MPs join fight to stamp out COVID-19 disinformation that’s ‘spreading faster than the virus’

NDP MP Charlie Angus and Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith have joined one such effort, Infotagion, an international initiative launched by U.K. MP Damian Collins.

By Mike Lapointe

Health-care workers in Canada’s federal prison system are on the verge of walking off the job over coronavirus-related safety concerns, according to their union, as pressure mounts on other public servants who would be tasked with handling the early release of inmates.

“This is a very critical situation that we’re trying to resolve” with the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), said Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada president Debi Daviau in an interview with The Hill Times on April 3. “Health-care workers at federal institutions have a number of very serious complaints about the safety of their workplaces, including a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), safe distancing, and occupational health hazards.

“Many nurses are being asked to take temperatures without any means of protection—this is consistently occurring, where nurses are being advised to perform nursing tests without personal protective equipment,” said Ms. Daviau, whose group—the second-largest public service union—put out an April 2 press release about the concerns. “We’ve

Continued on page 6
HEARD ON THE HILL
by Neil Moss

Politicos honour ‘fierce campaigner’ Shirley Douglas

MPs across the partisan divide honoured the life of Canadian activist and actress Shirley Douglas after news of her death broke on April 5. Ms. Douglas—the daughter of past NDP leader and medics—career supporter Tommy Douglas—appeared in more than a dozen films and several TV shows throughout a career that spanned from 1953 to 2008. She was 86 years old.

While in Hollywood, she was active in the U.S. civil rights movement and when she came back to Canada, she campaigned for the NDP to save public health care. Actor Kiefer Sutherland broke the news of his mother’s death on Twitter: “My mother was an extraordinary woman who led an extraordinary life. Sadly she had been battling for her health for quite some time and we, as a family, knew this day was coming.”

“She will be deeply missed by New Democrats everywhere,” NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh tweeted. NDP MP Niki Ashton said in a tweet that “our movement and Canada has lost a brilliant progressive force in Shirley Douglas.” She added that she’ll never forget when Ms. Douglas encouraged the then-24-year-old candidate to “keep at it” after her first loss in the 2006 federal election at the hands of then-Liberal MP Tina Keeper who she would defeat two years later. “Her words are still with me today.”

Former NDP national director Karl Belanger said in statement that he saw firsthand the “fierce campaigner” that Ms. Douglas was while on the trail with Jack Layton. “Wherever she went, she was stealing the spotlight without even trying. She took her causes seriously while not taking herself too seriously. It was an honour and a privilege to have been able to witness her in action, ardently defending the health-care system her father brought to Canada,” he said.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted that she was “a tremendous talent, a tireless advocate, and a fearless activist who never stopped fighting for what she believed in.” Infrastructure Minister Catherine McKenna, Green Party parliamentary leader Elizabeth May, and longtime NDP MP Brian Masse added their tributes, among other Hillites.

Shirley Douglas is pictured meeting with then-prime minister Jean Chrétien in 1997 alongside her son Kiefer Sutherland, as well as then-MPs Bill Blaikie and Peter Milliken. Photograph courtesy of Jean-Marc Carisse

An ‘Uncommons’ podcast for an uncommon time

What is an MP going to do while stuck at home amidst the coronavirus pandemic? Why not launch a podcast? That was Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith’s thought. He said that over the past six months he has had conversations in his office about launching a podcast. Now that he is working from home and having conversations with experts on many aspects related to COVID-19, he decided to record those chats. “I thought why not record them and post them online so other people can see the advice that I’ve received and hear directly from much smarter people.” Mr. Erskine-Smith told The Hill Times, admitting Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith has covered topics ranging from basic income to sports in his new podcast. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

As Canadians are stuck at home pining for a warm weather trip, TVO is offering a virtual getaway with a new documentary that will take viewers up a section of the Rideau Canal.

“Tripping the Rideau Canal, a four-hour documentary, takes viewers on a mid-20th century runabout to tour the UNESCO World Heritage Site.”

“Tripping the Rideau Canal is the antithesis of the kind of scripted reality programming that covers the television landscape today. Whatever happened on the canal that day is eau naturelle,” said Jane Jankovic, TVO’s executive producer of documentaries, in a press release.

The boat trip starts near Manotick, Ont., by a 160-year-old mill. From there, the 27-kilometre voyage takes viewers north past four different locks. Throughout the feature, there will be animated scenes to show the Rideau Canal through different periods of its history. Construction on the canal began in 1826 and was completed in 1832, linking Ottawa to Lake Ontario—at the time establishing a much-needed link between Kingston, Ont., and Montreal, Que., in the case of an American invasion in the years after the War of 1812.

“We think this was our most important task, to allow the viewer to experience the Rideau Canal with us, to give them enough information to have a deep understanding of this important historic waterway,” Good Earth Productions executive producer Mitch Azaria said in the release. The documentary will be televised on April 10 at 7 p.m., and will be available to watch on TVO’s website following its airing.

Take a trip up the Rideau Canal with a new TVO documentary

Ipsos’ Darrell Bricker to host webinar on public opinion during the COVID-19 crisis

As the world struggles to cope with the spread of the coronavirus, a prolific pollster is hosting an online information session to showcase how public opinion has been shifting around the crisis.

Darrell Bricker, Global CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs, will host the free webinar on April 24 and anyone can register to ask questions about the crisis, from the public’s view of how the health-care system is coping with COVID-19, to whether people think financial aid has been adequate.

“Imagine being able to be seated in the same room as all of the experts on the most important stories of the day for an hour,” Mr. Bricker said.

A recent Ipsos poll suggested that the majority of countries polled don’t think social distancing strategies will defeat the virus, according to a Global News report. The poll, which surveyed more than 14,000 people from 14 countries, found that those in eight of the countries polled thought that restrictions on travel and self-isolation efforts would be ineffective. Although 59 per cent of Canadians that were polled felt the measures would work, only 44 per cent of their southern neighbours felt the same way.

Darrell Bricker will participate in an information session on public opinion at the time of COVID-19 on April 24. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

Ms. Douglas—the daughter of past NDP leader and medical activist and actress Shirley Douglas—brought to Canada,” he said. Ms. Douglas was a tremendous talent, a tireless advocate, and a fearless activist who never stopped fighting for what she believed in.” Infrastructure Minister Catherine McKenna, Green Party parliamentary leader Elizabeth May, and longtime NDP MP Brian Masse added their tributes, among other Hillites.

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Leonardo is committed to Canada - investing in people, innovation, technology-transfer and domestic intellectual property.

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Patients in psychiatric care at great risk to COVID-19 outbreak, warns Sen. Kutcher

‘We are very worried,’ echoes one psychiatrist whose association is preparing a ‘call to action’ to governments.

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN

Independent Senator Stan Kutcher is raising the alarm about the looming risk of a COVID-19 outbreak among patients in psychiatric care. Facilities that he’s warning don’t have the capacity to protect against or properly respond to infectious diseases.

As a leading psychiatrist who pioneered research and headed the psychiatric department at Dalhousie University, the Nova Scotia Senator is intimately familiar with the capabilities and limitations of the hospital wards housing vulnerable populations across the country.

The units are not designed for infection control like the rest of the hospital and the staff don’t have the same training, he said. Those with severe mental illnesses, both in and out of these settings, are also more likely to have the multiplying health conditions—including diabetes and heart disease—among the many health flags that increase a person’s risk of contracting COVID-19.

They are also much more likely to be homeless and much more likely to live in poorly supported environments, he said. While the proportion of the population that has mental illness is about one in five, the proportion of Canadians with a severe illness is much lower, between four and six per cent.

But those at greatest risk at the moment are in hospital wards, which he said are ill-equipped to respond to an outbreak. The threat of spread should be treated with the same urgency and concern as for those in seniors homes, where Canada has seen among the worst outbreaks—and deaths—and where staying away has been presented as matter of “life and death” by Quebec Premier François Legault.

“If a COVID-19 case breaks out in one of the units, the chances it is immediately contained is huge,” said Sen. Kutcher, who was named in 2018 to the Upper Chamber, which he said brings with it a responsibility to speak for society’s vulnerable.

