

Is some relaxation appropriate?

EDITORIAL

THE CONTRAST between the situation in Canada and the United States has, perhaps, never been more dramatic.

South of the Canada-U.S. border, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic will soon have taken 50,000 lives, with more than 45,000 having perished by Tuesday of this week, and nearly half the horrendous total occurring in New York state.

In Canada, the death toll was approaching 2,000, with the two provincial hotspots being Quebec and Ontario and the deaths in both provinces occurring more and more in long-term care institutions ? about 80 per cent of Quebec's 1,000-plus total.

In the circumstances, one would reasonably expect some thought being given to gradually relaxing the virtual lockdowns in just about every jurisdiction, thanks to the widespread acceptance by the public of the temporary loss of personal freedoms.

But what we've been seeing this week in some U.S. states is virtual mobs demanding an immediate return to normal economic activity, actions seemingly based on unfounded suspicions that the risks posed by COVID-19 have been grossly overblown.

And the result has been a decision by the governors of some southern U.S. states to permit a fairly wide range of business activities to re-open as early as this weekend. In Georgia, for example, residents will be able to golf, get a massage and even a haircut and shortly to eat in bars and restaurants.

Yet the death toll in Georgia topped 800 this week, about nine times the 86-death toll in British Columbia, where the only relaxation thus far involves a few golf courses opening. Although Georgia has about twice the 5 million population of B.C., that still means a death rate of 80 per million residents compared with B.C.'s 17.

Why has there been such a difference in public behaviour and governmental actions? We are inclined to attribute it to the political leadership seen in recent months.

In Canada, there has been little of the ordinary partisanship, with the sole exception having been a dispute over whether some sittings of Parliament should be ?virtual? rather than requiring some MPs and senators to be physically present, the compromise reached being to have some of both.

Similarly, there seems to have been close cooperation between Ottawa and the provinces, with all the provincial premiers agreeing to accept the recommendations of scientists and public health officials rather than react to opinion polls.

That's hardly what we're seeing south of the border, albeit in an election year. Donald Trump has, in many ways, attempted to deflect attention, and criticism, to other sources, cutting off financial support of the World Health Organization and trying to blame former president Barack Obama for the lack of vital medical supplies when in reality he did little or nothing in the way of preparing for a pandemic his own experts had long warned was coming.

In the circumstances, the big question for Canadian political leaders to deal with is when and how we should start re-opening the economy.

As we see it, the easy answer is not to significantly relax the current restrictions until we find a means of accurately testing most of the population to determine both who has become infected and of those many who can be assumed to have developed an immunity to the killer virus.

However, we think it would be reasonably safe to do a few things, such as to allow golf courses to open, subject to limits on the

number playing at any given time and continuing closure of clubhouses, and maybe even to permit barbershops and hair salons to re-open if the staffs are first tested and all required to wear surgical masks.

In the mean time, the urgent priority in both Ontario and Quebec is to deal with the situation in long-term care facilities, by ensuring that all residents and staff are tested weekly; that everyone working in them is properly equipped and supplemental help provided by the Canadian Armed Forces as necessary.