

Eternal Vigilance in the Age of COVID

By Michel Kelly-Gagnon

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Eternal Vigilance in the Age of COVID

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A person wearing a white apron is holding a blue sign with white text. The sign is suspended by two white strings. The background is blurred, showing warm, bokeh lights.

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DUE TO

COVID-19



Preface

This President's Essay addresses the most contentious and pressing issue of our day: the COVID-19 pandemic and our response to it. Now that the pandemic seems to be subsiding, and government-imposed restrictions as well, it is a good time to look back and take a calm and measured look at some of the key issues that were raised by it. This is important to do, since we are not immune to future waves, or to crises, real or perceived, coming from other quarters.

My goal here is not to take a decisive position on the various government restrictions and responses during the pandemic. Readers can come to their own conclusions about the efficacy and proportionality of these measures. My objective in this essay is instead specifically to encourage us to ask these questions and have serious and reasonable debates among ourselves and with our fellow citizens.

One thing that concerns me is the extent to which public discourse around the pandemic has become polarized and produced a climate in which reasonable people cannot have reasonable disagreements. Too often, it seems as though in order to hold respectable opinions, one must unquestioningly accept and support all the measures and restrictions we have been subjected to over the past two years. Dissent from this and you are lumped in with so-called “anti-vaxxers” and “COVID deniers.” Considering the importance of these debates, this is an unacceptable state of affairs. What this essay seeks to do is sketch out a reasonable middle ground position, not to prove to you that this position is the indisputable truth, but to show that we can have a reasonable disagreement over the pandemic response.

I will do this in the present essay not simply by offering my own opinion, but by presenting some serious scholarship to support this view. Using a paper written by George Mason University Professor of Economics Christopher Coyne and his colleagues, we can see how infectious diseases produce what they call “infection externalities.” While these externalities theoretically justify government interventions to correct them, officials run into the challenges that all top-down officials

and policy planners do. The officials that advise on these matters are not omnipotent angels with the capacity to come up with perfectly appropriate and proportional solutions, and the very nature of the challenges we face and the infection externalities they produce means we should be skeptical of the ability of top-down planners to adequately consider the trade-offs inherent in their decisions. Building on the work of James Buchanan and public choice theory, my argument will use both Coyne and Buchanan to suggest that while there is a need to “do something” in the face of a crisis like a pandemic, this does not mean we should blindly accept whatever the government decides is an appropriate response.

Instead of top-down mandates and solutions, my argument will then build on rigorous scholarship from authors Stefan Kolev and Erwin Dekker, recently published in *Power and Democracy*, which suggests that we should be encouraging and looking for more decentralized solutions, and reminds us why we must remain vigilant and humble, but skeptical. I encourage you to likewise be skeptical of me, but in the spirit of encouraging reasonable debate and disagreement among reasonable people—something increasingly hard to come by in our public discourse.

ETERNAL VIGILANCE IN THE AGE OF COVID

Now that the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be subsiding, and government-imposed restrictions are gradually being removed, at least for the time being, it is a good time to look back and take a calm and measured look at some of the fundamental issues that were raised by this crisis. This is important for us to do, since we are not immune to possible future waves, or to other crises, real or perceived, coming from different quarters.

For two years, this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic dominated the news cycle and our daily lives. It caught most countries, including Canada, woefully unprepared, and saw most governments improvising their official responses and making it up as they went along, with varying degrees of success. The undeniable success story of the pandemic has been the remarkable speed at which pharmaceutical companies were able to develop and produce vaccines that have undoubtedly saved countless lives. Human innovation and capitalism have in less than two years enabled us to develop these lifesaving modern miracles and fully vaccinate just over half the world's population.

That's the good news; now for the bad. Despite having one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, Canada has been among the more restricted countries,

with “lockdowns” in place across the country. Up until quite recently, we still found ourselves under a variety of restrictions and government measures that we were told were key to limiting the spread of the virus and making sure our public health care system didn’t collapse. Long after March 2020, government officials and policy-makers were still eager and willing to use measures designed to deal with a virus and situation in which there was limited information and no vaccines available.