“It’s a huge problem” that Sen. Kutcher said he fears is absent from political and public discussions—a gap he hopes to address given the great risk both to patients and staff who aren’t able to practice physical distancing and other hygienic precautions with the necessary vigilance.

Though mental health delivery is at the provincial and territorial level, the response to a global pandemic crosses jurisdictional lines. With the federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu (Thunder Bay-Superior North, Ont.) and Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Theresa Tam offering frequent public briefings and directions.

Ms. Hajdu said the government is working on a free virtual tool to support mental health in response to the crisis, and last month Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) announced $7.5-million to Kids Help Phone to meet an increased demand for services.

“This is a shared responsibility,” said Sen. Kutcher, between health authorities and provincial, territorial, and federal governments to come forward with solutions to mitigate risk and put supports in the community so that fewer people are admitted to the hospital. Ms. Hajdu’s office did not respond to a request for comment by deadline.

“We are very worried’
The Association of Chairs of Psychiatry of Canada, made up of university faculty chairs in the field, is preparing a briefing note to send to provincial, territorial, and federal governments. It’s a “call to action” to help vulnerable populations in response to the pandemic, including those with serious mental illness, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Sen. Kutcher, a former chair himself, is trying to get it in the right hands this week.

“We are very worried,” said Kathleen Pajer, who chairs the department of psychiatry at the University of Ottawa.

Any kind of contained space is bad for infection control, but psychiatric units are especially bad,” she said. For example, “little things like having hand sanitizer on the wall aren’t possible as they could be used as weapons.

Separation is also incredibly difficult to achieve with group activities, and it’s hard for staff to remain infection-free, which in turn increases the risk for community spread. Programs developed around group activities and social interaction are a central point of care, and nurses mix freely with fewer barriers than you’d see in surgical care, including that they don’t wear protective equipment.

“We don’t have capacity to make isolation rooms,” she said, and while many are working on solutions to mitigate risk and put supports in the community, so those in the community are being helped before being admitted to hospitals.

Discussion is growing around COVID-19’s likely impact on Canadians’ mental health, an amorphous topic that Sen. Kutcher said often leaves the most at-risk out of the picture.

“Since the dawn of time, people with severe mental illnesses have been left behind and sadly what I see happening right now with COVID-19, a lot of the discussion around mental health is focused on how the people who are emotionally healthy are prepared to respond,” he said, adding the “vast majority” will be fine.

What is being left out, as always, is what about the people who have severe mental illnesses?”
Morneau — why are you giving $15 billion to these people:

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We’re all under the gun: MPs work 24-7 in the midst of a pandemic

MPs are facing a flood of calls from constituents looking for answers about programs being rolled out by the government in response to COVID-19, and are working to flag gaps. Pictured from left to right: Liberal MP John McKay, NDP MP Niki Ashton, Conservative MP Kerry Diotte, and Liberal MP Wayne Easter. The Hill Times photographs by Andrew Meade, Cynthia Münster

MPs say COVID-19 case work is consuming their days, and they’re turning to ‘imaginative’ ways of reaching out to make sure constituents’ needs are met and their voices heard.

Canada Revenue Agency and other departments. Even the direct MP line to Service Canada is slower, with some staff reporting it’s taken half a week to get responses that used to take hours.

“We all know that they’re being flooded. But the bottom line is, the way our communication should be better,” said Mr. Diotte, noting the federal government needs to “step up” its game.

Parliamentarians report being a key conduit for communications to Canadians—whether it’s public health messaging or pointing to programs making urgent support available—but also for reporting back to caucus, and government, on where gaps exist.

Even in the best of times, MPs’ days are long and interrupted at all hours, but this crisis has brought an urgency longtime Parliamentarians have never experienced before. They spoke to The Hill Times about the importance of not only being available, but also being advocates for action—as four-term NDP MP Niki Ashton (Churchill-Keeewatinook Aski, Man.) put it. For many, these unusual times have reinforced their fundamental role of representing local needs to Ottawa, a responsibility all said they felt before, but more acutely now in a job made more complicated by the fact the House of Commons is not sitting.

Contained in home offices and on phone lines, MPs used to meetings and regular interactions on local event circuits in their home ridings are turning even more to social media—and creative outreach methods—to make sure that direct contact isn’t missed. Still, with their parliamentary mailing privileges suspended—which allowed constituents to mail them free of charge, and vice versa—some worry the inability to reach every household will mean some vulnerable populations’ voices get missed.

The level of urgency of what we’re dealing with is something I feel very profoundly,” said Ms. Ashton, who is “acutely aware” of how vulnerable many are in her vast, northern riding. She said the current pandemic is giving her “flashbacks” of the H1N1 virus, the infection rate for which was six times the average for Indigenous people in northern Mani toba.

“There’s pressure to advertise and a clear need for urgent tangible action,” for First Nations, said Ms. Ashton, who has been hosting regular Facebook Live videos talking about COVID-19 in “our north.” an area of Canada that she said doesn’t get enough attention from Ottawa even at the best of times.

“I’ve always seen social media as critical to my work, even more so now,” she said, adding her live chats have led to a flood of messages and “heartbreaking stories” that reveal how anxious people are.

“I try to convey that anxiety, stress, and worry in demanding change,” said Ms. Ashton, who is used to the 24-hour cycle of parliamentary work, but said the intensity of it now is something different. Add twin toddlers to the mix, and Ms. Ashton said she’s “fortunate” to have a partner who can care for them during the long stretches when she’s working.

MPs turning to “imaginative outreach“ MPs have had to become “very imaginative” in reaching out to constituents, said Bloc Québécois MP Stéphane Bergeron. His office organized a robo-call to Montar ville, Que., residents to tell them his office is still operating despite being closed, and to reach out if they needed help.

“We got hundreds of phone calls in the days following,” he said, sometimes just to say thanks but also asking for information on programs, with details sometimes coming days after they’re announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.).

“It’s not an easy task, because the situation is not really clear, even for us, but we’re doing our best in very difficult conditions in order to support our constituents in that crisis,” he said, adding MPs are reaching out as broadly as possible through newspaper ads and social media channels.

To encourage feedback, Liberal MP Rob Oliphant (Don Valley West, Ont.) has organized a robo-call to Montrealers, and on top of the weekly COVID-19 update, he’s planned a Facebook Live event for constituents, and placed ads in newspapers.

MPs mostly deal with gaps and problems, even in normal circumstances, said Mr. McKay.

“We are the frontlines of problems, and we are the ones that reinforces the utility and benefit of riding-level MPs,” he said.

At a policy and practical level, caucus has had a significant role in the feds’ response, because the government is in a “vacuum of information” and needs that immediate feedback from Canadians, said Mr. McKay.

He said he’d like to see more committees set up virtually, as they could be “quick” and “efficient.” So far, only the House Health and Finance committees have met since Parliament suspended, though Parliament House Leader Pablo Rodriguez (Honore-Mercier, Que.) recently asked House Speaker Anthony Rota (Ni pissing, Timiskaming, Ont.) to give advice on convening Parliament virtually. Such meetings could fill existing gaps and formalize policy development “a little more thoughtfully than what’s happening now,” said Mr. McKay, adding they could also help prevent abuse of the system, because while the government is operating in good faith, it is also, necessarily, operating in haste.

“There needs to be a more formalized mechanism of feedback,” he said.

Continued from page 1

“My name is never anything like this,” said Mr. Easter, who said he’s been through plenty of difficult times during his 27 years representing Malpeque, P.E.I., but nothing so “heavy or stressful” or “constant as now.”

“It’s much more intense because this is people’s lives. This is not a political discussion. This is people’s lives and how they put food on their table, how they avoid the mental anguish, how they put food on their table, how they’re turning to social media—and creative outreach methods—to make sure every household will get missed. MPs who spoke before, but more acutely now in the current pandemic is giving her her current constituency as four-term NDP MP Niki Ashton, said Bloc Québécois MP Stéphane Bergeron. His office organized a robo-call to Montar ville, Que., residents to tell them his office is still operating despite being closed, and to reach out if they needed help.

