

British Columbia's New Democratic Party government abandons remaining COVID-19 protective measures

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Despite warnings from principled scientists and medical professionals, British Columbia's New Democratic Party (NDP) government lifted all remaining pandemic restrictions at the beginning of April, including vaccine and mask mandates. The scrapping of the few remaining public health protections went hand-in-hand with an ever-expanding data blackout of any relevant metrics for the public to accurately judge the current state of the pandemic.

The NDP government and its chief public health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry, who is notorious for denying the airborne transmission of COVID-19, began April 7 to report data on infections and deaths only on a weekly rather than a daily basis. Public health experts denounced the move, warning that the province was flying blind into a sixth wave of the pandemic driven by the BA.2 subvariant of omicron.

Andrew Longhurst, a public health researcher at Simon Fraser University, told the *Times Colonist* that the effective data blackout "sends the signal that the pandemic is over and people think that there's no risk." He continued, "Right now we're going into the sixth wave with virtually no public health mitigation."

Jens von Bergman, a data scientist, pointed out that the information supplied on the BC Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website is over a week old. The website's COVID-19 dashboard is only updated every Thursday with figures from the previous Sunday to Saturday period. This means, for example, that the update for April 21 covers infections and deaths between April 10 and April 16. "There seems to be a clear desire to move away from a daily [reporting]," he commented to the *Vancouver Sun*. "I find it extremely frustrating."

Even when BC released daily updates, it was infamous across Canada for manipulating statistics. In November 2020, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) revealed that the province had stopped sharing infection rates of local health care workers, claiming that the information was too sensitive to share. The response was a direct refutation of Henry's claim a month earlier, "We have not stopped sharing that. ... We do provide that information and certainly provide it on request."

Throughout the pandemic, Canada's western-most province has consistently tested far fewer than other major jurisdictions. It only briefly approached 20,000 daily PCR tests during the height of the Omicron surge in January. The majority of the tests performed since the start of the pandemic have been in industry testing, such as film, professional sports and construction, and not "MSP" or public health testing. This has artificially driven test positivity rates downwards.

The pattern has been the same with the reporting of more severe outcomes. Unlike other jurisdictions, the provincial hospitalization data refers only to those patients who are currently infectious, again clouding the true picture of the burden the health care system is under.

According to modelling done by the Moriarty Lab at the University of Toronto, BC was likely only reporting 35 percent of its expected COVID-19 death toll during the winter Omicron wave. This was the largest discrepancy in the country.

The data manipulation has been accompanied by extensive lies and gaslighting by the "progressive" NDP government and its public health officials. Premier John Horgan recently said, after contracting the

virus himself, that people should not be afraid, and that the virus was nothing worse than a case of the sniffles. Henry penned a preposterous op-ed in local community papers on April 5, in which she indicated that the main defense the public can use in combatting the virus is to deploy empty platitudes like “be kind” and “work together...despite being in different boats.”

Embracing the arguments of far-right COVID deniers and backers of the Great Barrington Declaration, Henry listed a litany of supposed harms caused by public health measures, such as the stigmatization of people not wearing masks and the alleged trauma inflicted on students who could not see their teachers’ mouths. Nowhere in this pack of lies did she care to mention that mitigations protect the population from a virus that has killed an estimated 20 million globally in just over two years.

The NDP government’s lies and manipulation of data are necessitated by its fulsome support for the prioritization of the safeguarding of corporate profits over the protection of human life. The government is determined to convince the population that everything is back to “normal” so that big business and the super-rich can continue accumulating vast quantities of wealth at the expense of the health, well-being and very lives of working people.

The government’s lying campaign is increasingly being exposed by the development of the pandemic itself. The BC CDC’s latest figures released April 21 show that there were 485 people in hospital with positive COVID-19 tests, up from 364 the previous week. With the sixth wave in full swing just two weeks after the government sought to proclaim the pandemic all but over, questions have even begun to be raised in official circles about Henry’s future as chief public health officer. An opinion piece in the Vancouver-based *Georgia Strait* recently called for Henry’s firing.

Henry is widely despised, and rightly so. She continues to deny the airborne transmission of the virus through aerosols, small particles that can linger in the air like smoke for long periods of time. She also refused to call for the use of high-quality masks, dismissing the need to wear N95s, which provide the wearer with significant protection against infection.

That being said, she is only the public face of a policy that enjoys the full support of Horgan’s NDP government and the province’s wealthy corporate elite.

As Henry herself acknowledged in a rare moment of candour in her self-aggrandizing autobiography published in November 2020, “I was fully aware however, that if I was wildly offside with what the provincial health minister and government believed it could make my position challenging...the government could render me ineffective or fire me altogether.”

The BC NDP’s support for Henry’s pseudo-scientific nostrums and a policy of mass infection and death is in keeping with the record of this right-wing party across Canada. As Horgan and his ministers were dismantling the remaining COVID-19 protections in BC, the trade union-backed NDP was pledging to keep Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government in office until at least June 2025 through a “confidence-and-supply” agreement.

The deal was struck as the Trudeau government oversaw the destruction by all provincial governments of what remained of COVID-19 protections, as Canada’s entire ruling establishment embraced the demands of the far-right Freedom Convoy. The Liberals and NDP have made clear that there will be no additional funds to fight COVID-19, even as the two parties funnel tens of billions of dollars to Canada’s military and wage war as part of NATO against Russia in Ukraine.



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