Alberta government declares COVID-19 pandemic over

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With its announcement last week of an end to all public health measures to combat COVID-19, Alberta's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government has effectively declared the pandemic over. This criminal decision—which is now being implemented with only tepid, token opposition from the rest of Canada's political establishment—threatens the lives of tens of thousands of people in Alberta and across the country, as the spread of the more contagious and lethal Delta variant accelerates.

As of August 16, all masking requirements and contact tracing will be abolished in what Alberta Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Deena Hinshaw has termed the "next phase," where the public will have to "live with COVID-19." COVID-19 testing will be available only for severely ill symptomatic people, so as to "help direct patient care decisions."

Most outrageously of all, as of August 16 the government will not require people who have contracted COVID-19 to self-isolate. This means that they will be "free" to transmit the virus to their family, friends, co-workers and the public at large. Alberta is now being referred to as the "Florida of the North," a reference to Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis's homicidal policy of letting the virus rip. But even though Florida has been one of the US states in the forefront of the dismantling of public health measures, it still requires people infected by the virus to self-isolate.

Throughout the pandemic, which has officially claimed 26,600 lives across Canada, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has spearheaded the ruling elite's "profits before lives" strategy. As late as June 2020, he was describing COVID-19 as nothing worse than the flu; and he would continue to employ the anti-social rhetoric of the far right in resisting implementing elementary public health measures until Alberta was in the midst of devastating second and third waves of the pandemic.

Last spring, even as Kenney was forced to adopt limited lockdown measures due to the province having the highest infection rate per head of population of any jurisdiction in North America, he gave UCP legislators free rein to promote far-right anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests. With Kenney's assent, thousands of people were encouraged to attend "No More Lockdowns" rodeos in Bowden, Alberta.

Among the world's epidemiologists there is a consensus that vaccine herd immunity will only be achieved when 80 to 85 percent of the entire global population is fully vaccinated. Yet the UCP made the arbitrary decision, based on recommendations from the federal Liberal government, that most lockdown restrictions could "safely" be removed when 70 percent of all eligible Albertans (over the age of 12) had received just one shot of the vaccine.

Whilst only 36 percent of Alberta's population had received the requisite two-vaccine doses to be fully inoculated, Kenney seized on the attainment of the 70 percent one-shot mark to throw off virtually all remaining anti-COVID measures. Going much beyond the federal government's own reckless big business-driven recommendations, Kenney proclaimed Alberta "Open for Summer" at the province's July 1 Canada Day celebrations. From that date, masks were no longer required anywhere except on buses and in taxis, and all social distancing and gathering restrictions were scrapped. All businesses, gyms and places of worship were allowed to open up with no restrictions.

The lockdown restriction removals have already had their expected result. Within three weeks, Alberta's COVID-19 daily case count tripled from 76 cases to 233 cases. By July 28, the R value for COVID-19 transmission had nearly doubled from 0.76 on July 1 to 1.48, the highest level recorded in the province since the pandemic began.

The reaction of the medical community across Canada and the US to the Kenney government's abandonment of any effort to contain the virus has been swift and harsh. Many have described the UCP government's actions as "irresponsible," "dangerous" or outright "criminal."

"We are launching an experiment on a population level: first in the world to basically stop acting on COVID," said Dr. Joe Vipond, a Calgary hospital emergency room physician. "These are decisions, these are policies—there are

human beings making these decisions to imperil other human beings. … Suddenly, the enemy's not the virus; the enemy's the government."

Ryan Imgrund, a COVID-19 biostatistician from Sudbury, Ontario, who is working with public health units in the province, told CTV News, "The data and the science is definitely not guiding the policy in Alberta. As far as I know right now, Alberta is the only place in the world that will be allowing COVID-positive people to not have to self-isolate. The only place in the world. We are talking Florida, the United Kingdom; all those places, they not only require someone that is COVID positive to self-isolate, but they also require those that are close contacts to isolate as well."

Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, a US-based epidemiologist and senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, said, "This is really worrisome. Even if you are vaccinated … you can still get infected, and even if you are not hospitalized you can still transmit COVID-19. … Long COVID is serious. This is why to stop COVID transmission, to stop future variants, you have to stop the transmission chain. A positive person not isolating is just the worst possible recipe of keeping the virus still spreading." He concluded by denouncing the government for taking measures that are "antithetical to public health."

Dr. Andrew Boozary of the University of Toronto said Alberta's decision to drop public health measures while facing lower vaccination rates, growing cases and a mutating virus sets the entire country back. "It just really appears as a cruel policy experiment for far too many Albertans and a cruel policy experiment that has far-reaching effects across the country," Dr. Boozary said. "This is a pandemic that requires a global response and, in our own country, it's going to require provinces working in concert, coordinating their responses."

These entirely appropriate warnings from the medical community stand in stark contrast to the reaction of Canada's political establishment, which has responded to the Alberta government's murderous actions with what amounts to a collective shrug of the shoulders. Canada's chief medical officer, Theresa Tam, could not even bring herself to mention Alberta and Kenney by name when she timidly pointed out that "quarantine and isolation can help prevent the spread of COVID-19" at a press conference last Friday. None of Canada's federal party leaders, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the New Democratic Party's Jagmeet Singh, has directly addressed the issue.

This comes as no surprise. Throughout the pandemic, the Liberal minority government, which has only been able to secure a parliamentary majority due to NDP support, has prioritized the protection of corporate profits over human lives. Beginning with the hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts given to the banks and big business and continuing with the reckless back-to-work/back-to-school drive, the Liberals have presided over mass infection and death across the country.

While Kenney and his UCP have gone the furthest in abolishing all COVID-19-related restrictions, governments of all political stripes at every level across the country are not far behind. Even as the Delta variant surges, no faction of the ruling elite has any intention of supporting the kind of coordinated response to suppress COVID-19 that is so urgently necessary, because it would impinge on corporate profit and investor wealth.

The ruling class's drive to "normalize" COVID-19 is viewed with widespread hostility among the population, which has responded with outrage to the Alberta government's criminal policy. Medical professionals helped to organize two protest rallies Friday in Edmonton and Calgary, held, respectively, at the Alberta Legislature and the McDougall Centre.

Albert Nobbs co-organized the rallies with the Calgary emergency room physician Dr. Joe Vipond. He spoke in Edmonton about his frustration. "I'm here on behalf of frankly, my fellow citizens, just due to our concerns over the government's recent decisions and the course that they've set for not only us; but for our students, our health care systems, our education systems and all the institutions that will inevitably suffer if we go ahead with Aug. 16 and September (school reopening) after that." Nobbs continued, "This isn't a risk that we should be taking. This isn't a risk we should be allowing them to take for us."