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COVID upheaval may prompt long overdue repudiation of selfishness disguised as austerity

The implications of the current crisis are unknowable, but there is a school of thought this upheaval will lead to a re-examination of this mentality, with an eye to rebuilding more generous social structures.

That ironic phrasing is, of course, a recognition of the reality that in the worst of times, people turn to government to inject large quantities of money into the economy in hopes of resurrecting business activity.

Les Whittington

Ottawa—More than a decade has passed since, during the 2009 financial meltdown, we heard the now-resurrected refrain: “We’re all socialists now.”

That ironies phrasing is, of course, a recognition of the reality that in the worst of times, people turn to government to inject large quantities of money into the economy in hopes of resurrecting business activity.

The early stages of COVID-19 have been no different. Here, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has unrolled the largest, most far-reaching bailout package in modern times, totalling an astronomical $200-billion-plus. Canada’s central bank is spending billions to keep money flowing, $200-billion-plus. Canada’s central bank is spending billions to keep money flowing, with the provinces having seen their fortunes expand greatly. The government in the name of austerity has seen even more generous social safety nets with the provinces. The situation has been one of the most familiar impacts, if not similar events. In the past, people who’ve lived through similar ones have been defeated by those emotions, individually or collectively, or absorbing and prevailing over them to reach understandings, empathy, resolve, resilience, and perseverance.

Les Whittington

In her April 5 address, the Queen, who has unique authority to speak about this current global catastrophe, was speaking as not just a head of state but also as a survivor, writes Lisa Van Dusen. YouTube screenshot courtesy of The Telegraph

Chief economist Joseph Stiglitz summed it up: “Those at the top have learned how to suck out money from the rest in ways that the rest are hardly aware of—that is their true innovation.”

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One of the tests of leadership at such moments—one way to tell the voices that are part of the problem from those that are part of the solution—is the degree to which they contribute to or detract from the efficiency of that process by generating lies, confusion, division, inexcusability, weakness or truth, clarity, judgment, strength, vision, and compassion. Of all the norms we’ve been urged to consign to history, the corruption of that one is among the least convincing. Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor may be the single most potent provider of moral perspective on the planet. The Queen, expertise in coping with the previcit is back to her invaluable moral and morale-boosting role, while still a teenager, in the Manichean battle between the brutality of the state and the future of human freedom, presided over by the Prime Minister. That would have been her first prime minister, Winston Churchill. At 94, after 68 years as monarch alongside 14 prime ministers, the Queen, as we’ve seen in the past year, has learned a thing or two about crisis management.

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The early stages of COVID-19 have been no different. Here, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has unrolled the largest, most far-reaching bailout package in modern times, totalling an astronomical $200-billion-plus. Canada’s central bank is spending billions to keep money flowing, $200-billion-plus. Canada’s central bank is spending billions to keep money flowing, with the provinces having seen their fortunes expand greatly. The government in the name of austerity has seen even more generous social safety nets with the provinces. The situation has been one of the most familiar impacts, if not similar events. In the past, people who’ve lived through similar ones have been defeated by those emotions, individually or collectively, or absorbing and prevailing over them to reach understandings, empathy, resolve, resilience, and perseverance.

Les Whittington

COVID upheaval may prompt long overdue repudiation of selfishness disguised as austerity

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**Editorial**

Corporations stepping up shouldn’t mean their practices get a blind eye

When it comes to rationalizing potentially not-great decisions, defenders often pull out the old chestnut of perfection being the enemy of good.

A few weeks ago, this was backed by compelling statements from Michael Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization’s health emergencies program. "If you need to be right before you move, you will never win. Perfection is the enemy of good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection." And the problem in society we have at the moment is everyone is afraid of making a mistake. Everyone is afraid of the consequence of error. But the greatest error is not to move. The greatest error is to be paralyzed by the fear of failure." Dr. Ryan’s March 13 comments, unironically, went viral. And rightfully so, because it was—and still is—a good message.

These are times in which the use of the word ‘unprecedented’ is itself unprecedented. And to expect that the response from all orders of government to the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be note perfect is a fool’s errand.

Everyone is trying their best to make good decisions in a whirling dervish of a situation, and that is to be commended. While the people who signed up to be politicians likely expected to have to make a few difficult choices, it’s likely many of them didn’t expect their degree of public service to mean life or death on such a massive scale during their tenure. That said, criticism of their choices is still fair game. When he was speaking about the lessons he learned from the Ebola crisis, Dr. Ryan also said in addition to being fast, the response has to be comprehensive.

"You need to be co-ordinated, you need to be coherent, you need to look at the other sectoral impacts, the schools, and security, and economic [impacts]," he said. Part of that overview should consider whether there’s a bigger message being sent by the particular choices governments make. For example, last week Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that Amazon Canada would be managing the distribution of personal protective equipment to the provinces and territories. This, on its face, is a sound idea—few private companies have the pervasive network Amazon does.

The government said the company was providing this service at cost, without profit, and would be using its existing partnerships with Canada Post and Purolator for delivery.

But taking even one step back, it’s hard not to see the choice as rewarding a company that has a less-than-stellar reputation, with myriad reports of questionable business practices and poor treatment of its most vulnerable employees.

These are longstanding issues, not ones that have cropped up since the pandemic was declared—though the coronavirus has only exacerbated them.

By picking a company that has had employees walk off the job in protest of the handling of COVID-19 in Amazon facilities, the federal government is also sending a message that it’s okay to endanger these workers. When all is said and done, “reflections” as the prime minister is wont to call them are finished—hoped for by the workers who put their lives on the line to ensure health-care workers had the supplies they need, by pushing Amazon to be a better employer. The Hill Times

**Letters to the Editor**

Canadian House of Commons needs discipline, not virtual voting: reader

Re: ‘Introduction of electronic, remote voting not called for yet, but should be re-examined by House committee, says some MPs’ (The Hill Times, April 1, p. 14).

As one who frequently observes the televised House of Commons proceedings, it was interesting to read the commentary from three MPs in this story regarding modernizing House procedures, particularly with regard to voting in the House of Commons.

The notion of utilizing either electronic voting or absentee voting, or both, have been bandied about on different occasions for the past number of years. Thankfully, in my opinion, mature action has been taken to implement those voting procedures in the House of Commons, and may it be ever thus.

Both Liberal MPs quoted, namely Larry Bagnell and Kevin Lamoureux, have suggested that going to electronic voting, for example, would free up more time for MPs to do other things rather than spending time in the House Chamber for recorded votes. I wonder what “other things” could be more important than having MPs being in the House Chamber and being held visibly accountable for their votes on any given issue? I want to know what MPs are there to do?

Some comment was made about the availability of a reminder bell, with the Speaker shutting the doors and only those who have the supplies they need, by pushing Amazon to be a better employer. The Hill Times

in their seats before the time set aside for the vote to take place. At most, all that should be required is a 10-minute reminder bell, with the Speaker shutting off the bells as soon as the 10 minutes is up in order to allow the voting to begin. Any MPs not in the House in their seats when the bells stop ringing don’t get in until the voting is completed. In other words, “you lose.”

That’s the system in place in both the British and American Parliaments. Division bells ring for about 10 minutes and as soon as the time is up, the Speaker orders the doors locked and only those Members in their places at that time get to vote. It’s called “discipline” and it’s a process that needs to be developed and adhered to in Canada’s House of Commons.

In normal circumstances (when there is no pandemic) I expect all MPs to be in the House of Commons Chamber on Dec. 3. Introducing measures that would allow MPs to spend less time in the Chamber voting is a bad idea, says Evan Eade, The Hill Times photographer by Andrew Meade. In their seats before the time set aside for the vote to take place. At most, all that should be required is a 10-minute reminder bell, with the Speaker shutting off the bells as soon as the 10 minutes is up in order to allow the voting to begin. Any MPs not in the House in their seats when the bells stop ringing don’t get in until the voting is completed. In other words, “you lose.”

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Supporting international allies helps Canada, too

We’re so very focused on our own behaviour during the pandemic that we forget: without a vaccine, developing countries are at even greater risk than ours, because it’s harder for them to do physical distancing and workplace shutdowns. The further down the income ladder people live, the more important it is that they go to work every day just to feed their families.