Despite having one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, Canada has been among the more restricted countries, with “lockdowns” in place across the country.

As the crisis continued, the institutional and legal climate became less and less respectful of freedoms, on the grounds of fighting against COVID-19. A global pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime crisis that may require extraordinary and exceptional measures. But this means that these infringements of our basic rights and freedoms must truly be exceptional and temporary. In this ongoing state of exception, law and politics seemed increasingly dictated by a dangerous mix of media-driven sensationalism and a public health regime unable to consider the trade-offs that come with heavy-handed

state-imposed restrictions, especially in an environment when the vast majority of citizens are vaccinated.

But this essay is not a detailed effort to evaluate the efficacy and legitimacy of these various restrictions. Readers will undoubtedly be divided over such matters. And *that* is exactly what this essay is about. It now seems as if the discourse around the response to the pandemic has become bifurcated. On one side, you have people who take COVID seriously. This means being pro-vaccine and also pro- any and all restrictions, without questioning whether they are actually an effective and proportionate response to the virus. On the other side, meanwhile, are the COVID skeptics, and anyone who questions or opposes any restriction or lockdown measure is presumed to be an “anti-vaxxer” and someone who thinks the virus is some sort of hoax. This broad framing now dominates the debate, and it is extremely corrosive to public discourse, and prevents us from having the serious debates we desperately need to have.

The response to the pandemic is arguably the most significant and pressing issue of the present moment. Most of us are exhausted by the pandemic and just want things to go back to normal. But two years into the pandemic with high vaccination rates, we were still being sent into winter lockdowns and dealing with a range of restrictions and measures. That this is the case should force us to think very carefully about some of the fundamental changes we might be embarking on as a society, and ask serious questions about whether we might be sleepwalking into a fundamental renegotiation of the social contract in which things

like indoor masking and vaccine passports become facets of everyday life indefinitely. One can recognize the necessity of restrictions on our liberties in a state of exception, but we need to have a serious discussion about how and when a state of emergency ends, and ensure we don't wake up one day and find that many of the measures we put in place for an emergency become the norm and not the exception. We must be vigilant. But to even have this discussion, we need to ensure that those two binary sides set out above are discarded. We can have a reasonable discussion, and disagreement, over the efficacy and proportionality of many of the measures put in place without needing to be either lockdown enthusiasts or conspiracy theorists. In fact, in order to have these discussions that we desperately need to have, we must recognize that there is nuance and plenty of middle ground between these two extreme positions.

In the rest of this essay, I want to briefly show how vigilance is essential, and how you needn't be an anarchist or a conspiracy theorist in order to be concerned about the exceptional measures imposed during the pandemic. Economics can teach us some important lessons about the challenges of responding to pandemics, and there is serious scholarship which should make us question some of the technocratic overreach we have seen that has sidelined the democratic process and that undermines the rule of law in a free society.

Infectious Diseases Produce Infection Externalities

Economics especially has a lot to teach about these challenges and limitations, and offers us some important lessons that would help us handle the next pandemic more effectively, with fewer needless deaths and less needless disruption of people's lives and livelihoods. A good starting point for learning the lessons economics can teach us in order to better handle pandemics is the concept of externalities. Externalities occur when the production or consumption of goods and services imposes costs on (or provides benefits to) people not directly involved in the said production or consumption, and not reflected in the prices charged for the goods and services being provided.

There is serious scholarship which should make us question some of the technocratic overreach we have seen that has sidelined the democratic process and that undermines the rule of law in a free society.

