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PANDEMIC EXPOSES WEAKNESSES OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

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2020 forever will be associated with the coronavirus sweeping Canada and the world. However, its impact on the economy was much greater than on our health. Far fewer people were stricken by the virus than the initial apocalyptic warnings from health care experts, while its impact on incomes, jobs and government deficits was larger and longer lasting than economists forecast last spring.

Will the growth of government be sustained? It is a natural human tendency to predict the future by extrapolating a straight line from recent developments. Occasionally this works; the postwar liberal welfare state was birthed by massive state interventions in response to the Great Depression and the Second World War. Many analysts wishfully see a similar emergency-induced expansion of government during 2020 as signalling a permanent upturn in spending, on everything from green energy infrastructure to a guaranteed annual income.

However, history more often moves with the ebb and flow of conflicting ideas and recurring cycles in the economy.

For example, former U.S. President Barack Obama appeared to set the U.S. irrevocably on the path of a cosmopolitan globalism detached from local identity, completely overlooking the rise of Tea Party populism and nativism that foreshadowed Donald Trump's election in 2016. In Canada, growing momentum for Quebec's separation cultivated the sentiment in the mid-1990s it would inevitably win the next referendum. Instead, support unexpectedly and quickly faded, to the point that the separatist Parti Quebecois vote fell below 20 percent in the 2018 election.

The coming years may also confound predictions of a permanent enlargement of government due to the pandemic. It is often overlooked that two forces were unleashed by the pandemic: government spending exploded and new technologies diffused rapidly. Only the latter proved effective and efficient and therefore is likely to be enduring. Clearly, the pandemic acted as an accelerator for technologies such as tele-working from home, communicating and shopping on-line instead of in-person. These trends show how fleeting government plans and assumptions can be; they confound government support for high-density downtown living and costly investments in mass transit

as people sell their downtown condos, move to the suburbs and buy their own vehicles to get around.

The fall-out from government actions to combat the virus is already provoking a backlash against specific government interventions during the crisis. Governments boast of having "Canadians backs" with income support, but they failed to provide basic health services such as safe long-term care facilities for the elderly, rapid testing and comprehensive tracing, and the timely roll-out of vaccinations. Canada wasted its experience with the SARS virus in 2003. Testing was less than half the per capita rates in the U.S. and Europe. Tracing was ad hoc, despite its importance in allowing authorities to pinpoint what activities to curb instead of the blanket shutdowns imposed in the spring.

The ebbing moral authority of governments is reflected in faltering public willingness to adopt basic preventive measures such as wearing a mask and social distancing, especially outside of work. The weakening social contract between government and its citizens, who received income support in return for being socially disciplined, fuelled much of the explosive second wave of the virus. Most obviously, Quebec Premier

Francois Legault's proposed "moral contract," in which Quebecers would curb their social interactions now in return for a relaxation of restrictions for Christmas, was rescinded as cases keep rising. Politicians have to accept responsibility for less public servility in the fall because they assumed ownership for the pandemic response in the spring with their daily press conferences. Millions of Canadians may have balked at Justin Trudeau's recommendation to download the government's tracing app because it was endorsed by someone they dislike. Some actions should have been left to healthcare professionals.

The legacy of unprecedented budget deficits will prevent governments from initiating expensive new infrastructure and social spending programs while increasing the burden on future taxpayers. Government spending was already trending up due to population ageing and the inexorable increase in its labour costs. The privileged position of most federal civil service workers was on full display during the pandemic, with the vast majority keeping their jobs and full salaries, safe in their cocoons at home even as millions of Canadians lost their jobs or risked their health to keep essential goods and services flowing.

The pandemic's legacy of lower interest rates further undermines pension plans, bringing closer the day governments face the unappetizing choice between taxpayer's subsidizing public service pensions or trimming benefits.

Most importantly, the pandemic may reverse how younger generations think about what drives our economy. Many youths unfairly blamed the excesses of capitalism for the Great Financial Crisis and increasingly tuned in the siren call of radicals such as U.S. Democratic Bernie Sanders who questioned our economy's fundamental organization around markets and business firms.

The pandemic fatally undermines this naïve view of the innate evil of business and sanctity of government. While governments struggled to develop an effective health care response to the second wave despite huge budget deficits, the real solution to the pandemic is coming from technological innovation in the business sector, notably drugs to treat the virus and then vaccines to eradicate it. Already technology had proved indispensable during the lockdown, allowing people to stay at home and work on-line, shop on Amazon, meet on Zoom, and be entertained with Netflix.

