

We've more to celebrate

by TOM CLARIDGE

As is always the case, the first week of July sees celebrations on both sides of the border between Canada and the United States, with Canada Day on July 1 and Independence Day on July 4.

However, for the first time since 1867, the border between the two nations has been closed to all but essential traffic, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. And for the same reason, celebrations have been muted, with no mass gathering on Parliament Hill and merely virtual fetes across the land.

We don't know yet how far the governors of U.S. states will go in dealing with the Independence Day weekend, which for most Americans will start tomorrow (Friday) with the day itself being Saturday. However, it's clear that in states like Florida and California the smart move would be for the governors to order everyone who can to stay home and wear masks if they have to go out.

That's because the novel coronavirus is spreading like wildfire in the southern and western U.S. states, with the death toll now approaching 130,000 Americans and the number of persons known to have been infected nearing 2.8 million.

In Canada, meanwhile, the death toll is a little over 8,500 and would have been much lower had it not been for lax inspections of for-profit long term care facilities in Ontario and Quebec.

In the circumstances, Canadians should be in a more celebratory mood than their American cousins even if the response to the pandemic was our only concern. However, the fact is that the COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. is merely the tip of the iceberg.

Sadly, the fact is that there is a dramatically different situation in the two countries' political leaderships, with a relatively united front in Canada and an almost total lack of co-operation between the Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. just four months before a presidential election.

Although there's no doubt that the two presidential candidates will be the incumbent Republican Donald Trump and former Democratic vice-president Joe Biden, the only similarity between them is that both are well past the traditional retirement age of 65, with Mr. Trump now 74 and Mr. Biden 77.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between the two is in their personal responses to the pandemic, with Mr. Trump determined to host public rallies and have an ordinary convention in Jacksonville, Florida rather than Charlotte, North Carolina, where the governor wanted to impose social distancing.

Both parties have postponed their conventions to mid-August, but there the similarity ends.

The downsized Democratic convention will be held in a Milwaukee, Wisconsin convention centre, presumably with the delegates masked and trying to maintain the recommended six-foot social distancing.

Although it's anyone's guess as to who will win the election, recent polls show Mr. Biden with 50 per cent support and Mr. Trump at 36 per cent.

Meanwhile, one of the latest and strangest moves by Mr. Trump has been a ban on permitting U.S. firms to engage foreigners with particular expertise, something that has benefited high-tech firms like Google and Apple. It will be interesting to see whether such firms will opt to bring those experts into their Canadian operations.

As matters stand, there is a real possibility that the next few years will see a repeat of mass immigration to Canada from the U.S., something that happened back in the 1850s when thousands of slaves reached Ontario via the Underground Railroad, and during the war in Vietnam when many thousands of Americans fled north to avoid conscription.

But those northward migrations were a relative oddity, with Canada being the main source of immigration to the U.S. in the early 20th century and Canada enduring a troubling 'brain drain' to the U.S. following the demise of the Avro Arrow in the 1950s and the arrival of Canadian medicare in the 1960s.

All in all, the next few years could be great ones for Canadians, particularly if Mr. Trump wins re-election.