Externalities, then, can be either negative or positive. The classic negative externality is pollution—for example, when the fuel you purchased for your car is combusted, releasing various harmful chemicals into the air. The two parties to the transaction, you and the gas

station, both benefit, but others are negatively affected, as air quality is reduced. An example of a positive externality is education, which presumably benefits both you and the school that is paid to educate you, but also society in general as you may contribute to greater economic productivity, a lower unemployment rate, and related civil society values.

There is no reason to assume, ex ante, that government can correct the divergence between individual choices and the socially optimal outcome.

As George Mason University Professor of Economics Christopher Coyne and his colleagues point out in a recent article for the *Southern Economic Journal* entitled “The Political Economy of State Responses to Infectious Disease,” communicable diseases produce “infection externalities.” Some individuals, in making decisions during a pandemic, will tend to consider only those benefits and costs that affect them directly, while tending to neglect the costs associated with potentially infecting others:

In the case of COVID-19, for instance, those at a lower risk for severe illness from infection may engage in behaviors that increase the chances that

others, who are at a higher risk for severe illness upon infection, will contract the disease. The result is a socially inferior outcome—without incurring the full cost of their actions, individuals within the lower-risk group are likely to “over consume” behaviors that will spread the disease to more vulnerable populations, leading to higher rates of infection and death.

This mismatch between the “price” a person pays for certain behaviour and the “cost” of such behaviour that may be imposed upon others creates a *prima facie* case for government intervention for a more optimal control of infectious diseases. However, while the theoretical potential for welfare-enhancing interventions on the part of government exists, there is no reason to assume, *ex ante*, that government can correct the divergence between individual choices and the socially optimal outcome.

The Nature of the Problem Facing Policy-Makers

When confronting serious challenges like a pandemic, our response should be governed by epistemic humility. This means trusting experts who have studied and specialize in things that laypeople have less knowledge of. But it also means that experts and public health officials are not omnipotent angels. They have relatively limited information and certainty to inform their decisions and advice, and are governed at least partially by self-interest just like the rest of us. If social planners knew everything they needed to know, had the perfectly good intentions of angels, and could anticipate the perverse unintended consequences of policies, then

welfare-enhancing government interventions would be a slam dunk. In reality, policy-makers are human beings like the rest of us, and in trying to correct for negative externalities, they face what Coyne and his colleagues categorize as a) epistemic, b) public choice, and c) system effects challenges.

Drawing on the seminal work of Nobel laureate economist James M. Buchanan, the authors explain how epistemic challenges stem not merely from the difficulty of amassing and analyzing a lot of disparate information in order to identify the precise nature of an infection externality and the optimal response for maximizing social welfare. The fact is that individuals are not mere units of account with given and known utility functions that can be tabulated by an external analyst to achieve the optimal outcome for society. Rather, individuals must *discover* the best means of utilizing scarce resources to achieve a multiplicity of ends through the process of living and interacting with others in an open-ended system.

This does not cease to be true during a pandemic, as we all continue to value other things besides our health—such as food and shelter, financial security, education, entertainment, and social interaction—and importantly, to place different levels of value on such things. Indeed, we constantly change our minds about their relative values as circumstances evolve. Working parents, for example, must balance their careers with childcare and schooling, something adults without children need not consider. Closing public schools, as many governments did, requires all families to follow the same path, regardless of their particular risk

profile, finances, and work situation. This information is dispersed throughout society and constantly changing, but in the economic jargon, a “single hierarchy of ends” is determined by policy-makers and imposed on all.

Experts and public health officials are not omnipotent angels. They have relatively limited information and are governed at least partially by self-interest just like the rest of us.

Even then, there are still significant public choice challenges to achieving, even inefficiently, the single hierarchy of ends that is imposed on all. These stem from the fact that government actors are not angels standing outside of the system they are trying to affect. Rather, they are human beings “embedded in a set of political institutions which create a range of incentive challenges” including “competition between various levels of government and various political interests pursuing their own goals.” There is infighting, there is vying for scarce government funds, there is caving to pressure from lobbyists, there is the rewarding of political allies and the punishing of enemies.