Compared with the business sector's impressive mastery of new technologies, the response of governments was heavy-handed, lead-footed, and wrong-headed. In the spring, governments unnecessarily closed large swathes of the economy that posed little risk of spreading the virus; they were unprepared to test and trace more cases during the inevitable second wave and failed to make vaccines in Canada by year-end; and they poorly-targeted aid to many people not needing support instead of small businesses in desperate straits. Rather than demonstrating their ability to manage the virus and thereby stoking confidence in government's ability to solve other societal ills, the pandemic highlighted its limitations compared with the speed and efficiency of the private sector. This message is as evident to youths as the failings of global finance in 2008.

Understandably most Canadians say 2020 was the worst year ever. However, it may ultimately prove to be a turning point for the better if it represents the high-water mark of government intervention that recedes to leave place for a resurgence of private sector innovation and competition in markets.

Ontario Expands Case and Contact Management Workforce

The Ontario government has hired more case managers and contact tracers, building the provincial workforce to 1,600 by February 15, 2021. Along with staff who work in or have been redeployed within public health units, this support brings the total number of case and contact tracers in the province to nearly 5,600 staff. These people are vital in helping to isolate new cases of COVID-19 and stopping the spread of the virus in communities across Ontario.

"Our government continues to use every resource at its disposal to fight COVID-19 and keep Ontarians safe," said Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health. "By expanding our

case and contact management capacity, we are significantly boosting our ability to respond to the rising number of COVID-19 cases across the province. We are immensely grateful to our public health units and this provincial workforce, who are all working to keep Ontarians safe and healthy and stop the spread of this deadly virus."

As part of its Fall Preparedness Plan, the province has hired over 700 contact tracers and case managers, in addition to the 600 Statistics Canada employees that are assisting with contact follow-up. The province is onboarding an additional 300 case managers in the coming weeks - bringing the provin-

cial workforce to 1,600 and the total number of case and contact management staff across Ontario to approximately 5,600.

"Ontario's public health system continues to take extraordinary efforts to contain COVID-19," said Dr. David Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "Public health units have shown incredible commitment and dedication to protecting our health during this challenging time. We will continue to work closely with them and support the important services they provide to Ontarians."

Due to high rates of transmission in Toronto, the Ministry of Health is currently providing

180 case managers and contact tracers to support Toronto Public Health, with plans to increase the number up to 280 in the next few weeks. The provincial workforce also assists 12 public health units across Ontario, providing extensive supports to Windsor-Essex, Ottawa, Hamilton, Halton, Toronto, Waterloo, Peel and York. As new staff are onboarded, they will be made available to additional health units.

Public health units are starting to use technology to reach cases and contacts faster so that people can get into isolation as quickly as possible and limit the spread, including a new, secure "Virtual Assistant" tool.

Through a secure online form, the Virtual Assistant uses text messages to connect health care workers with individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have been identified as close contacts. The text messages link to safe and secure web-based forms with questions that help case managers assess symptoms and general health, and identify close contacts. The Virtual Assistant also provides important information to individuals such as guidance on how to self-isolate.

This Virtual Assistant tool is available to all public health units and provincial workforce staff that are supporting public health units. Currently, this

new tool is being adopted by a number of public health units including Toronto, Windsor, Halton, Waterloo and York, and will soon be used across the province.

To aid the success of the province's case managers, contact tracers and health care workers, it is vital that all Ontarians continue to play their part by following public health measures. It is also critically important that individuals with confirmed cases of COVID-19 provide all history of contacts and contact information to their public health unit. This remains the best way to control the spread of the virus and to keep our communities safe from COVID-19.

HEALTH DEPARTMENT INSPECTS BIG BOX STORES JAN. 16 AND 17 FOR COMPLIANCE WITH PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

Durham Region Health Department public health inspectors will be visiting area big box stores to ensure compliance with COVID-19 public health measures as part of a provincial enforcement blitz happening this coming Saturday and Sunday. On Jan. 16 and 17, public health inspectors will join their enforcement counterparts from the province, as well as local bylaw and police officers, in this initiative to help protect workers and customers in response to rising COVID-19 cases.

These inspections will focus on ensuring workers and patrons are wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, and following every public health and safety measure. Public health inspectors will have the authority to ticket supervisors, employees and patrons who do not comply with COVID-19 public health requirements or temporarily close a premise.

The most common areas of non-compliance to date have been improper mask use, lack of employee screening and improper sanitization. Since the beginning of the pandemic's second wave last September, the Health Department has responded to over 4,700 inquiries and complaints related to businesses, organizations and the public regarding lack of compliance with COVID-19 public health measures.

Individuals and businesses who are not following the rules can be fined as follows:

\$750 for not following the rules;

\$1,000 for preventing others (including employees or other workers) from following the rules.

Maximum fines can be up to \$100,000 for individuals and \$10 million for a corporation. Failure to follow the rules could also result in prosecution or even a year in jail.