The work we’re doing to develop vaccines will save lives in Canada. We must ensure Canada provides financial support to ensure all countries get equal access to those vaccines.

Randy Rudolph
Calgary, Alta.
We don’t know how this virus began, but we know how we can learn from our response

Our goal should be not to erode the moral authority of the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention—to the detriment of all nations—but to strengthen it in the aftermath of this pandemic.

The internet is awash in conspiracy theories that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was due to an accidental or deliberate escape from a Chinese facility engaged in covert weapons development. A March 17 Nature Medicine article considered the possibility that the outbreak resulted from an inadvertent lab release of a virus under study but concluded “we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

The Washington Post has debunked a claim that the outbreak can be tied to deliberate bioweapons activity, with help from Professor Richard Ebright of Rutgers University’s Waksman Institute of Microbiology, a biosecurity expert. Yet it was reported March 30 in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists that Ebright thinks that it is possible the COVID-19 pandemic started as an accidental release—not a deliberate release—from a laboratory such as one of the two in Wuhan that are known to have been studying bat coronaviruses. All such claims and suspicions are so far reliant on hearsay. Credible media sources are careful not to propagate widespread claims by the Chinese, including from trolls, that the virus actually originated in the United States.

But we should begin to call into question the effectiveness of the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. Our goal should be not to erode its moral authority—to the detriment of all nations—but to strengthen it in the aftermath of this pandemic.

The convention, commonly referred to as the BWC, established confidence-building measures (CBMs) in 1986 that aimed to “prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts, and suspicions, and in order to improve international co-operation in the field of peaceful biological activities.”

The BWC includes the obligation to “exchange ... information on all outbreaks of infection diseases and similar occurrences caused by toxins that seem to deviate from the normal pattern of development.”

Back in the 1980s, the release of an aerosol of anthrax spores from a Soviet military microbiology facility led to the formal adoption of this CBM by the United Nations. The problem is that few states have submitted annual reports to the UN, and when they have, their information is often too sketchy and incomplete to be useful to determine compliance to the BWC.

Now that much more attention will have to be paid to global patterns of disease—driven largely by concerns about the coronavirus—we will need to revolutionize the flow of information by reducing non-co-operation. We need to reduce delays in information sharing from years, months, and weeks, to days and hours.

We need to act fast to provide many more direct channels for information sharing across international borders from all types of medical, veterinary, and agricultural professionals.

The United Nations Security Council and the World Health Organization (WHO) have not been able to schedule face-to-face emergency summits because physically convening all UN-recognized countries to discuss realistic strategies for quarantining citizens creates problems, especially in New York City, and at international ports of entry.

The WHO will need to provide more specific guidelines and requirements on protective equipment that should be worn, and minimum international standards that factories must meet when producing medically approved face masks and hazmat suits for health-care workers and the general public.

The United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination (UNDAC) team did travel immediately to Wuhan and other areas of Hubei Province, with the permission of Chinese governmental authorities; but in future crises, no such national permission should be needed before taking swift action.

If a country is too poor to prevent the spread of an outbreak, we need a Global Emergency Response Fund at the UN or NATO headquarters that can help pay. Authorities must be prevented, globally, from censoring content and from refusing to share information on social media platforms, like Facebook and WeChat.

In the future, many different scenarios for accidental or deliberate biological weapons use may be imagined. Military scenarios often envisage the dissemination of substantial quantities of anti-human agents, like a new form of anthrax, in aerosol form.

In the case of the coronavirus, the pandemic spread from a point source that was likely due to a natural disease, not an accidental release, and certainly not a terrorist attack with biological weapons. But in future covert attacks, we may employ natural processes, like sneezing and coughing, to spread disease from the point of attack.

We will need more mechanisms that distinguish natural and unnatural outbreaks from one another.

Rogue leaders will also need to be strongly prevented from concealing the use of biological weapons. We need to deter them by using today’s crisis to strengthen tomorrow’s international norms and agreements.

Important conferences that focus on controlling weapons of mass destruction are being delayed; meanwhile we need to plan for the future by demanding more effective global governance and international co-operation. World leaders and civil society representatives should use their cell phones and email to speedily communicate with each other.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at Western University; president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, author of The Bomb, and peer reviewer for the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health College of Peer Reviewer. This is her viewpoint and not that of the CIMVHR.

The Hill Times
Team Canada shows co-operation pays after 3M mask supply threatened

While Canadian officials were working behind the scenes to ensure Canada’s supply of 3M masks, some of Canada’s premiers stepped up to the cameras to launch the moral-suasion offensive.

OTTAWA—As Canada’s COVID-19 containment enters its fourth week, with many weeks still likely to go, a bouquet of some of our political leaders for how they handled U.S. President Donald Trump’s initial efforts to limit 3M from providing N95 masks to Canada.

Late last week, in a time when the world needed—and still does—co-operation, the American leader looked like he was going to prohibit these key pieces of medical equipment from entering Canada. Thankfully, that no longer appears to be the case. Some good political advocacy may have helped.

When news first broke that the president was about to hit hoarder mode, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in his daily public appearances, didn’t take the bait journalists where trying to hook him with. They hoped he might offer a full throttled public condemnation of Trump: blast him for his blatant self-interest and apparent ignorance that some of the N95 component parts were made in Canada in British Columbia.

Trudeau, having worked with and through the American president’s unique psyche for several years, knew that a public punch in the head would not prove helpful in getting the N95s to Canada. The president’s jaw is glass and his skin thin, so Trudeau going after him on a scale like that would have, at a minimum, led to a shouting match and masks not moving.

While Canadian officials were working behind the scenes, as the prime minister acknowledged, some of Canada’s premiers stepped up to the cameras to launch the moral-suasion offensive. Two of these—Premiers Doug Ford and Jason Kenney—were at different levels during the long ago fall election, strong foers of Trudeau, and he them.

Ford expressed disappointment in the Trump administration’s initial behaviour, saying: “We’re one big family, but they’ve cut out one part of the family now.... Still, I am so disappointed in what they are doing right now.” Kenney added: “It’s very disappointing. I would remind our American friends and neighbours that we’ve always been there together in important moments in history.”

Neither of the critiques offered by Ford or Kenney were bitingly personal, something both premiers have in the past demonstrated skill at doing up. Instead, they were centred on the historical familial ties that bind the people of Canada and the United States. Both are Conserva-

tive leaders known in Washington and to others in the Trump orbit. Their interventions added legitimacy to the Canadian concern about U.S. mask hoarding.

Then a blast of late winter came at the American president from Newfoundland and Labrador.

The outgoing premier of the province, Dwight Ball, not normally regarded as having the best of communications skills, weighed in and weighed in hard. He evoked the memories of 9/11 when Canada, and Newfoundland and Labrador in particular, gave without question safe harbour to thousands of Americans who couldn’t get home because of terrorist attacks.

Ball was forceful. He stated: “To say that I’m infuriated by the recent actions of President Trump of the United States is an understatement,” adding that “Newfoundland and Labrador will never give up on humanity. We will not hesitate for one second if we had to repeat what we did on 9/11. But I don’t want to do it again.” Ball’s comments, along with Ford’s and Kenney’s, were picked up by American media outlets.

The efforts of the premiers, the prime minister, is not a managed public utterances, and backroom diplo-

macy must have helped in resolving the log jam around masks. Reports now suggest the 3M N95 masks will be readily available in Canada. Team Canada efforts do pay off apparently.

A final thought on Premier Ball, as a Newfoundland and Labradorian I was proud he publicly called out the president this way he did. I can also confirm if the people of my province were called upon again to help our American friends in a time of need, they would do it in the blink of an eye.

Tim Powers is vice-chairman of Summa Strategies and managing director of Abacus Data. He is a former adviser to Conservative political leaders.

The Hill Times
Market fundamentalism is dead. We’re all socialists now

Erica Ifill
Bad+Bitchy

OTTAWA—So, us SJWs (social justice warriors) were right all along. Seems like building a just and equitable society where people are paid a livable wage, health care and housing are human rights, the environment is protected, labour is powerful, and white supremacy/colonialism and patriarchy are relegated to the powerful, and SJWs have been fighting for.

