

# Canada's governments lift COVID-19 restrictions despite warnings of deadly third wave

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22 February 2021

Highlighting “the emergence and spread” of more contagious variants of the COVID-19 virus, Canada’s chief medical officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, told a press conference last Friday, “Unless we maintain and abide by stringent public health measures, we may not be able to avert a re-acceleration of the epidemic in Canada. These variants have been smouldering in the background and now threaten to flare up.”

Tam backed up her warnings with Health Canada projections that showed new infections could rise to 10,000 per day by late March if current public health restrictions are maintained, and mushroom to 20,000 if these restrictions are relaxed. “Further lifting of the public health measures would cause the epidemic to re-surge rapidly and strongly,” she declared.

Tam’s warnings of a “third wave” of mass infections and death echo those of epidemiologists and other health experts across the country. But their scientific advice is being disregarded by every provincial government across the country, and with the full blessing of the federal Liberal government, Tam’s boss.

Canada’s governments are engineering the very “lifting of the public health measures” that she warned against last Friday. In so doing, they are paving the way for an upsurge in infections that will add thousands more fatalities to an already horrific death toll that has risen by more than 40 percent in just the last two months and now stands at more than 21,600.

In Alberta, the United Conservative Party government is implementing a 4-step plan to fully reopen the economy. Except for sports games and entertainment venues, virtually the entire economy is reopened, even as large workplace outbreaks continue, as at the Olymel meatpacking plant in Red Deer.

In Ontario, the Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government lifted a state of emergency on February 8 and announced the return to a regional, colour-coded reopening plan. Businesses in the majority of Ontario’s districts were allowed to reopen as of February 16, with York, one of the province’s hotspots, following suit yesterday. Ford grudgingly agreed that lockdown measures will remain in place in Metro Toronto and the neighbouring Peel region until March 8, but only because local health and other officials repeatedly went

public with their concerns about the premature lifting of restrictions.

The Ford government has also completed its reckless reopening of the province’s public and publicly funded Roman Catholic schools, with schools in Toronto, Peel, and York ordered to reopen for in-class instruction starting Tuesday, February 16. This dangerous policy, which puts the lives of teachers and students at risk, has been enforced by the trade unions. They have suppressed opposition to school reopenings among teachers, including isolating job actions that have erupted at COVID-19 hit schools, while making pathetic appeals to Ontario’s hard-right government to invest more money in education so, to use their words, schools never have to close again.

Businesses across Quebec reopened two weeks ago and the Coalition Avenir Québec government has announced plans for all entertainment venues except bars to reopen on February 26. As in other provinces, only the most rudimentary health measures such as reduced seating, the wearing of masks, and hand washing are being retained. Since January, schools have been providing only or almost entirely in-class instruction.

The ruling elite’s cavalier dismissal of scientific advice is motivated by their determination to protect corporate profits at all costs, even if that requires the sacrificing of thousands more lives.

The federal Liberal government and provincial governments of all political stripes have funneled virtually unlimited sums into the financial markets, banks and big business, while starving the health care system of resources and refusing to provide non-essential workers and their families the support they need to shelter at home till the spread of the virus is halted.

Instead, as soon as the massive corporate bailout was finalized last spring, the political establishment and corporate media initiated a homicidal back-to-work campaign.

Throughout the pandemic, governments at all levels have displayed indifference to the rampant spread of COVID-19 through workplaces. Statistics in Quebec show that workplaces and nursing homes each account for between 30 and 33 percent of outbreaks, while schools are responsible for more than 23

percent of new infections.

These figures do not fully reflect the impact of the rapidly spreading new variants of COVID-19, which are up to 30 percent more infectious. According to the latest figures from Quebec, 135 cases of the new virus variants have been detected, although this is viewed by health experts as almost certainly an underestimation of their prevalence. Hundreds of cases of the British variant have been detected in Ontario. Across Canada, over 700 cases of the British, South African, and Brazilian COVID-19 variants have been recorded to date.

As ever more areas of the economy are reopened, fuelling a resurgence in transmission, the risk of a new variant developing in Canada will also increase. As the chief microbiologist at Quebec's Laboratory of Public Health, Michel Roger, put it, "The more positive cases we have and the longer the pandemic continues, the more likely it is that the virus will replicate, make mistakes and see the appearance of a mutant that will adapt and take its place."

Under these conditions, Tam's explicit warning about the consequences of lifting the remaining public health measures are only one in a long line of dire projections by medical experts about the weeks and months ahead. Asked for his opinion of the Ontario government's reopening strategy, Dr. Michael Warner, director of critical care at Michael Garron Hospital, told CP24, "(W)hen the variants take hold, if cases remain high, we will be in major trouble.... (W)hat the premier's doing is he's making it much more likely that we are going to be back to where we started at the beginning of Wave 2. I think it is an irresponsible decision."

Dr. Brooks Fallis, who was demoted from a leading critical care position at the William Osler Health System after warning that the Ford government's policies would trigger a third wave, commented Sunday, "I think we're doing really everything too quickly. I think we should be taking a real pause across the province and across the country to realize how serious the implications of these variants are."

Even Quebec Premier François Legault, one of the leading proponents of lifting public health restrictions, was forced to admit recently that the new variants threaten to unleash an exponential growth in cases that could overwhelm Canada's hospitals, meaning some patients would be denied care. Said Legault, "If the variant were to become established in Quebec as it is in the United Kingdom, it would be a disaster in our hospitals."

The probability of a deadly third wave is made all the more likely due to the governments' disastrous rollout of COVID-19 vaccines. As of Sunday, a mere 2.8 percent of the Canadian population had received a first vaccine dose, and just over 1 percent has received a second dose.

Corporate Canada's media mouthpieces are seeking to justify the reopening of the economy with blatant lies and social Darwinist arguments. Boiled down to their essentials, they are advocating the "survival of the fittest." Right-wing media

outlets, led by the *Toronto Sun*, have explicitly embraced the Great Barrington Declaration, which calls for all public health measures to be abandoned so the virus can spread unhindered and "herd immunity" can be achieved.

Dr. Lucie-Paule Doyon was recently quoted by the Montreal daily *Le Devoir* as saying, "Do you think a 90-year-old, demented person would be intubated for 55 days if he paid the bill? ... I'm not sure about that. Do we have the resources to pay for all this? How far do we have to go? I don't know."

The claim that Canada lacks the resources to provide medical care to all those who need it is a cynical lie. For over three decades, governments at the federal and provincial levels have savaged health care budgets, including the current federal Trudeau government, which has imposed below-inflation health transfers on the provinces. Meanwhile, taxes on big business and the rich have been slashed time and again.

Canada's 40 billionaires increased their combined wealth by over \$50 billion during 2020, as a result of the hundreds of billions of dollars the Trudeau government and Bank of Canada poured into the markets as part of last March's bailout.

The unanimous support within the ruling elite for prioritizing profit over the needs of society underscores that a science-based response to the pandemic and the avoidance of a third wave and further mass death is dependent on the mobilization of the working class. Working people must intervene independently to fight for a political program that places human lives ahead of private profit. This must include: the shutdown of schools and all nonessential production until the pandemic is brought under control; the requisite support for all workers and their families so they can shelter at home; and the provision of billions of dollars to strengthen health care and other critical social services. The resources for such a program exist in abundance, but they must be expropriated from the capitalist elite and placed at the disposal of society as a whole.



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