This also extends beyond government. The pandemic demands expertise, which has elevated a set of public health experts that have their own set of incentives

like everyone else. Certain doctors, epidemiologists, virologists, and so on, have gone from being obscure to celebrities almost overnight. They've gained significant power and influence, they are on TV and in newspapers on a regular basis, their social media followings have exploded. If someone gains this newfound sense of power, prestige, and status, it is going to be hard to relinquish it. This would be true of all of us. It doesn't require nefarious intent on the part of public health experts; it's a natural part of human behaviour.

The many bureaucratic policy failures during the current pandemic, surveyed by Professor Coyne and his colleagues, illustrate the kinds of difficulties that arise when flawed humans with necessarily imperfect knowledge intervene in complex systems.

This newfound prestige and influence brings its own set of powerful incentives, especially in the social media world. The desire to keep this influence and prestige may impact the way these experts think about the pandemic. The public choice incentives here skew toward inflating risks and perpetuating the pandemic, consciously or not, in an attempt to hold onto this newfound prestige. These experts are normal people

just like the rest of us, they face their own incentives that shape and influence their behaviour. Imperfect information and these kinds of incentives do not make these experts omnipotent angels, nor should we treat them as such.

Examples of Bureaucratic Policy Failures

These limitations influence the design and implementation of public health policy, undermining government efforts to address infection externalities in such a way as to improve human welfare. The many bureaucratic policy failures during the current pandemic, surveyed by Professor Coyne and his colleagues, illustrate the kinds of difficulties that arise when flawed humans with necessarily imperfect knowledge intervene in complex systems.

For example, the Trump Administration gave General Motors \$489 million to build 30,000 ventilators, but hospitals “remained short on both the trained staff and the drug necessary to sedate patients requiring intubation.” In another case, to pre-empt the danger of hospital overcrowding, \$660 million was allocated for the construction of field hospitals across the US, but many of these “did not treat a single patient” due to lack of planning to make sure they could be put to use once built.

There are similar examples of such mishaps in Canada, such as the failed attempt to collaborate with China over a never delivered vaccine. We similarly have \$300 million mobile hospitals still sitting in storage, never used. And above all, the latest Omicron wave

has exposed the limitations of Canada's public health care system that has substantially less capacity than the United States, and is thus more fragile and susceptible to collapse, even with one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. This means that Canadians have had to deal with some of the harshest and longest lasting restrictions in the world. These lockdowns have undoubtedly come with their own costs, and we will likely be dealing with the damage they have caused for years to come, whether it be the economic costs, the mental health costs, or the damage to the development and learning of children.

*In his recent book, **Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe**, renowned historian Niall Ferguson challenges any sharp distinction between a natural and a man-made disaster.*

But no student of history should be surprised to hear about government policy failures during a crisis. In his recent book, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, renowned historian Niall Ferguson tries to put the pandemic into its larger historical context. In doing so, he challenges any sharp distinction between a natural and a man-made disaster. For one thing, we humans often settle in areas we know to be dangerous. Despite the cataclysmic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, for instance, many

continued to settle nearby—including in Naples, just 9 km away, which is today one of Italy’s largest cities. Another major eruption in the year 1631 killed between 3,000 and 6,000 people. Was that disaster natural or man-made? (p. 83)

The history of famines, which may also seem to be purely natural disasters at first glance, is replete with government policy failures. Most infamously, the famine caused by Mao Zedong’s “Great Leap Forward” between 1959 and 1961 was the direct result of “a premeditated domestic policy to replace the market altogether.” Depending on the estimate, anywhere from 30 million to 60 million Chinese citizens died because of this state-imposed lunacy. (p. 188)