Market fundamentalism is dead. We’re all socialists now.

Neoliberalism gave way to market fundamentalism, which is the belief that unregulated markets will solve everything, and yet here we are. An extension of market fundamentalism is the belief that the private sector does everything better, which coagulates into the belief that government cannot be trusted and neither can its workers. Unfortunately for market syphons, the market is about to collapse and the only thing saving us is government, however, after decades of cuts, government infrastructure has been hollowed out to the point that the ability to deliver new and existing programs in times of crisis is questionable.

In 2012, the Harper government implemented the Deficit Reduction Action Plan (DRAP) to balance the federal budget, which they claimed to do without cutting government services. The claim was that the then-government found $5.2-billion in ongoing savings.

The stupidity required to take these claims seriously, and the consequential lack of critical analysis, continues to be astounding. The idea that more than 19,000 public service jobs could be eliminated due to “efficiencies”—which is just another way to say that government is a spendthrift, wasting your hard-earned money to give to people who are less deserving than you—is preposterous. It is that attitude that has permeated our politics and has been the lens through which government policy is developed and analyzed. It is in the name of fiscal conservatism that we’re in this mess, where our services and government infrastructure are hollowed out for the perfunctory promises of efficiency. Rarely is the frequency with which these promises are analyzed from a societal perspective: is efficiency really the role of government, or is it a just and equitable society? This is a fundamental question that relies on a view of government as a conduit and a catalyst for societal perspective: is efficiency really the role of government, or is it a just and equitable society?

The more plausible explanation is that the government had a political motive to deny service impacts and was keen to ensue there was little evidence to the contrary.” This assessment by IFSD, headed by Page, seems quite standard for the fiscal conservative set who like to perform funky mathematics that don’t hold to argue anything, hence the term, “snowflake.” The stupidity required to take these claims seriously, and the consequential lack of critical analysis, continues to be astounding.

The problem is, the effects of those cuts are being felt during a crisis that requires all hands on the government deck, only they eliminated those hands eight years ago. Instead of 19,200 jobs, the Harper government actually eliminated 20,000 federal jobs indiscriminately (another 8,900 had been planned), rather than strategically, which resulted in the loss of institutional knowledge and, yes, loss of services. If you don’t have enough people with the institutional knowledge to deliver and service federal programs, the quality and delivery of the program will suffer. And we can see this already.

According to a 2017 case study on the DRAP by the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD), contrary to the government’s insistence that no services were adversely affected by these cuts, there were impacts felt, especially by departments that are foundational to providing relief for COVID-19, such as Employment and Social Development Canada, where “the number of contact centres processing employment insurance claims dropped from 120 to 22. This led to a 40-year low in the number of unemployed people who successfully claimed EI, and led to large increases in call wait times, dropped calls, and abandoned calls.”

Welp, that’s kind of inconvenient now, eh?

The funny thing is, the Harper government refused to disclose data regarding how services fared after DRAP, so much so that then PBO-chief, Kevin Page, took them to court. One could surmise from this resistance to transparency that the government knew it couldn’t back up those claims.

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The role of the WHO in this crisis has been tarnished by politics

A poisonous cocktail of money and internal and global politics has left the WHO damaged by aligning with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s mendaciousness of the perils and spread of COVID-19.

OTTAWA—In February of 2019, I was the deputy head of information at the World Health Organization, and was invited to a meeting of senior staff in the office of then-director-general Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima. Invitations to the director-general’s office at the WHO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, as it was explained that Nakajima would be travelling to Iraq. Led by Saddan Hussein’s officials, he would look into the impact of sanctions and the “Oil for Medicine” program (part of the “Oil for Food” program instituted by the UN in 1995). We were to prepare a press release, in which Nakajima would blast the United States for restricting the funds to the country, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates, as he would suppose points where people were lined up in long queues. Within the direction was given by the adviser on Iraq, a former member of Hussein’s government.

I was uncomfortable with writing a release before the fact, and I mentioned it to the director-general, a former head of information at the World Health Organization. And it was accepted to only 57, for a very high rejection rate of 70 per cent.

Taiwan needs the world, and as the COVID-19 situation proves, the world needs Taiwan.

This donation of masks led to an outpouring of gratitude, including from President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who thanked Taiwan in a Twitter post, calling the donation “a gesture of solidarity” that shows we are “stronger together.”

Taiwan’s mask donation builds upon agreements with the U.S., EU, Czech Republic, and Australia, on all manner of COVID-19 related matters. This includes possible co-operation on: information and best-practice sharing, vaccine development, testing kit development, personal protective equipment supplies, raw material development, and more. It is clear that Taiwan is a ready and willing partner, and that there is much to be gained by working with the island nation when it comes to battling COVID-19.

It is worth noting that Canada makes it clear that the “enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.” It is therefore unconscionable that the human rights of the 23 million Taiwanese people (and indeed, the people of the world) should be impeded by political whims of apparatchiks in Beijing.

It is why the world needs a co-ordinative role of the United Nations. Taiwan, along with the other UN organizations for donor countries, will follow suit.

The story is pertinent today, as World Health Organization (WHO) continues to reject the request of the Taiwan. As a former WHO staffer, I can be reached at pipson52@hotmail.com.
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COVID-19 can be deadly.
Stay home. Save lives.

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‘Critical situation’ in prisons as health-care workers threaten to walk over lack of protective equipment

The Correctional Service of Canada continues to take a number of preventative measures to restrict the spread of COVID-19 in federal institutions, according to the office of Public Safety Minister Bill Blair.

During a press conference on April 6, Blair, who is also the parliamentary secretary to the government’s website, “It has been argued that the development of good relationships between COs and inmates can be an mental process for good relationships being formed across the organization. Therefore, it is necessary to facilitate the lack of hand sanitizers and other sanitation products—other issues, said Ms. Daviau.

We also have modified routines across the organization to reduce staff levels and a screening process takes place prior to the entry of critical services within our institutions. In addition, group education and programs have been temporarily suspended,” wrote Ms. Tricomi, in addition to putting into place hygiene measures as well as cleaning, disinfecting, and proper laundry and waste disposal processes.

Our parole officers and staff in the community continue their critical work to ensure the management and supervision of offenders. We are providing direction to community staff on what measures they can take to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission,” wrote Ms. Tricomi. “Community staff have been instructed to take measures to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission, such as limiting visits, increasing cleaning routines and reducing capacity to ensure that residents can safely self-isolate, as necessary, for the protection of other residents and staff members.”

“Our greatest responsibility is keeping Canadians safe. That includes all correctional staff, inmates, and the Canadian public. We know the unique risks inherent to prisons,” said Mary-Liz Power, spokesperson for Public Safety Minister Bill Blair (Scarborough Southwest, Ont.). “The Correctional Service of Canada continues to take a number of preventative measures to restrict the spread of COVID-19 in federal institutions while maintaining inmates’ connections with family, friends, and support systems.”

Mr. Blair has asked both the commissioner of the CSC and the chair of the Parole Board of Canada and said their recommendations were not being followed to reduce the numbers of people in prison.

Sen. Pate was appointed to the Senate in November 2016 after spending several decades in the legal and penal systems of Canada, including as executive director to the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry societies from 1992 until her appointment to the Red Chamber.

“Some jurisdictions, like Ontario, did immediately say no intermittent sentences will be served in the prisons, as of mid-March or near that point, so that those individuals would not be potentially unwittingly introducing the virus,” said Sen. Pate. In an April 6 interview: “They were instructed to take measures to reduce the number of people in prison.”

Sen. Pate has been getting calls from medical professionals since the pandemic began, including as executive director to the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry societies from 1992 until her appointment to the Red Chamber.

“We are being [heard] at the West Block press conference about the government’s response to COVID-19,” said Sen. Pate. “We have asked both the commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada and the chair of the Parole Board of Canada to determine if there are measures that could be taken to facilitate an early release for certain offenders.”

