



COVID-19

It's time to talk about a COVID-19 exit strategy

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So we've declared war on COVID-19. The calculus for victory is straightforward. Without a vaccine or a broadly acquired immunity, the virus can be fatal. Our defensive tactic is social distancing by isolating ourselves in our homes both to protect ourselves and to keep possible symptom-free COVID-19 carriers from infecting others.

For now, we're quite rightly fighting this dangerous virus with the best tactics available. And that battle may need to continue. But as any good general knows, it is one thing to enter the battle. It is quite another to know how to exit it. Now is the time for leaders to develop a clear exit strategy.

One key piece of that strategy will be determining that we're actually winning—neither letting fear overwhelm good sense, nor unfurling a "mission accomplished" banner before the job is done.

Right now, we measure the battle against COVID-19 through daily reports from public health officials, dominated by statistics on confirmed cases, hospitalization rates, and deaths. The big concern is ensuring that the hospitalization doesn't exceed hospitals' capacity for intensive care and



Health Minister Patty Hajdu addresses reporters on April 2 during her daily media briefing. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

ventilator support. The public narrative is fear-based: maintain social distancing to prevent overwhelming hospitals.

Current approaches make sense in the early going, but they don't tell the whole story.

Prescribing social isolation has its own serious side effects, especially the longer it is in place. Few would dispute this. Addictions, bankruptcy, depression, suicides, family breakdown—it would not be hard to create a lengthy list of predictable and negative side effects of extended social distancing. Each item on the list would have its own mortality rate.

In fighting the enemy, we will need more comprehensive information.

We'll need to count the lives lost in the short term directly related to the pandemic, of course. But we'll also need to consider deaths over the long term, as a consequence of fighting the pandemic.

Additionally, we'll need to turn our attention to Canada's ability to deal with "preventable deaths" from COVID-19. Social

distancing deals only with reduced demand for medical care. But any war effort also needs to secure its supply lines. Governments are just now beginning to repurpose manufacturing capacity to fast track production of ventilators, masks, and other equipment. Where is our contemporary Lord Beaverbrook, who helped triple Britain's fighter production during the Second World War?

Let's also consider another human cost of extended social distancing. Being human means more than just being alive; it means living. In every dimension of human life, we are social beings who need others. Institutions, including government, matter. Especially at times like this, we need the state to ensure the peace, order and good government will be there when the pandemic is over. But we also need the full range of social institutions—from family to church, business to labour, arts groups to social service agencies—to enable social flourishing. We cannot just shut it all down.

If we take a more comprehensive approach to the pandemic, we can get beyond fighting in the here and now, so that we can start to think about exit strategies.

What might this mean in practice? Here are five things we need to do:

1. Change the conversation by focusing on our capacity for preventable deaths rather than death by COVID-19 as the leading metric.

2. Transition away from social distancing and containment when there is foreseeable capacity to manage extreme cases. Eventually, social distancing can be the default position for vulnerable populations, instead of everyone in general.

3. Develop best practices in our public interactions to lessen the spread of germs and viruses by learning from our current experience.

4. Work toward opening society, recognizing that the costs of continued restrictions are measured with many currencies other than dollars and health.

5. Learn the lessons of the moment and frame the conversation in the context of the hope of living with purpose and meaning rather than in the fear of dying.

COVID-19 is a formidable enemy. Society's generals have understandably and defensibly responded with a wartime mentality. Following our quick strike against the pandemic, the generals need to think through a credible exit strategy. As in all wars, hope needs to overcome fear. The renewed vision of enabling us to live as a flourishing society with meaning, purpose, and hope is the rallying cry that will help us through.

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