As for our current crisis, many officials come in for criticism in Ferguson’s book. Chinese authorities, first of all, could very well have averted disaster if they had acted quickly and transparently instead of dragging their feet and admonishing doctors for spreading “false rumours.” (pp. 289-290) The World Health Organisation director, whom China had strongly backed for the job, was according to Ferguson “supine, if not sycophantic,” uncritically echoing Beijing’s official story. (p. 291)

Turning his attention to the United States, the historian notes that on paper, the country was well prepared for a pandemic. (p. 309) In reality, though, the U.S. became one of the hardest hit nations in the world. While President Trump deserves some blame for errors of judgement, the performance of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) early on was worse:

The much bigger failure was the CDC's centralization and general hampering of testing. It not only declined to use WHO testing kits but also impeded other U.S. institutions from doing their own tests and then distributed a test that did not work. Matters were not helped by the need for the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve non-CDC tests. (p. 311)

As Ferguson notes, this was not the White House's fault, or due to a lack of resources; this was "classic bureaucratic sclerosis" and "indescribable, burdensome hierarchy." (p. 312) In other words, just what one would expect given the kinds of challenges described above.

The Other Negative Externalities: Our Dwindling Liberties

But the negative externalities that heavy handed government measures impose are not just technical and narrow health and economic outcome focused trade-offs; a more fundamental externality that increasingly appears to be getting less and less consideration is at stake. The erosion of our basic rights and freedoms, our liberty, is a negative externality being given short shrift. Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional measures. The pandemic has led to infringements on our liberties that would be considered unreasonable and unjustifiable in ordinary times. But even if a pandemic can justify the temporary and limited infringement of some of our liberties, this does not mean these can simply be ignored or discarded. And what's more, at times like these, we must be extra vigilant to ensure that the extraordinary does not become the ordinary.

The pandemic has seen governments exercise unprecedented control over our lives. Businesses were shut down on government orders. We were told where we could go and who we could see. We had curfews in places like Quebec. Every province adopted some sort of vaccine passport system and mask mandates. Restrictions were imposed on religious events and gatherings. And all of this was enforced by the police, who were given extraordinary powers by governments. These powers and measures were mostly imposed essentially by ministerial and bureaucratic decree, with minimal democratic oversight.

Even if a pandemic can justify the temporary and limited infringement of some of our liberties, we must be extra vigilant to ensure that the extraordinary does not become the ordinary.

These are not trivial concerns. The ways that governments have gone about imposing these restrictions, the extraordinary power now wielded by technocratic public health officials, the seeming inability of the democratic process and ministers to restrain these bureaucrats, and the difficulty of dismantling the new public health regime set up to temporarily deal with the pandemic pose a serious challenge to the rule of law and the basic norms that

underpin a free and democratic society.

Lord Jonathan Sumption, a legal scholar and former justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, is one of the most widely respected legal and constitutional minds of his generation. He has been troubled by the way that the pandemic response has been handled in the United Kingdom, and vocal about his concerns, which ring equally true in Canada. Lord Sumption gave the prestigious Cambridge Freshfields Lecture back in 2020, and titled his talk “Government by decree: Covid-19 and the Constitution.”

In the lecture, Sumption has much harsh criticism for the British government imposing draconian restrictions on people’s lives using ministerial decrees with minimal parliamentary scrutiny. Sumption raises several important points about the danger of this approach to governing and power. He accuses the government of circumventing parliament and undermining the bedrock constitutional principles that govern the United Kingdom by limiting its ability to consider and debate the restrictions and measures. This undermines the basic capacity of parliament to do its job and scrutinize

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government actions. He warns that “The sheer scale on which the government has sought to govern by decree creating new criminal offences sometimes several times a week on the mere say so of ministers, is in constitutional terms truly breathtaking.”