Sen. Pate also said they would start to look at temporary absence programs in Nova Scotia, and provincially, the judges sat all weekend to try and do a series of bail reviews to try and get as many people out of the remand centre and provincial jails as possible.

“Different jurisdictions have done different things, and the problem is it’s a bit of a patchwork across the country,” said Sen. Pate.

There’s also the question of where those inmates are going to go when they are released, a particular concern for some First Nations offenders, Mr. Stapleton said. “In the communities where they have simply closed off, nobody can come in, so if we’re going to let those women go, there will be nowhere for early, where are they going to go? Halfway houses don’t want any new people right now, so that’s another concern,” he said.

The number of inmates who could be released early won’t really have much of an impact on the number of inmates in the prisons, Mr. Stapleton noted. “Now, to be fair to the individual that are going to be released, it may have a huge impact on them because they are being removed from an environment that is going to be very dangerous, and we’re already seeing cases come up within the institutions, and we certainly expect that it’s going to be very difficult inside the institutions to protect offenders and protect staff, quite frankly,” said Mr. Stapleton.

The union has regular discussions with CSC about the safety of correctional officers, and he said that the ability to maintain physical or social distancing within a prison can be extremely difficult and the lack of PPE is another problem—the expectation that Correctional Service of Canada officers will continue to interact with offenders without either of those is a huge concern.”

He also said that while there has been some consultation with the union about community correctional centres and community parole, there hasn’t been much overall.

Mr. Stapleton said his union has engaged the minister’s office when it felt necessary, which “has been very receptive to our concerns,” and that he regularly speaks with senior staff within Mr. Blair’s office.

“We are being heard at the minister’s office, but certainly not at Corrections as much as we wish we could,” he said. “It’s always kind of been this is how we’re going to do it, what do you think,” as opposed to “let’s sit down, have a discussion, here’s where we need to end up, how are we going to get there.”

“We rarely have those discussions at Corrections,” said Mr. Stapleton.

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The Hill Times
MPs join fight to stamp out COVID-19 disinformation that’s ‘spreading faster than the virus’

NPD MP Charlie Angus and Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith have joined one such effort, Infotagion, an international initiative launched by U.K. MP Damian Collins.

Continued from page 1

“We’ve seen misinformation in many other contexts—etectoral contexts and certainly other health contexts—but the seriousness of this global challenge demands that we ensure that misinformation, disinformation is stamped out wherever possible,” said Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches-East York, Ont.), one of two Canadian Parliamentarians currently involved in K. MP Damian Collins’ international initiative, Infotagion.

Projections released by the Ontario government last week reflecting the potential impact of COVID-19 in the province underline the need for such action, said Mr. Erskine-Smith.

“Their projections are 100,000 people could die over the course of the pandemic if there’s no public health response, and we could reduce that to 3,000 to 15,000 with a strong public health response, and government’s moving forward with a strong public health response depends, in the end, on an informed public,” he said.

The WHO has said the “infodemic” around COVID-19 is “spreading faster than the virus.” In turn, it’s called on major tech companies to do more and has added the myth-busting effort itself.

Online misinformation and disinformation—that is, inaccuracies and outright falsehoods—around COVID-19 is rife: from false theories on prevention (whoever needs to hear it: blow-drying your mouth does not protect against the virus), to would-be home remedies, to conspiracy theories (including over how it started, or that the pandemic is exaggerated or entirely a hoax), to panic articles, to incorrect warnings over speculated government actions, calls to lockdown, or shortages. The disseminators of such disinformation are a similarly broad range, from local to international.

Such content can spread quickly through social media platforms and messaging apps, from WhatsApp to Twitter to Facebook to TikTok, and beyond.

Infotagion officially went live on March 30. Aimed at identifying and fact-checking disinformation spreading around COVID-19, it involves Parliamentarians from around the world, including Canada, Ireland and the U.K., along with American and British experts and tech companies.

From Canada, along with Mr. Erskine-Smith, NPD MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.) is supporting the effort organized by Mr. Collins. The three have previously collaborated as part of the International Grand Committee on Disinformation and Global Public Health, which was put together in 2018 in light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

“We believe that the coronavirus is the first major public health crisis in this day of online media disinformation. People need to be able to check what they see if it doesn’t look right,” explained Mr. Collins in an email exchange with The Hill Times last week.

The idea is people can send in screenshots or links to “suspected disinformation to Infotagion, which will then “check it against trusted and official sources of information” and post the results online, creating an open archive of what people are seeing and recommendations on how they should respond to it,” said Mr. Collins. Along with dispelling false information, the hope is this archive will underlie the need for “more effective action” to fight disinformation, including from big tech companies.

While there are other, “excellent established fact-checking resources available—including from the WHO—Mr. Collins noted “they are not always open for people to send in individual articles to be checked,” and by comparison, Infotagion is designed to respond to individual disinformation claims.”

Claire Wardle, an expert on misinformation and executive director of the Oxford Internet Institute, said the level of information currently out online around COVID-19, both true and false, is “unbelievable.”

“Disinformation around COVID-19 has followed familiar patterns, said Ms. Wardle: ‘We’re seeing people keyword search on certain hashtags, we’re seeing people buying domains, we’re seeing old images resurfacing, we’re seeing disinformation that intersects with hate, particularly around anti-Asian sentiment.’

“A lot of this is exaggerated gossip, as opposed to absolute disinformation,” she said. “It’s not if, you lick your cat, you’ll be okay.”

“While there’s a lot of kernels of truth,” she said, “you can imagine how those kinds of rumours could really start to have real-world impact” and contribute to a ramping up of public fear and panic.

Some world leaders, and others, have contributed to the infodemic. President Donald Trump, for example, has promoted the use of anti-malaria drugs—hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine—to combat the virus, suggesting on Twitter on March 21 that a combination of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin could be a “game changer.”

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has since approved chloroquine phosphate and hydroxychloroquine sulfate for “emergency use” to fight COVID-19 for those not able to participate in clinical trials, but only says these drugs “may be effective,” and that its recommendation is based on “limited in vitro and anecdotal clinical data in case series.”

The drugs remain unproven as a cure for COVID-19, and medical experts have criticized the president’s push as misguided and dangerous. On March 28, the same day the FDA issued its emergency-use approval, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a warning over chloroquine phosphate, saying the drug “can cause serious health consequences, including death,” citing reports of two recent deaths by individuals who ingested “non-phantom-chemical chloroquine phosphate”—individuals who were suggested were acting on the advice of the president.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has repeatedly downplayed the virus, calling it “just a little flu,” and promoting the use of hydroxychloroquine, incorrectly claiming it’s “working in every country. ” On March 30, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all removed posts shared by the president, citing rules about posting harmful content, including a video message from Mr. Bolsonaro.

Layered onto this are questions being raised over official data on COVID-19, with U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly warning China has been underreporting its infection and death rates, for example.

Asked about this last week, federal Health Minister Patty Hajdu (Thunder Bay-Superior North, Ont.) shot the prime minister down, saying “there’s no indication” data from China has been falsified in any way.

Further muddying the waters are differing messages coming from health and government authorities, day to day, jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as they grapple to come to grips with the crisis, for example, on whether face masks should be worn by the general public.

Add to the mix the fact that people are isolated and scared, and it’s created this perfect storm for misinformation to flourish, because people are less critical and they want to share information to be helpful,” said Ms. Wardle.

Ms. Wardle said her organization began monitoring disinformation around the coronavi- rus in mid-January, and in early March, when work-from-home orders began, they “needed to pivot everything to focus on coronavirus.” Along with a daily fact-checking webinar series, First Draft launched a new “Covering coronavirus” online course for news outlets on April 1.

The current experience with disinformation around COVID-19, including seeing different jurisdictions push out different levels and kinds of information to citi- zens, further highlights the need for an international co-ordinating body to address online disinformation, something Ms. Wardle said her organization has been calling for for years.

“Not country is going to solve this problem on its own, and the idea of working across borders and with colleagues from all parties and all countries is incredibly important,” said Mr. Erskine-Smith, noting Parliamentarians involved in the Infotagion initiative are all also part of a WhatsApp group, through which they share information and ideas.

