

Fear of COVID-19 is overblown, it's time to get the economy moving again

The danger of death for 80 per cent of people is not statistically significant, and there is no excuse for continuing any substantial part of the lockdown in respect of them

by Conrad Black



It is possible to become demoralized by the enthusiasm an inordinate number of Canadians seem to have to continue the coronavirus shutdown. The generally capable mayor of Toronto, my friend of many years, John Tory, who's usually a sensible man, is now being lampooned even by soft-left elements of the media for trying to prevent the public from crowding into High Park and other public places to enjoy the sight and aroma of

the cherry blossoms, a much anticipated rite of spring. This is starting to resemble the Dutch Tulip madness of the 17th century, where individual tulip flowering plants, which had only recently been developed, could sell for the current equivalent of over \$50,000, and we are discussing the frugal and sober Dutch, not a nationality more accustomed to taking leave of its collective senses.

Canada recorded 4,404 coronavirus deaths as of Thursday night; about 80 per cent of them are among the 20 per cent of people over the age of 60, and usually with additional health problems that have compromised their immune systems. Thus, we have discovered with the data that has come in in the last two months, and especially from the over eight million tests in the United States, that we have a significant problem for a fifth of the people and a minimal problem for the great majority. In Canada this means that among people over 65 there has been about one fatality for each 2,200 people, or one-22nd of one per cent, which are pretty good odds for the elderly. And as 20 per cent of fatalities occur among the 80 per cent of the population beneath the age of 65, the chances of people in that large age bracket being mortally afflicted from this pandemic are approximately one in almost 40,000. Thus the danger of death for 80 per cent of people is not statistically significant, and there is no excuse for continuing any substantial part of the lockdown in respect of them.



A woman and child walk through a Toronto park on May 7. Stan Behal/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

American testing, uncontradicted by the experiences of other countries that have tested extensively, is that about half of those who contract the coronavirus have no symptoms at all, so the fear that people who survive a coronavirus attack are certain to have been through a terrible, life-threatening ordeal is unfounded. And thorough research in New York City, where there has been the greatest concentration of occurrences of the illness in North America, well beyond that city's

proportionate share of the U.S. population, reveals that two-thirds of infections have been contracted by people who have been observing the shutdown and staying at home. I supported the shutdown as necessary to ensure that a disease that we had reason to fear was deadlier and more pernicious than it is did not sweep across the whole population. But now, nothing could be more obvious than the fact that it is a positive danger now, medically and economically, to continue the shutdown remotely as tightly as it has been.

The confinement of millions of people doesn't, beyond a certain point, reduce the chances of infection and this level of economic disruption is an unprecedented international act of self-impoverishment. The human damage of this amount of artificial unemployment cannot be sustained much longer, and neither can the fiscal burden of trying to compensate those who have been disemployed as a result of public policy rather than any fault of their own or the normal forces of the free market, and there is no excuse for it. I am not a gun enthusiast and don't enjoy shooting of any kind but it was hard not to be impressed by the determination of large groups of Americans crowding into state capitals last week, many of them exercising the Second Amendment right to bear arms, to assert their right to go freely about their communities, do their jobs, earn their pay and take care of their families. When my sons and daughter and I were all much younger, I used to take them to paintball parks in the interior of Florida and was always astounded at how many adult men appeared in battle fatigues and told me what arsenals they had in their homes of real guns and how little surprised they would be if at some point they had to defend their homes against the government, as in the days of the American Revolution.



An armed demonstrator gathers outside of the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, on May 1. Matthew Hatcher/Bloomberg

The gentler tradition of this country has many attractions, and there are aspects of American society that are mad and

violent. But the docility of Canadians putting up with this nonsense is dispiriting. Escalated efforts should be made to provide for and insulate the vulnerable, who are almost all sensible and aware of the dangers and can act prudently. The rest of the population should take their chances. They have virtually no chance of a fatal encounter and little likelihood of a nasty illness. Our society must act sensibly to reduce the likelihood of dangerous infections but stop this contemptible cowering like moles and imagining that fear of the illness will ever be a policy that banishes it. This is not a question of monetizing life and exalting commerce. It is the recognition that too many in this country seem reluctant to face: that we cannot justify the penury of a fifth of the population, almost eight million people, and dangerous increases in public debt and the money supply, to reduce marginally the mortal impact of a disease that takes such a small percentage of the population.

We know from Sweden what happens when the population is adequately warned and restaurants and theatres and sporting events are somewhat thinned but essentially everything goes on close to normal: the fatality rate rises to about 2.5 times the rate of Canada and perhaps 20 per cent above the United States, and 90 per cent of Sweden's deaths from this virus occur in people 70 years old or above. Every death is a sadness and premature and avoidable deaths are tragedies, but putting between a fifth and a third of the population in grave financial danger and at risk of ancillary conditions that can also be deadly, to reduce the mortal incidence of the virus from 320 people in one million over the whole population to 200, is not a justifiable measure.



People sit in a restaurant in Stockholm on May 8, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Jonathan NACKSTRAND/AFP

The whole anti-coronavirus effort has suffered from mission creep: at the outset, it was designed to prevent a devastation that would re-enact the great London plague of the mid-17th

century. The Imperial College in London predicted, a bit cavalierly, about 2.2 million dead in the United States, about two-thirds of one per cent of the entire population. The shutdown and simultaneous measures reduced the incidence of the coronavirus, but a virus can remain dormant for a long time and cannot be extirpated without a vaccine. Until a vaccine is developed, the best that can be done is to run as normal an economic life as possible, shelter the vulnerable elderly and infirm, and rely on the prudent majority to act wisely but not obsessively or in a cowardly manner. Having neighbours set the police on neighbours because they suspect they are entertaining a friend for dinner, barricading the public out of parks because too many will want to see the cherry blossoms, frog-marching people off beaches and fining or jailing them, demeans the police and insults everyone. It is shaming and absurd.

Telling 25-year-old couples, married or not, straight or gay, who are intimate, that they have to maintain two-metres between them in public is ludicrous. A sure sign that this has gone far enough occurred this week when my tailor in Savile Row advised that designer masks are available. The rest of the world is going back to work and to comparative normalcy, in stages, but much more quickly than we are. No one wants impetuosity; but we don't want, and should not accept, priggish fearfulness either.

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