

Commentary



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Understanding the consequences from the COVID pandemic

Ken Coates

We may soon be able to declare definitive victory over the COVID-19 virus and its many variants. But we must feel, at least, as though we have landed on the beaches of Normandy. The end may not be near, but it is at least in sight, albeit only from a high-flying drone. Canadians have sacrificed a great deal over the past two years, going along with painful restrictions, commercial lockdowns and social turmoil. We all want it to end.

For reasons that are not totally clear, Canada and most nations (New Zealand being a successful exception) have not attacked the pandemic as the biological equivalent of war. Instead, governments have, for good reason, worked hard to protect family wellbeing and maintain economic momentum. There were no emergency personal financial measures, no pandemic-specific tax increases, no major government cutbacks, no COVID bond drives, and, basically, no calls on for personal or collective sacrifices beyond those imposed by lockdowns and business closures.

Even as the pandemic surges, it is vital that the country reckons with the many challenges and transitions associated with the pandemic. Some of these may prove short-lived; others could be transformative. There are few silver linings in what has been a long, hard slog, with tempers wearing thin and frustrations mounting. The pandemic has been hard; Canadians have reached the limits of their tolerance. Sadly, there are serious and long-term issues yet to be addressed.

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Distrust of government and health authorities

In the early months of the pandemic, Canadians put their trust in government – and government responded with substantial support. That trust has eroded badly over the past six months. Confidence in public health authorities has plummeted. Anger with the endless toggling between restrictions and freedom is growing. That the federal government has used the fog of the pandemic to launch major new programs and expand the role of the state dramatically has only added to Canadians' disquiet and lack of confidence in national politicians. It may take a long time for the country's confidence in government to return to pre-COVID level, particularly as they peddle misleading concepts like “building back better” as a call to action when the reality is that we have not yet addressed lingering problems caused by the pandemic itself.

The transformation of political dissent

Canada has a long, distinguished (but comparatively mild) history of political dissent, with Canadians challenging the status quo and accelerating political change. But in the COVID era, protest has been different. What started as a conspiracy-theory driven, odd-ball frustration with government has morphed into the beginning of a major anti-government movement. A significant number of people, perhaps 10 to 15 percent at present, have had their confidence in Canadian authorities deeply shaken. This confidence will not be easily restored. The extensive and extended encroachment into the daily lives of all Canadians, including increasingly aggressive condemnations of the vaccine averse, often led by the prime minister and other prominent politicians, have infuriated many people. This may represent the start of a new political challenge to the formerly calm and predictable Canadian democratic process. We are not yet ready for American-style political turmoil, but it may well be coming.

The COVID-19 generation

There is growing evidence that even a relatively short recession can result in long-term consequences for the worst affected individuals. The impacts of the pandemic are much worse and even more damaging. Elementary school children have lost crucial years of learning and socialization. High school, college and university students have had their education seriously disrupted and the standard social transitions – graduation, the start of college and university, dating, weddings, parties and the like – stripped from their lives. Young people entering the work force have been shuffled into the misleading

security of receiving monthly payments from the government. Canada has the makings of a large COVID-19 generation, who will carry the disruptions and career impacts of the pandemic for the rest of their lives. Politicians will still be dealing with this COVID cohort for decades to come

Educational turmoil

Teachers, college instructors and university faculty made remarkable adjustments to respond to COVID-19. So did schools, colleges, polytechnics, and universities. Students had to respond to online learning, false starts and re-starts, and the difficult challenges of adapting to learning from home. While some did reasonably well – motivated, talented students almost always succeed – the majority have struggled. Data is hard to come by so far, but it appears that educational performance (course completion, graduation rates, learning outcomes) has suffered, perhaps seriously. Instructors talk openly about distracted and absent students.

This might have been manageable in the short-term. But the problems continue to compound. The shortcomings of Grade 12 affect first- and second-year college and university. Poor performance in the first years of an academic or career program undermines future learning. Poor training results in a poor start to a career. Weak entry to the workforce damages long-term prospects. Instructors have done their best in difficult circumstances. Most students have tried, to a greater or lesser degree. But the undermining of education will have long-term implications for individuals and for Canada's economy and society.

Re-establishing small business confidence

Big business in Canada made it through the pandemic in pretty good shape. The same can be said for government-funded workers, who coasted through the pandemic financially. But the Canadian small business community has been battered. Hundreds of thousands of small businesses have crashed and burned. Many have closed permanently. Others have seen the owners stripped of liquidity and value, as they do everything possible to stay afloat. Governments helped with some emergency measures, but these were undermined by cyclical closures and fast-changing and often arbitrary restrictions and regulations, to say nothing of inconsistent supply chains that ravaged inventory control and the rise of e-commerce that harmed many retail businesses. Small businesses are the backbone of the Canadian economy, but they have been marginalized throughout the pandemic; major steps will be required to help restore this sector to its role as an engine of Canadian prosperity.