Mr. Angus has repeatedly downed pandemic ripe for exploita- tion, calling it “just a copypaste of climate change.”

Mr. Angus and Mr. Erskine-Smith noted that people have been more responsive to such changes than in the past.

A spokesperson for Facebook said the platform has been removing content related to COVID-19 that “could contribute to physical harm,” based on input from the WHO, since January—including, for example, posts discouraging medical authorities to say COVID is being exaggerated.”

If not stamped out, such disinformation could prove toxic and even fatal, said Mr. Angus.

“I think information is going to win this, but we have to be vigilant,” he said.

Along with initiatives like Infotagion, Facebook’s Fact Check team, and major tech companies, there have also been working with governments, including the WHO. Mr. Collins noted Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have all removed posts shared by the president, citing rules about posting harmful content, including a video message from Mr. Bolsonaro.

There are patterns that we’ve seen in disinformation, there are players around the disinformation world, and certainly they’re evi- dent in the response to COVID,” he said.

Misinformation and disinformation generally “plays on people’s fears, vulnerabilities, said Mr. Angus, making the cur- rent pandemic ripe for exploita- tion. People who are anti-vaxxers and mistrust medical authorities, well, there are efforts to say COVID is being exaggerated.”

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Former U.S. ambassador Bruce Heyman, left, says there will be a necessary healing process in the Canada-U.S. relationship due to the damage done by American President Donald Trump. The Hill Times file photograph and photograph courtesy of the White House/Flickr

The deeper the wound, the longer it takes to heal: Trump’s threats undermine Canada-U.S. relationship, says former envoy

We are dealing with an administration that is both very unpredictable, very much America first, [and] not long-term thinking in terms of its relationship with its allies,” says former diplomat Michael Kergin.

Former diplomat Colin Robertson, who sat on the international trade deputy minister’s NAFTA advisory committee, said Canada has learned lessons on how to deal with the Trump administration: namely, to work around it.

He said during previous times of friction between the Trudeau and Trump governments during the NAFTA renegotiations, Canada put emphasis on outreach to governors and legislators at the federal and state levels, as well as business and labour interests, adding that Ms. Freeland was one of the architects of that strategy.

“She knows who to call. The Rolodex is there and we can pick up the phone. These are always what you want to have in an emergency. You don’t want to be meeting people or talking to people for the first time. And I think we have really embedded ourselves much more deeply into the United States as a result of the renegotiations of the economic agreement,” he said.

Conservative MP Colin Carrie (Oshawa, Ont.), his party’s critic on defense and a member of the Canada-U.S. IPG’s executive, said the pandemic is certainly a serious blow to the bilateral relationship.

“Canada and the United States are neighbors, not just trade partners, but neighbors and allies for the majority of our existence. The stress of fighting this pandemic would strain even the best relationships as governments scramble to save the lives of their most vulnerable,” he said, adding that he doesn’t think efforts to curb the virus would lead to long-term damage in the relationship, but instead to stronger ties as the two countries seek “common solutions.”

Carleton University international affairs professor Pen Osler Hampson said Mr. Trump’s protectionist ideas shouldn’t have come as a big surprise for Canada.

“That’s not what I expected, but I will never forget that conversation. I especially won’t forget it now,” the former diplomat said.

Mr. Heyman said the current U.S. president “lost precious time” to co-operate with an international partner when he didn’t take the threat of the virus as seriously as he should have when his intelligence advisers first alerted him to the threat.

Earlier this week, The New York Times reported that U.S. officials had warmed senior Trump administration officials in January that the pandemic could put millions of Americans at risk. “Had [Mr. Trump] done the work in advance then we would have had plenty of masks to go around for all the people who needed it, on both sides of our border,” Mr. Heyman said.

Along with the lack of preparedness, Mr. Robertson said, Canada has also been a casualty of Mr. Trump’s America First policies, adding that he didn’t think any previous U.S. president would threaten to withhold the masks from Canada.

It doesn’t matter what administration—Carter, Ford, Nixon, Clinton, Regan—they all saw the value of alliances and the importance of keeping the allies a part of the alliance,” he said. “Trump just doesn’t recognize that.”

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The Hill Times
The people behind the Conservative OLO’s communications, digital media shops: Part 3

Kelsie Chiasson is acting director of communications, Marc Lemire is now associate director of digital and video production, and Salpje Stepanian remains manager of correspondence.

Mr. Martin-Chan was previously manager of digital communications. He has been in the OLO since the fall of 2017, first as an assistant manager of digital communications. Roughly one year later, he was promoted to his current position.

A former assistant to Manitoba Conservative MP James Bezan, Mr. Clancy has been a press secretary in the OLO since the fall of 2018. He’s also a former senior fellow with the Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee, and spent roughly a year as a communications assistant in the office of then-Conservative veterans affairs ministers, starting under Julian Fantino and ending under then-minister and now Conservative leadership candidate and MP Erin O’Toole. As previously reported, supporting Mr. Scheer directly as English press secretary is Denice Siele, while Josée Morissette is the leader’s French press secretary.

David Murray continues as a special adviser for strategic communications. A former MP’s assistant, Mr. Murray tackled analytics for Mr. Scheer’s 2017 leadership campaign and subsequently joined the OLO, first under the title of research assistant. During the recent 2019 election, he was a national pollster for the federal party.

Anton Sestrinsky is working alongside Mr. Murray as a strategic communications adviser. He’s been in the leader’s office since the beginning of 2018 and previously held the title of manager of community relations. Mr. Sestrinsky is also a former executive co-ordinator of the League of Ukrainian Canadians and former executive director of the International Council in Support of Ukraine.

Julie Belayon (née Pham) remains in place as a communications officer; a role she’s played for roughly the last two and half years. Before joining the OLO in the fall of 2017, she was a special assistant to Ontario Conservative Senator Thanh Hai Ngo.

Erika Lee continues as the office’s digital production co-ordinator. She previously worked in the office for years under then-prime minister Stephen Harper as project co-ordinator of creative services, before she moved away from the Hill to work in the private sector after the 2015 federal election before returning in the fall of 2017.

Evan Webster, who was previously a senior video specialist for the Conservative caucus, is now manager of video production. A former IT support staffer for the Conservative MP Candice Bergen. As previously reported, Angus MacLellan is also a video specialist and caucus liaison.

Joel Hansen, a graphic designer in the office since 2018, has added animator and video specialist to his title. He’s working closely with graphic designer and junior animators Stéphanie Ratté, who’s been in place since 2016; Zachary Shank, who joined the OLO in November 2017; and new hire Anthony Cinera, who’s a former digital media specialist for the Conservative Party and was a digital content and marketing specialist with Sharp Electronics of Canada before that.

Emily Pechonchik continues as a graphic designer, having done the job for the last year and a half. She took leave to do graphic design work for the federal party during last fall’s election, and is also a former graphic designer with Cynenn Creative and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, among other roles.

Chase Tribble, a former content manager for the party, has joined Mr. Scheer’s team as a videographer. Andre Forget continues as a photographer.

Salpje Stepanian remains manager of correspondence for the OLO. He’s well-versed in the job, having spent years as manager of correspondence in Mr. Harper’s office as prime minister. Going back even further, he was a correspondence supervisor in then-Reform leader Preston Manning’s OLO.

Two of Mr. Stepanian’s old colleagues in Mr. Harper’s PMO continue to work under him in Mr. Scheer’s office. Paul Dagenais, as a senior correspondence adviser, and Carolina Salas as a correspondence adviser.

Joshua Gilman, previously a writer in the office since early 2019, is now manager of written production. He’s been director of Strength to Fight, a group focused on “fighting for a porn-free Canada,” as described on its website, since 2015, and is also a former special assistant to then-citizenship and immigration minister Chris Alexander.

Catherine Mongénis is a French writer and editor. Before joining the OLO team, she was office manager to both Conservative Whip Mark Strahl and to Conservative House leader Michelle Rempel Gentz.

Leslie Virgin remains an English writer. A former writer in Mr. Harper’s PMO, she’s been with the OLO since the 2015 federal election.

