

University of Victoria Association of Retired Professors.

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- I finished the manuscript for my book “Restoring Democracy in an Age of Populists and Pestilence” in February last year, 2020, just as it was becoming clear that the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan was expanding fast from an epidemic in China to a pandemic.
- It was apparent to me that a pandemic would play into several of the themes I explore in the book, but for a few days I hoped I might be able to get away with just adding a few sentences to the epilogue.
- That hope didn’t last long.
- Even before the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, I’d resigned myself to having to do a significant re-write of several chapters in the book.
- That work was completed in May and the book was published in July.
- What struck me as I worked the story of COVID-19 and other pandemics and epidemics into the manuscript was how surely these phenomenon expose some of the weaknesses in our democratic systems and institutions.
- And, as we have some hope of seeing the end of this phase of this pandemic within a year, now is a good time to explore those weaknesses and use that opportunity to rebuild our democracy rather than just “getting back to normal.”
- What COVID-19 has shown in many areas is that normal was not working very well.

- Now is a good moment to examine why, and to seek to make improvements.
- I'd like to look first at some of the **economic** weaknesses in our system highlighted by COVID-19.
- Those of you who have read "Restoring Democracy" will know that in looking at things that I judged to have gone wrong with the North Atlantic versions of democracy since the end of the Cold War 30 years ago, a distorted economic system is at the top of my list.
- In particular, I think that the way economic disparity and inequality has been allowed to grow within the North Atlantic democracies is **the** major mistake.
- In my view disparity, with its suffocation of hope and expectations, is the propellant for mistrust among voters for politics, government, the media and all other establishment institutions.
- And those feelings of hopelessness and disenfranchisement among voters have been the honey on which demagogues are feeding.
- What has the pandemic told us about this situation?
- On the purely economic front there are a multitude of lessons.
- I'll highlight just a few.
- An obvious one is that in a crisis the functioning of society depends not on the captains of industry and stock market investors.
- COVID-19 showed clearly that the daily functioning of our society depends on people who live on minimum wages.
- More than that, if minimum wages are not enough to live on, this creates a real threat to the security of our society.

- Thousands of Canadians have died for that very reason: minimum wages are not enough to live on.
- Look at a map of the infection hot spots.
- They are predominantly in Canada's poorest areas where poverty drives vulnerability because of poor diet, poor healthcare, and crowded living space.
- An even more direct example is that people working in care homes had to hold down two or three jobs in order to survive.
- They took the virus with them to all their workplaces.
- For similar reasons of financial insecurity people who are sick have felt compelled to go to work at food packing plants and other crowded workplaces, bringing the virus with them.
- Governments across the North Atlantic Basin cushioned the economic impact of COVID-19 by rushing to create programs to get cash into people's hands.
- Some worked seamlessly.
- Others didn't
- The turmoil of the pandemic reawakened the debate that has been rumbling in Canada since the 1970s for a Guaranteed Annual Income.
- Had a guaranteed annual income system been in place, first, infections caused by economic necessity would not have happened to the same extent and, second, a framework would have been in place to roll out whatever extra help was needed.
- At the same time, the distortions that have become embedded in our economy since the 1970s, when the ridiculous theory of trickle down growth became almost religious faith, have become even more profound during the pandemic.

- By and large, the pandemic has made disparity even worse.
- The captains of large and multi-national corporations have made a killing.
- The on-paper worth of Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon, went up by \$16 billion US dollars in just one day last summer.
- The wealthy living off the interest and dividends on their investments have seen their incomes soar in line with the stock markets.
- Investment income, of course, is taxed across the North Atlantic Basin at a much lower rate than earned income, and this has been a major contributor to disparity over the last 30 years.
- A crucial response to the pandemic **must** be to address disparity.
- Here in Canada, in the United States, and in some European countries there are moves in that direction.
- But I am not convinced those moves are strong enough.
- One of the problems is that globalised trade and other levers have distorted the relationships between the parties in any corporate endeavour.
- In any public company in Europe and North America there are shareholders, corporate managers, company employees, and customers.
- Since the 1970s the relationship between those four has been warped in favour of shareholders and management, and to the detriment of employees and customers.
- That has happened for several reasons, but it needs to change.
- Another lesson from the pandemic was the deadly dangers of the passion for deregulation that has infected some political parties in Europe and North America since the 1970s.

- There have been plenty of reminders in the last 50 years that a fundamental duty of any government of any stripe **is** to regulate society.
- That's what we pay them for.
- What characterised the first town and city states in Mesopotamia seven thousand years ago was the responsibility of the governing power to provide public health, standard measures in the marketplace, and security for the community.
- Those fundamental duties have not changed.
- In Ontario and Quebec in particular the arrival of COVID-19 showed the consequences of those provincial governments withdrawing or neglecting their oversight duties on care homes in the name of de-regulation.
- The result has been that hundreds, if not thousands of people died unnecessarily.
- One positive outcome from COVID-19, in the early months at least, was that it revived public confidence in some political leaders and the officialdom behind them.
- Public confidence in ruling establishments had been waning since the end of the Cold War.
- Without the challenge of an opposing ideology, democratic governments and establishments had become lethargic and deaf to the realities of their constituents' lives and concerns.
- The emergence of a global adversary in the shape of COVID-19 saw some political and administrative leaders rise to the occasion and others not.
- Those that **did** rise energetically to the challenge and who responded purposefully on the basis of what the epidemiologists were telling them were rewarded with public support and adherence to advice on how to behave.

- It has been very noticeable, however, that the countries with the most ineffectual responses to COVID-19 and thus the worst infections and death tolls, are those headed by demagogues and hardline political ideologues.
- Donald Trump, Jiar Balsonaro, Boris Johnson, and Narendra Modi have all been exposed as empty vessels by COVID-19.
- We have seen similar failings in Canada from the ideology-driven governments of Doug Ford in Ontario, François Legault in Quebec, and Jason Kenney in Alberta.
- This experience has been a useful but expensive warning about how dangerous demagogues are to society, and the mistakes and lack of attention that brought them to power.
- The age of demagogy and social media has already shown us the dangers of misinformation and even more dangerous dis-information.
- But COVID-19 showed with deadly simplicity how people brainwashed by conspiracy theories and propaganda are a danger to us all.
- Finally, COVID-19 should be forcing us to reassess what are the essential elements of our national security.
- Canadians have never been big on itemising what is essential to the security of this country, because they have never had to.
- When the chips were down, first Britain, and, for the last 70 years, the United States could be counted on to watch our back.
- That is no longer the case.
- With the US embroiled in a brutally polarized social and political battle over who and what their country is for, Canada is on its own for the first time in its life.

- COVID-19 has offered some low-level warnings by showing us that we had given up our ability quickly produce vaccines and medical protective equipment.
- For several months we were an also-ran in the race of vaccine nationalism.
- We also discovered how vulnerable Canada is to disruptions in the globalised supply chains.
- Those experiences **should** push us into a thorough re-examination of the weaknesses in our national security and how to address them.
- And your organization is just the sort of body that should be involved in promoting such a national discussion.

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