

Coronavirus' political toll

Europe's bungling of the approaching danger has been so serious that Donald Trump should not have any problem demonstrating that his administration has handled it better than its natural comparable countries

by Conrad Black



The greatest long-term significance of the coronavirus pandemic, as will be elaborated a few paragraphs along in this piece, will be the injury to the credibility and prestige of China and the European Union. It need hardly be emphasized now that there is no choice in any advanced country but to apply drastic measures to reduce the likelihood of members of its population being infected with coronavirus. As the average age of those who have died from that illness in the United States is 80, and the mortality rate in the U.S. for those beneath the age of 70 who are afflicted by the coronavirus is approximately a quarter to a fifth of one per cent of those

that are afflicted, the greatest and most urgent effort must be to shield elderly people in fragile health from any exposure to it. The massive closures of institutions and public entertainments are designed to reduce the overall incidence of the coronavirus – to diminish the possibility of people catching it, rather than to focus on the danger of mortal encounters with it, since 99.75 per cent of people under the age of 70 who are in good health are not in significant danger of dying – they are just being urged to take and comply with unusual measures to reduce drastically the likelihood of a possibly very nasty virus.

The level of danger this illness presents to a sophisticated country in public health terms such as Canada and the United States does not justify the level of media and public hysteria that has assaulted the financial markets and unhinged most of the media of the United States. Since the imagination is often more torturing than reality, it is easy to leap to a state of acute spontaneous nervousity over a virus that can kill people, (though very rarely thoroughly healthy people). And in the United States, the national media which is overwhelmingly hostile to the president, (who openly requites their contempt), are naturally trying desperately to find grounds to attack him and reduce his chances of re-election in November. In this respect, the authentic coronavirus crisis is the successor to the confection of the monstrous fraud that U.S. President Donald Trump had colluded with the Russian government to rig the 2016 election, and the spurious effort at impeachment of him, in which a drumhead kangaroo court in the House of Representatives accused him of offences that are not impeachable and without any probative evidence that he had committed the acts alleged anyway. At least here there is a real public health crisis; it is not a complete fiction like the previous episodes, and in this round, Trump botched the early public relations, seeming complacent, and rather ignorant. But it has at times seemed like a negative medical version of the Dutch Tulip Mania in the 1630s, in which a

tulip bulb could sell for the current equivalent of about \$500,000.

Despite his clumsy start, no one can blame Trump for the start of the epidemic in the U.S. and he was much abused with the customary bunk about racism and xenophobia for suspending direct travel from China to the U.S. very presciently, and in advance of almost all other governments, in January. But, partly because of the relatively distant separation of the United States (and Canada) from China, western Europe, Iran and South Korea, the principal hotbeds of the coronavirus, and partly because Trump acted quickly in closing the door on direct travel from China and then continental Europe this week, the United States has closed the spigot of outsourced infection to a slight trickle, while the preventive measures against domestic-sourced communication of the disease are being radically tightened now.

The numbers reveal this pattern. The reports from China and Iran can't be believed, not only because neither government ever is truthful about anything, but also because large sections of those countries do not have a public health system that is adequate to report accurately even if that were the official wish. The only countries, among those that can be believed, that now acknowledge having fewer than 10 coronavirus cases per million of population, are Canada (4.2), the U.S. (5.3), Japan (5.5), Australia (6.1) and the United Kingdom (8.7). New Zealand only acknowledges seven cases, and the coronavirus seems to have made very few inroads in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and in Latin America, presumably because of comparatively limited direct contact with China and western Europe. What is most alarming is that Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland all reported increases in the number of cases outstanding, from Tuesday to Wednesday of this last week, of between 20 and 30 per cent, which indicates that Europe has been very late to recognize the

danger. These are all countries with sophisticated public health systems, and the fact that none of their governments, nor the European Union in Brussels, awakened until matters started to get out of control in Italy, is a very unflattering reflection on what regards itself, (and is so regarded by the left in the mainly English-speaking Western countries), as a socialist paradise with perfect health care. Following so soon upon the departure of Britain from the EU, this is another heavy blow to the credibility and relevance of Europe as a strategic entity.

Italy suffered a shocking 184 deaths on Wednesday alone, and practically the entire country is now on shutdown, apart from pharmacies and food stores and markets; it is like a 24-hour curfew, with an enforcement process that replicates martial law. The figures are compromised by the inadequacy of testing; presumably there are a great many people who have had some fluish symptoms that are in fact the result of the coronavirus, but are not tested or recorded as such. In the United States, the administration promised four million tests this past week, but was unable to deliver them because, as the secretary of health and human services, Alex Azar, said on Thursday, the tests are available but giving them to applicants has not been "seamless." This is a shortcoming of the administration's management that is being addressed. But there is no cure for coronavirus – you get over it or you don't, and the main uses of testing are resolution of the curiosity of the patient and reduction of public exposure to the malady.

Europe's bungling of the approaching danger has been so serious that President Trump should not have any problem demonstrating that his administration has handled it better than its natural comparable countries, though Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer prattles on with his customary nonsense about Trump's "towering incompetence." Japan has been more competitive, but being so close to China, it could be

assumed to be more aware, and as an island state, it is, like the U.K., comparatively easy to insulate. More serious than Europe's maladroit performance has been the belligerent dishonesty and ineffectiveness of the Chinese government. It was very late grasping the existence of the problem, lied to its people and the world about the proportions of it and is now officially blaming the outbreak on the United States and deliberately withholding medical supplies that some of the large American pharmaceutical companies greedily outsourced to China to take advantage of cheaper labour costs and lower taxes. China will regret this serious provocation of the United States, a country much more economically and militarily formidable than China and with political institutions that are trustworthy and democratically organized, however sleazy and vulgar

American politics may often be. There is no longer any talk of China quickly overtaking the United States as the world's economic leader, and Trump's very successful visit to India last month was a step in America's systematic rejoinder to all China's boastful claim to be creating a "belt and road" to become the world's premier country.

The coronavirus will pass, Trump will come through it all right; America will not forget China's treachery and China will have reason to regret it.