Finally, rounding out the OLO team is strategists Charette, who continues as translator.
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INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY BRIEFING

As of December 2019, the Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB) had nine projects across Canada. The CIB focuses on four main sectors: public transit, trade and transportation, green infrastructure, and broadband infrastructure. Is Canada getting good value? Are the projects in the public interest?

One key to how the federal government’s infrastructure policy is shaped is the need to navigate the chasm between how much money needs to be spent and what funding is actually making it out the door. What is Canada’s infrastructure gap and is it any closer to being closed?

This briefing will also take a look at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ fall report that said Canada’s public infrastructure is “at risk” unless some key investments are made.

It will also explore the federal Gas Tax Fund, and whether it lives up to its promise of providing predictable, long-term funding for local governments (a $2.2-billion one-time transfer was allocated in Budget 2019).

Finally, in this briefing, we’ll take a look at the progress of the government’s drive to expand high-speed broadband access for all Canadians, especially those in rural areas of the country.

Be a part of this timely and relevant briefing.

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The Dominican Republic hosts pre-pandemic party

The Hill Times photographs by Sam Garcia

Ottawa quiet as parties hash out next recall of Parliament

A man wearing a mask walks down Lyon Street in Ottawa on April 1. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8

House Not Sitting—The House has been suspended until Monday, April 20. It is then scheduled to sit for four straight weeks until May 15. It will take one-week break and will resume sitting again on May 25 and will sit straight through for the next four consecutive weeks, until it’s scheduled to adjourn on June 23. The House adjourns again for three months and will return in the fall on Monday, Sept. 21, for three straight weeks. It will adjourn for one week and will sit again from Oct. 19 until Nov. 6. It will break again for one week and will sit again from Nov. 16 to Dec. 11. And that will be it for 2020.

Senate Not Sitting—The Senate has also been suspended due to the COVID-19 virus. When it’s scheduled to return, the possible sitting days are April 21-23 and April 28-30.

The possible Senate sitting days are May 4, 8, 11, 15, 29, and 29. The Senate is scheduled to sit May 5-7 and May 12-14. The Senate will break May 18-22. It is scheduled to sit May 26-28. The June possible sitting days are June 1, 5, 8, 12, 15 and 19. The Senate is scheduled to sit June 24-; June 9-11; June 16-18; and June 22, 23, it breaks June 24 for St. Jean Baptiste Day; and it’s scheduled to sit June 25 and June 26. The Senate breaks from June 29 until Sept. 22. The Senate’s possible September sitting days are Sept. 21, 25, 28. It’s scheduled to sit Sept. 22-24 and Sept. 29-Oct. 1, with a possible sitting day on Friday, Oct. 2. The possible Senate sitting days are Oct. 5, 9, 19, 23, 26, and 30. It’s scheduled to sit Oct. 6-8; it takes a break from Oct. 12-16; it will sit Oct. 20-22; and Oct. 27-29. The November possible Senate days are Nov. 2, 6, 16, 20, 23, 27, 30. It’s scheduled to sit Nov. 3-5; it will take a break from Nov. 9-13; it will sit Nov. 17-19; and Nov. 24-26.

The possible December Senate sitting days are Dec. 4, 7, and 11. The Senate is scheduled to sit Dec. 1-8, Dec. 10-15, and it will sit Dec. 14-18.

MONDAY, MAY 4

International Day of Pink—In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots/Pride; and the 30th anniversary of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, we are proud to invite you to Stonewall 50 across Canada, in Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and Cape Breton, from May 4-21, featuring Stonewall Riot activist Martin Boyce. Stonewall 50 across Canada is a free speakers’ series in cities across the country featuring Stonewall Riot activist Martin Boyce. Boyce is among a handful of surviving Stonewall activists whose contributions have had a significant impact on our communities. Join us as he shares his stories of uprising and rebellion, what motivated him that night.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 10

CIF Awards Celebrating 30 Years of Excellence in Journalism—The Canadian Journalism Foundation Awards will be held on June 10, 2020, at the Ritz-Carlton, Toronto. D.C., hosted by Rick Mercer, former host of The Rick Mercer Report. The CBC’s Anna Maria Tremonti will be honoured. Tables are $7,500 and tickets are $750. For more information on tables and sponsorship opportunities, contact Josh Garfinckel at jgarfin@cfu.ca or 416-995-0394.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 8

Canada’s Foremost Fintech Conference FFCON20—Featuring high-growth start-ups and leading industry experts across fintech sectors including digital banking, P2P finance, AI, capital markets, Wealthtech, payments, crypto, and blockchain. July 8-9. Speakers include: Robert Asakawa, senior director public policy, BlackRock; Paul Schulte, commissioner; and CEO, Schulte Research; Craig Asano, founder and CEO, NCFI; George Bondurco, co-founder and CEO, Balance; Julien Brazeau, partner, Deloitte; Aline Cormier, president, Venture Law Corporation; Niko Danayov, founder, keynote speaker, author, futurist, Singularity Media; Pam Draper, president and CEO, Bitvo; Justin Hartman, co-founder and CEO, Contingent; Peter-Paul Van Hoeken, founder & CEO, FrontFundr; Cynthia Huang, CEO and co-founder, Atticus Fantasy; Austin Hubbell, CEO and co-founder, Consilium Crypto; Patrick Mandic, CEO, Moneywire; Matt Monisio, co-founder & CEO, FioQuest; Calo Pastoll, co-founder & CEO, Lending Loop; Enda Donnelly, investment partner, Northmark Ventures; Al Pouzard, Founders Capital Partners, Family Office; Richard Prior, global head of policy and research, FSMA; Richard Remillard, president, Remillard Consulting Group; Jennifer Reynolds, president & CEO, Toronto Finance International; Jason Saltzman, partner, Gowing WDG Canada; James Wallace, co-chair and co-CEO, Exponential; Alan Wunsche, CEO & chief taken officer, Tokefunder; and Danish Yusuf, founder and CEO, Zanzure. For more information, please visit: https://fintechfunding.com.

THURSDAY, OCT. 15

PPF Testimonial Dinner and Awards—Join us at the 33rd annual event to network and celebrate as the Public Policy Forum honours Canadians who have made their mark on policy and leadership. Anne McLellan and Senator Peter Harder will take their place among a cohort of other stellar Canadians who we’ve honoured over the last 33 years, people who have dedicated themselves to making Canada a better place through policy leadership and public service. The gala event will be held on Thursday, Oct. 15, at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, 205 Front St. W., Toronto.

SATURDAY, OCT. 24


THURSDAY, NOV. 12

Liberals Party National Convention—The Liberal Party of Canada announced the 2020 Liberal National Convention will be hosted in Ottawa, from Nov. 12-15. For more information, please contact: media@lpc.ca, 613-627-2384.

Conservative Party National Convention—The Conservatives will hold a convention in Quebec City from Nov. 12-14. For more information, please contact 1-866-408-8407.

The Parliamentary Calendar is a free events listing. Send in your political, cultural, diplomatic, or govern-mental event in a paragraph with all the relevant details under the subject line ‘Parliamentary Calendar’ to newsletters@thetimes.ca by Wednesday at noon before the Monday paper or by Friday at noon for the Wednesday paper. We can’t guarantee inclusion of every event, but we will definitely do our best. Events can be updated daily online, too.

The Hill Times
The Hill Times is offering free access to all our coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

For the next few weeks, The Hill Times is offering free access to all our news and analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We are also expanding The Hill Times’ print edition in PDF format to all elected provincial officials, provincial cabinet ministers, and their respective staff across Canada. The Hill Times is taking extra steps to ensure the print edition in PDF format is delivered to all senior decision-makers, in isolation or not.

All readers of The Hill Times, including cabinet ministers, MPs, Senators, political staff, senior bureaucrats, and officials in the PMO and PCO will continue to receive their Hill Times’ digital edition (PDF) twice a week, along with our daily coverage on HillTimes.com, along with our seven-days-a-week special email briefings. Print subscriptions will continue to be delivered twice a week.

We offer trustworthy political and policy coverage. We're keeping on top of key policy developments in order to help keep our readers well-informed and we’ll keep shining a light on Canada’s federal government and Parliament during this critical time.

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