Indigenous communities, lockdowns and community resilience

Indigenous communities have suffered seriously over the past two years. Pandemics and other disasters, after all, typically hit the poor and marginalized the hardest. This same period saw Indigenous governments step forward in major ways. Indigenous economic development corporations responded creatively to changing realities. Community members suffered; particularly children who were denied access to schools and community services. The pandemic coincided with the release of billions of dollars in additional federal funding and greater government attention to Indigenous rights. Together with the strong performance by most Indigenous authorities, these realities have strengthened community support and demonstrated the success of Indigenous empowerment and economic autonomy.

Rethinking Canadian health care

In thousands of ways, health care professionals and support workers are the real heroes of the pandemic. Over time, we will come to appreciate even more their commitment and sacrifices during this period. The system has been repeatedly pushed to the brink and it has proven inadequate in many respects. COVID-19 exposed serious cracks in the Canadian health care system, especially the illogical and ideology-driven insistence on a single-payer public health care system. Canada needs major health care reform, of the type strongly resisted over the past half-century. If anything good comes out of the pandemic, it would be the emergence of a national consensus that we need to build on the strengths of the current system while reimagining the financing, structural and service approaches to Canadian health care. Failure to learn the health care lessons from the pandemic would be a tragic mistake that will cost many more lives in the years to come.

Facing up to massive pandemic debt

Canadians have been unbelievably blasé in the face of the largest non-wartime expansion in government spending in our history. The level of comfort rests, in large part, in the fact that much of the money went directly to Canadians, in the hands of individuals and businesses. But the pandemic saw so much money go out the door that the effect was to desensitize most Canadians to the dangers of massive government debt. While the government insists the economy is poised to grow quickly enough to make this additional debt manageable, there is no reason to believe this is more than wishful thinking. Rising interest rates, steadily increasing inflation, and the economy-dampening effects of ill-advised government climate and energy policies portend a less

promising fiscal future. The worst part of the pandemic has been the near silence on the simple fact that the huge costs of the past two years are being pushed forward to future generations, including the same young people whose economic prospects have been badly damaged by the disruptions of the past few years.

Rebuilding the Canadian tourism industry

The pandemic has undermined much of the Canadian tourism industry, with the collapse of international travel ravaging many parts of the sector, though there have been efforts to support tourism, largely through the promotion of “staycations” for regional residents. In some areas, including the West Coast cruise industry and Yukon’s international tourism, the commercial devastation has been real and deep. Indigenous tourism, slated to reach \$1 billion in returns in 2020, has hit a deep depression, damaging an industry on the verge of a real breakout. A few places – Prince Edward County in Ontario, Whistler and Tofino in British Columbia – have done very well by catering to regional travellers anxious to get away from home but who are unable or unwilling to travel to other jurisdictions. But this vibrant sector is in serious, nation-wide trouble. Urgent collective action is needed to help the tourism industry find its feet and return to its former glory, where it still holds enormous potential for revitalizing small-town and rural Canada.

Changing the Canadian work ethic

The pandemic changed the way Canadians work. Many professionals now work from home and a large number of them do not want to return to their offices. Faced with economic dislocations, the Government of Canada created a large and temporary “guaranteed” income system. The money was poorly targeted. Many people who did not truly need the money got support. Young people who could not find work, who did not want to work and/or who choose not to go to college or university could stay home and still get a monthly stipend from the government. Why work at a minimum wage job when the government is willing to transfer a comparable sum each month for nothing? A broad swath of Canadian youth has been given a weird, unproductive entry to the adult “work” force, one based on a freely offered stipend with no reporting requirements or duties. Meanwhile, businesses offering entry-level jobs find themselves desperate for workers. This is not sustainable, and the government has cut back on these payments. But the damage to the work ethic of Canadian youth may be long-term and little is being done to address this troubling development.

Revitalization of small-town Canada

Small-town Canada has had a rough few decades, save for those communities within easy commuting distance of metropolitan areas. Towns like Squamish, BC, Stratford, Ontario, and Cochrane, Alberta have flourished as adjuncts to the largest cities. Growing numbers of people, particularly professionals, were liberated to work from home, and they sold their over-priced city houses and bought cheaper properties in the Maritimes, one of the hundreds of superb small towns in southern Ontario, and the attractive communities across Vancouver Island. The arrival of more high-income people into these small communities brought a much-needed burst of economic opportunity. It is not clear that the renewal of towns – as diverse as Wolfville, Nova Scotia, North Hatley, Quebec, Elmira, Ontario, Canmore, Alberta, and Nelson, BC – will be sustained over the long-term. The nature of work and the country's residential geography may change substantially and could put the country on a new trajectory. At the same time, over-heated urban real estate markets continue to diminish the affordability of city life. Canada may be facing dramatic transitions and small towns may see a significant change in their opportunities.

