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Export date: Fri Mar 29 6:32:10 2024 / +0000 GMT

It?s time to reopen the economy

EDITORIAL

When Premier Doug Ford ?took back Ontario?, as he so vociferously claimed following the 2018 provincial election, he promised to usher in a new era of common-sense, for-the-people critical thinking at Queen's Park. Now, more than ever, we need him to follow through on that commitment.

COVID-19 has really knocked the world for a loop over the past few months. Entire countries, particularly in Europe, have, figuratively, been brought to their knees. Nations have closed their borders and completely shut down their economies in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Granted pandemic status by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March, COVID-19 has, as of Monday infected a shade under 5 million people worldwide, and killed almost 320,000.

On the face of it, those are some pretty startling statistics. It's only when you begin to dive a little deeper that you may wind up scratching your head, wondering why we find ourselves in the situation we're in today.

We currently have a population on earth of around 7.8 billion people. Using the statistics published by the WHO, that means 0.06 percent of the global population have been infected by COVID-19. Even if we acknowledge that many confirmed cases have flown under the radar and gone undiagnosed, let's say we, generously, multiply the confirmed number by 10, it still only brings us to a fraction of a percent ? 0.6 percent, in fact.

There have been many comparisons made by the mainstream media in Canada, for some strange reason, between COVID-19 and the Spanish Flu, which gripped the world for the better part of two years from 1918 to 1920. An estimated 500 million people were infected at a time when earth had a population of between 1.5 billion and 2 billion, with deaths reported to be between 17 million and 50 million. You likely don't need a calculator to break down those numbers.

Looking more recently, going back a decade, the H1N1 Swine Flu pandemic saw as many as 1.4 billion people infected worldwide. The virus, which was considerably more vicious than COVID-19, is believed to have claimed the lives of around 575,400 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It should be noted, there was no real mass hysteria, and certainly no global shutdown when Swine Flu first hit in 2009.

Here in Canada, as of Monday, there have been around 78,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19. The majority of those cases have been in Quebec (43,000), and here in Ontario (23,000). Mr. Ford moved quickly to legislate lockdown measures that prohibited non-essential services from operating. That was more than eight weeks ago.

Since then, the provincial unemployment rate has ballooned to around 12 percent ? the highest it's been in more than 25 years. An estimated 2.2 million Ontario workers, representing nearly one in three jobs in the province, have been directly effected through job losses or reduced hours at work. Ontario's deficit is expected to quadruple to around $41 billion due to costs incurred by the coronavirus.

While the Premier unveiled the first stage of his plan to relaunch the economy last week, a move that will allow most retail operations with a street-front entrance to open and lifts limits on construction projects across the province, it doesn't quite go far enough. We understand why a shutdown had to happen, and commend the provincial government for successfully slowing the spread of COVID-19, but the time has come to remove the kid gloves, relax those restrictions and fully restore the economy.

While every one of the 5,679 (as of Sunday) lives lost due to COVID-19 is a tragedy, the vast majority of those deaths, around 90 percent, occurred with people over the age of 70, many of whom had additional health problems that compromised their immune systems. For those aged 20 to 69 ? the people who predominantly make up Canada's workforce, there have been 547 deaths. That equates to around 0.003 percent of the workforce.

Conrad Black made a harsh, but good point in a recent column published by the National Post, stating ?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.?

He pointed to Sweden, who has avoided a mass shutdown of services, instead implementing less stringent coronavirus measures. The result is a little more than 30,000 of the Scandinavian nation's 10.23 million people have contracted the virus. While its economy has been impacted by the pandemic, it certainly hasn't been hit as hard as some other European nations, such as the UK, Germany and France.

It's already being said that the COVID-19 crisis is going to bring on the worst recession in modern history ? even worse than the Great Depression. The financial implications are already going to be felt for generations. Pushing the reopening of the economy back any more is only going to exacerbate the problem, and increase that timeline.

We are in a much stronger position now than we were when the crisis hit more than two months ago. Hospitals are better prepared to handle any future outbreak, while businesses have introduced extensive safeguarding measures to ensure the spread of the virus is limited. We, the general public, are more in tune with what to do, too. Elderly residents, and those with health concerns, should continue to self-isolate and limit any face-to-face interaction. But the rest of us need to get back to work. We need to do what we can to rebuild the Ontario economy, before it's too late.