Lord Sumption concludes the lecture with a stark warning that the pandemic could precipitate a shift to a more authoritarian mode of governance. “The government has discovered the power of public fear to let it get its way. It will not forget.” He warns that “the use of political power as an instrument of mass coercion is corrosive. It divides and it embitters. In this case, it is aggravated by the sustained assault on social interaction which will sooner or later loosen the glue that helped us to deal with earlier crises.” What this crisis may well precipitate is a shift away from the tradition of responsible government that has protected our liberty and served us so well, toward an executive, technocratic dominated form of politics with minimal accountability and democratic deliberation:

Aristotle argued in his *Politics* that democracy was an inherently defective and unstable form of government. It was, he thought, too easily subverted by demagogues seeking to obtain or keep power by appeals to public emotion and fear. What has saved us from this fate in the two centuries that democracy has subsisted in this country is a tradition of responsible government, based not just on law but on convention, deliberation and restraint, and on the effective exercise of Parliamentary as opposed to executive sovereignty. But like all principles which depend on a shared

political culture, this is a fragile tradition. It may now founder after two centuries in which it has served this country well. What will replace it is a nominal democracy, with a less deliberative and consensual style and an authoritarian reality which we will like a great deal less.

We should not take this warning lightly. Sumption's warning echoes that of Robert Higgs in his famous book *Crisis and Leviathan*. Based on a detailed analysis of American history, Higgs shows how emergencies alone do not result in the expansion of state power and reach. There must also be ideologically conducive and fertile ground to facilitate this expansion. This requires ideological consent and support not simply from state actors, but from many other institutions as well that legitimate these permanent expansions of power and erosion of civil society and individual liberty.

We have these conditions right now, with widespread support for continuing harsh restrictions and measures, and the indefinite or perhaps permanent imposition of certain new restrictions like vaccine passports, even though these are being set aside at least for the time being. Some might argue that these damages are only temporary and will disappear for good when the COVID crisis truly ends. But there are lots of examples to draw from that suggest the opposite. You still have to take your shoes off at the airport every time you fly even though this is largely an act of security theatre. Far too often, freedoms sacrificed for exceptional measures do not return. The choice of the type of society we want must be made today before it is too late.

What Is to Be Done?

So, recognizing that the pandemic is a real and serious challenge, but that top-down government restrictions are not sustainable and are a danger to our liberties in the long run, what is to be done? Another scholarly article, “Why a Pandemic Needs Social Science,” recently published in *Power and Democracy*, explores what its authors Stefan Kolev and Erwin Dekker call a “decentralized, federalist discovery procedure” for policy-making. These economists argue that this approach is “conducive to the fast accumulation of knowledge generated in the numerous polities which try out different sets of measures.” Recognizing again the incomplete and dispersed nature of knowledge and the state of radical uncertainty in which decision-making has to happen, they stress the importance of cultivating an environment conducive to individual and societal learning in order to determine how best to live with risks old and new, and constantly readjust our evaluations of different trade-offs in light of new information. Heterogenous groups, they point out, learn and adjust differently, if allowed to do so, and thus can learn from each others’ mistakes and successes.

Another scholarly article explores what its authors Stefan Kolev and Erwin Dekker call a “decentralized, federalist discovery procedure” for policy-making.

Kolev and Dekker argue that probably the most important negative effect of top-down, government-enforced lockdowns is that they crowd out the bottom-up emergence and governance of new norms to deal with the state of exception brought about by the pandemic. Indeed, if citizens are not trusted to adapt their behaviour voluntarily or are believed to be incapable of doing so, the authors argue that such heavy-handed policies will actually narrow the scope for citizens to behave responsibly.

In contrast, a decentralized, federalist discovery procedure for adequate measures encourages a sense of joint norms ownership in the population, and thus increases the likelihood that people will show responsibility by accepting and living by those norms. This is more likely to happen, the authors write, if such norms are proposed by the local government or city council. “Norms which come from far away will have to fight the suspicion that they do not match local specificities, and that the players who have imposed them are too far away to care about the individual citizen’s feedback.”