Dealing with anti-vaxxers

More than 10 percent of Canadians refuse to be vaccinated. Some have medical or religious reasons for not getting the shots. Others buy into conspiracy theories and other unorthodox justifications for not being vaccinated. Many Canadians have one or more anti-vaxxers in their personal circle. However, many are decent, smart people who have come to their decisions after deliberate and lengthy thought. They emphasize personal choice more than societal responsibility. As a group, they bitterly resent further government intrusions in their lives. Fault lines are emerging between anti-vaxxers and the vast majority of the population. Harsh words have been exchanged, in both directions. These wounds will take a long time to heal. The vaccinated have serious questions about the unwillingness of the anti-vaxxers to take what they see as easy and safe steps to protect society at large. The vaccination debate is not over, with government leaders now musing about mandatory vaccines. This understated conflict, hidden in large part by Canadian politeness (save for on social media where the predictable bile of new media has surged to the fore), has created a serious fault line in Canadian society. This issue needs more than a temporary patch – and at present, this conversation about how to fix it is one that the country prefers to avoid.

Long COVID

From the beginning of the pandemic, physicians warned about a phenomenon they called “long COVID,” a catchall term used to describe potential but hitherto poorly-understood long-term symptoms and consequences of catching COVID-19. The phrase has not been a big part of the conversation in Canada, but it should be. Over 2.5 million Canadians have had COVID. We know about the 31,000 people who died because of the pandemic. But we do not have a good read on the number of people with long COVID.

The health implications of prolonged illness and lingering effects can be substantial, long-term and life changing. The costs and workforce consequence of long COVID could be considerable. This is a medical consequence of a disease that continues to unfold in real time; it needs to be both understood and addressed. On the other hand, this issue could perhaps fade with time, with our pharmaceutical interventions proving effective enough to mitigate much of its impact. Moreover, what we have learned most from the pandemic is that we must avoid radical or knee-jerk responses, even to unknown challenges. The lack of certainty over long COVID is cause for concern, but we mustn't allow it to overwhelm all other considerations related to human wellbeing.

As the country struggles to come to terms with the full impact of the pandemic, it is vital that the full story be discussed openly and that plans are put in place to respond to this issue. The key now is to study long COVID and let the facts and data guide how we choose to respond. We must be vigilant and dispassionate, a contrast to the panic that defined the early days of the pandemic.

Steps forward

Canadians are sick and tired of the pandemic. They are frustrated with government and the health care system, tired of restrictions that come and go with shocking regularity, perplexed by differences between the Canadian and American approaches, and eager to stay safe and healthy. We have, collectively, had enough – and yet the darn pandemic just seems to keep coming back, in wave after wave. All governments must be forgiven for not adopting perfect policies for a disease that continues to defy easy definition and health care management.

Canada must go forward with eyes wide open. We need a full and frank discussion of the challenges, issues, and opportunities that the country must address. The problems are real and, in many instances, severe. The financial implications are large and very worrisome, but the country and our political leadership have not been forthright in exploring the possibilities. Canada has adapted, reacted, changed, and responded to all the twists and turns of the global pandemic. The battle is not over. Indeed, the complications are grow-

ing in number, complexity, and impact. Frank conversations, careful planning and understanding the realities being faced by Canadians, businesses and communities are urgently required.

The post-pandemic era, when it finally comes, will be as challenging as the past two years as Canada and Canadians try to grapple with the fallout of the pandemic. Our collective focus has been, understandably, on making it through the pandemic. But it is time to turn our attention, at least in part, to the future and to consider how this dreadful period has challenged and upset some of the fundamental elements of Canadian society. Failure to act now will only exacerbate the problems and make the return to a “new normal” even more difficult.

About the author



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He has also worked as a consultant for Indigenous groups and governments in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia as well as for the United Nations, companies, and think tanks. He has previously published on such topics as Arctic sovereignty, Aboriginal rights in the Maritimes, northern treaty and land claims processes, regional economic development, and government strategies for working with Indigenous peoples in Canada. His book, *A Global History of Indigenous Peoples: Struggle and Survival*, offered a world history perspective on the issues facing Indigenous communities and governments. He was co-author of the Donner Prize winner for the best book on public policy in Canada, *Arctic Front: Defending Canada in the Far North*, and was short-listed for the same award for his earlier work, *The Marshall Decision and Aboriginal Rights in the Maritimes*.

Ken contributes regularly, through newspaper pieces and radio and television interviews, to contemporary discussions on northern, Indigenous, and technology related issues.

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