

Bonnie Henry: The public face of British Columbia's pandemic policy of mass infection and death

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British Columbia, Canada's third most populous province, announced Thursday that it was scrapping its mask mandate as of Friday at 12:01 a.m., and that its lone remaining substantive COVID-19 mitigation measure, the vaccine passport, will end April 8.

Thursday's announcement is just the latest in a crush of decisions by provinces from coast-to-coast over the past five weeks that effectively implement the far-right Freedom Convoy's demand that all anti-COVID public health measures be rescinded and the potentially deadly virus be allowed to run rampant.

BC is ruled by a New Democratic Party (NDP) government. The NDP, its supporters in the trade union bureaucracy and various pseudo-left organizations, and the corporate-controlled media never tire of portraying this pro-big-business party as "progressive" and "left." Yet its response to the pandemic, which is all but indistinguishable from that of the hard-right governments of Alberta, Ontario and Quebec, tells a very different story. Throughout the pandemic, the John Horgan-led BC NDP government has prioritized profits over the protection of human life. It has allowed most businesses in key economic sectors to continue operating during each of the province's five successive waves of mass infection, and insisted that in-person classes in schools continue at all costs. At the federal level, the NDP, with the full-throated support of the trade unions, has propped up Justin Trudeau's minority Liberal government, which has overseen the ruling elite's back-to-work/back-to-school policy that is responsible for more than 37,000 official COVID deaths. The true number, when excess deaths are taken into account, now well exceeds 60,000.

BC Public Health Officer Bonnie Henry has been the public face of this homicidal policy in Canada's West Coast province. In the early stages of the pandemic, she won a certain degree of public popularity due to her straightforward and often emotional press briefings. At times, Dr. Henry appeared genuinely moved by the initial

wave of trauma and death that swept across the province in the spring of 2020. But ever since, she has put her cultivated, empathetic public image at the service of a ruinous pandemic policy that has flouted science in the interests of profit and led to one wave of mass infection and death after another.

Henry, who serves as the province's public health officer at the pleasure of the BC NDP government, denies that COVID-19 is principally transmitted through the air, claims that schools are a low-risk infection setting, and refuses to urge the use of N95 masks.

Her regular press briefings rapidly became the occasion for the promotion of manipulated data and pseudo-scientific falsehoods about COVID-19. She has consistently sought to downplay the threat posed by COVID-19 and argued against public health measures that would impinge on business profits and shareholder payouts.

This "profits before life" agenda was often justified with cynical expressions of concern for the most vulnerable sections of the population. BC Public Health frequently claims that the vulnerable and working class suffer most from lockdown measures. In reality, it is these sections of the population who have suffered the most from the NDP government's homicidal pandemic policy, coupled with its refusal to provide the necessary financial and social support. It is the homeless, the elderly, the immunocompromised, the poor and the working class who have borne and continue to bear the full brunt of the virus' lethal effects.

Henry's role as a "personable" advocate of mass infection and death has earned her fawning corporate and state media coverage, locally, nationally and even internationally. On June 6, 2020, the *New York Times* ran a profile, titled "The Top Doctor who Aced the Coronavirus Test," which specifically praised Henry's "light touch," i.e., her refusal to issue public health orders closing nonessential businesses. British Columbia, for example, was the last major jurisdiction in Canada to close their public schools during

the spring wave of 2020 and one of the first to reopen them. The tone the *Times* adopted was perfectly in line with that adopted by the local and national media.

To this day, the BC media's coverage of the pandemic largely consists of regurgitations of the many falsehoods and anti-scientific claims made by Henry, whom it has sycophantically dubbed "St. Bonnie." A veritable cottage industry of products featuring Henry's name or image has sprung up, including a limited edition of pink-heeled "Dr. Bonnie Henry" Fluevog shoes. There have also been Bonnie Henry dolls, cereals and even a wooden Christmas statue that portrays her as the third wise person of the biblical Magi.

The province's ruling establishment has repaid Henry for services rendered. In addition to her \$300,000-plus annual salary, she has been granted honorary degrees from multiple universities in the province, including UNBC, UBC and Royal Roads. On August 2, 2021, the government announced that she was one of 16 invitees to be awarded the Order of British Columbia, the highest civilian order in the province.

The working class has often been Henry's whipping boy for many of the NDP government's and her public health failures. During the province's deadliest pandemic wave, the winter wave of 2020-21, as the virus was rampaging through long-term care (LTC) homes, killing tens of seniors daily, Henry pointed the finger at LTC workers for bringing the virus into the homes, despite the fact she refused to authorize widespread rapid-testing for employees. The social-democratic NDP government also refused to legislate an increase in paid sick days, forcing workers to return to the job infected.

In the spring of 2021, Henry again attempted to throw workers under the bus, this time blaming itinerant workers at the Whistler ski resort for spreading the virus. No mention was made of their cramped housing conditions, or her refusal to close the resort until after spring break, by which time the outbreak had already spread to the rest of the province. The anti-worker sentiments Henry fosters are shared by the top layers of the provincial government, as evidenced by Premier Horgan's infamous November 2020 claim that children are incapable of transmitting the virus, and that educational staff were solely to blame for the virus' spread in schools.

Henry has become notorious for a series of unscientific claims about COVID-19 associated with the far-right Great Barrington Declaration. She has continued to insist, together with the province's official guidelines, that COVID-19 is spread through droplets expelled from the mouth during coughing, sneezing, or speaking that fall rapidly to the ground. Despite extensive scientific evidence showing that

the main source of transmission is aerosols, small particles that linger in the air like smoke, Henry has repeatedly dismissed this mode of infection as insignificant.

British Columbia Public Health's (BCPH) refusal to acknowledge aerosol transmission has drawn widespread international condemnation from world-renowned international scientists. A report released in the spring of 2021 specifically called out the province, saying, "From the very beginning of the pandemic, British Columbia based its prevention measures on an explicit contact, droplet, and fomite theory of transmission." The report, whose lead author was Oxford University Primary Care Professor Trisha Greenhalgh, went on to note, "Bonnie Henry appears at least partly driven by the urge to quell panic and maintain calm." The highly respected University of Colorado Chemistry professor Jose-Luis Jimenez, a leading advocate for workplace protections against the threat posed by airborne transmission, described BC's attitude towards aerosol transmission as "one of the most retrograde on the planet."

As recently as this January 15, official Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) guidance stated, "Like most common respiratory viruses, COVID-19 spreads primarily through respiratory droplet transmission within a short range." Henry's rejection of airborne transmission is directly connected to her refusal to call for the provision of high-quality masks, like N95s, required to protect the wearer against aerosols, for all front-line workers, from teachers to bus drivers, let alone the population at large.

During the first year of the pandemic, Henry frequently questioned the benefit of mask wearing and refused to implement mandates during the horrific second wave. She has attended mass sporting events maskless (including BC Lions and Vancouver Canucks games). She has also repeatedly insisted that masks are the lowest layer of protection and N95s are not needed in most situations, and frequently attends press briefings with a cloth mask.

The response of Henry and the NDP government she serves to the devastating Omicron wave—which has officially killed more than 7,000 people nationwide—has been to declare that Canadians must learn to "live with the virus." Having earlier denied most British Columbians access to PCR tests, the BC Health agency overseen by Henry announced on February 10 that henceforth it would no longer release COVID-19 infection numbers.



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