Take, for instance, the vaccine passports. Why could such a decision not have been left in the hands of local governments, who could have based their decision on local case numbers, for instance? Alternatively, individual restaurants could have decided whether to require proof of vaccination of diners, and let individual diners decide which type of establishment they wish to patronize, based on their individual judgment and level of risk tolerance? Or maybe local governments could have been allowed to decide whether to allow individual

restaurants and diners to make up their own minds? A one-size-fits-all policy is only one of the many options imaginable, but it prevents us from experimenting with different strategies and learning which ones might work better for different people in different circumstances.

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The Road Back to Normalcy

An emergency, as Kolev and Dekker remind us, is a state of exception, but that does not mean it is a good idea for governments to impose wide-ranging and heavy-handed restrictions on the population. Such measures tend to absolutize the new risk above all else, leading to some of the unintended consequences mentioned above. A decentralized, polycentric approach will do a better job of encouraging learning and adaptation to the new trade-offs resulting from the novel risk.

In addition to this, the authors point out that whatever measures do end up getting implemented, policy-

makers need to make sure that the state of exception is “a *credibly temporary* state of affairs.” Unfortunately, there is ample evidence of temporary measures permanently altering societal institutions due to “ratchet effects,” such as occurred in conjunction with the war on terror. Another worry is that the state of exception will be used as a “fig leaf” to push through unrelated agendas, and we can certainly see a risk of this happening with regard to the radical environmentalist agenda.

What we need now is an intellectual inoculation against the seductive idea of an omniscient, benevolent social planner keeping us safe and sound.

Professors Kolev and Dekker think we can do better:

We believe that policy-makers can do something more to convince the citizens of the benevolence of their intentions, as well as the legitimacy and temporariness of the state of exception. The crucial point is not only transparency of what is being done, but also communicating a vision of the world after the state of exception.

Such visions, they write, can help prevent the bond between policy-makers and citizens from fraying

during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Alas, the improvised responses and moving of goalposts that have characterized too many governments' handling of this state of exception have intensified the polarization of the populace, feeding distrust (and not just among conspiracy theorists).

Thanks to the invaluable contribution of the innovative pharmaceutical sector, countries like Canada are largely vaccinated against COVID-19. What we need now is an intellectual inoculation against the seductive idea of an omniscient, benevolent social planner keeping us safe and sound. Such a vaccine would help us meet the next crisis with our eyes wide open, and in the meantime protect us from all manner of dangerous government overreach.

My intention here is not to convince you beyond a shadow of a doubt of the perfect way to handle the pandemic. But there are serious concerns we should recognize about the capacity of public officials to figure out the best solutions as well, and their interventions come at a heavy cost. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, especially in times like the one we find ourselves in. The costs of the restrictions and measures imposed are serious, and we should be extremely cautious about sleepwalking our way into a permanent pandemic regime with temporary restrictions becoming set in stone. But in order to stop this from happening, we need to be able to have a serious debate about these things, and recognize that there are reasonable arguments and discussions that can and should be had.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Michel was one of the cofounders of the Amis de la Liberté (Friends of Liberty) in the mid-1990s, and helped relaunch the MEI as of 1997, notably thanks to his skills as a fundraiser. After having been head of the MEI from 1999 to 2006, Michel was president of the Quebec Employers Council from March 2006 to December 2008. Early in his career, he practised law and then became an entrepreneur in the field of specialized business training. He served on the executive committee of the board of directors of the Quebec Workers Compensation Board (CSST) from 2006 to 2009. He was one of six Quebecers honoured in Canada's Top 40 Under 40™ 2008 awards. The winners were chosen from among 1,100 nominees.

Over the years, Mr. Kelly-Gagnon has served on several boards of directors, including that of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which disburses several hundred million dollars a year in order to finance Canada's scientific research infrastructure. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Atlas Network and a member of the board of directors of The John Dobson Foundation, which supports the teaching of entrepreneurial and free enterprise thinking to the general public. Michel is back at the helm of the MEI since January 2009.