest that the normal time required has been reduced by over a year. Vaccines are rarely 100 per cent effective, but they do drastically reduce the incidence of the illness, and they strengthen the morale of afflicted populations.

Research also shows that over 80 per cent of fatalities attributed to the coronavirus in advanced countries that test comprehensively and report accurately are people who also suffer from other significant illnesses or vulnerabilities. The extent to which the coronavirus is the effective cause of death varies in each case and is sometimes nearly impossible to determine. But the underlying point is illustrated by the fact that the average age of people deemed to die from, or at least with, the coronavirus is within a few months of the actuarial life expectancy in each country; for example, the average age of Americans deemed to have died from the coronavirus and the average life expectancy of the American public are both 78. Almost all deaths are sad events, but the media has been irresponsible in its complicity in the maintenance of a higher degree of public anxiety than is justified by this illness. Our entire species has largely fallen into an excessive state of fear, evasion and defeatism.

There is also ample evidence to demonstrate the negative consequences of economic and societal shutdowns. Not only is

the unemployment rate multiplied by between five and 10, a great many businesses including most aspects of the travel, hospitality and entertainment industries, are effectively strangled. Education is severely reduced in all respects by being conducted at home in many cases, even if supported by schools and universities. And many people suffer some degree of morose or depressive feelings, and develop substance dependencies as a result of prolonged solitude.

Persevering readers will recall that from the beginning, I opposed an economic shutdown. Instead, I recommended thinning groups and requiring masks in confined public areas and drastic protective measures for elderly or otherwise immunity reduced people. It was always a mistake to shut schools and universities; the students as well as the faculty and administrators beneath the age of 65 all have a very slight risk of suffering serious consequences from the coronavirus, and there is evidence to suggest that children do not transmit the virus as easily as they do simpler ailments like the measles, flu or cold viruses. Parents of school-age children are relatively invulnerable to the coronavirus.

But our whole society went cock-a-hoop for the shutdown and are now edging back toward it in Canada and Europe because of increasing incidences of the virus, generally unaccompanied either by increased fatalities or overloading of hospitals. Because those prevented from working by the pandemic are blameless in their fate, we have correctly adopted a generous method of compensating them. This is not fiscally sustainable indefinitely, however. We are effectively disincentivizing people from work at the same time that we prevent them from working and we are experimenting with an impossibly generous imposition of a guaranteed annual income. We are simply sending a salary drawn from borrowed money to unsustainably large numbers of adult citizens. We will be paying for it for a long time.

It has also been my contention that in Canada we have been too

much influenced by aspects of the coronavirus crisis in the United States that have been driven by political tactics in the election campaign in that country. The incumbent administration was practically certain of re-election prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. The Democratic opposition saw a path to victory by agitating for a gigantic economic shutdown, which would lead to an economic recession that could then be portrayed as a needless depression generated by incompetent public-health management on the part of the Trump administration, even though the administration was following its opponents' advice in shutting down, and is bringing the nation back to work more quickly than had been thought possible. The U.S. economic growth rate was 3.2 per cent in the third quarter and the United States has vastly outperformed all other advanced countries in the world since coming out of lockdown.

But in Canada, we have been sluggishly and doggedly attached to a shutdown policy based on infection rates, even though our fatality rate has been comparatively good. I know that the motives of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ontario Premier Doug Ford, Toronto Mayor John Tory and other Canadian leaders are in these matters sincere and commendable, but the policy has been mistaken from the beginning, and the longer it continues, the more damage it will cause. We are fundamentally shutting down the normal lives of up to 60 per cent of the population and the leisure time of 90 per cent of the population out of an exaggerated concern for only two per cent of the population who are in fact seriously vulnerable to this illness. It is not too late for Canada to show some leadership, even though we have been long preceded by Sweden, which wisely never imposed a general shutdown. But in around 10 days, the U.S. election will be over, and whatever the result, the rationale for the Democratic anti-Trump press (faithfully parroted by the Canadian media) to incite public hysteria will be over. The American media will cease to hammer public sensibilities with gruesome formulations about "grim milestones," and other

sombre fatuities. Canada will, as usual, plod along behind the Americans, without the excuse of an election, and continental unease will subside. We could have done so much better.

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