

For money or fresh air?



By Nate Smelle

On March 29, 2020 the provincial government reported that four people had lost their lives to COVID-19 that day. That same day, the daily total number of new cases came in at 211. At the same time, the province also documented that the average daily case count over the previous seven days was 133 new cases per day.

Checking in on these telling statistics exactly one year later, one finds a province faced with much more dire circumstances. On Monday, March 29, 2021 COVID-19 took 19 lives, and added another 2,448 new cases to the daily case count in Ontario. The average daily number of cases over the previous seven days also increased drastically, coming in at 2,038.

With Ontario adding more than 37 COVID-19 deaths per day on average the week before Christmas; and, the province averaging over 2,000 new cases a day, the Ford government locked down the province in an attempt to bring the numbers down and save lives.

With the numbers trending downwards at the beginning of February - registering a low daily case count of 745 on Feb. 2 - it appeared the province-wide lockdown was working. By mid-February, the government had lifted the stay-at-home order throughout most of the province, with the exception of the Peel, Toronto, and York regions.

Despite the fact Ontario's grim tally is once again rising fast - adding 2,000+ new cases of COVID-19 a day for the past five days as of March 30 - the Ford government has decided to ease its measures. Starting on Monday, March 29, outdoor fitness classes, training for team and individual sports, as well as outdoor personal training services will be permitted in Grey-Lockdown regions, subject to public health and workplace safety measures, including a maximum limit of 10 patrons. Also beginning on March 29 the province has allowed the capacity limits for weddings, funerals, and religious services, rites or ceremonies, to be adjusted to allow for the number of individuals that can maintain two metres of physical distance. Notably, this change does not apply to social gatherings associated with these services, such as receptions.

In addition, on April 12 personal care services, such as: tattoo and body art studios; barber shops; as well as hair and nail salons will be allowed to reopen by appointment only and with a limited capacity (the lesser of 25 per cent capacity or five patrons).

Responding to criticism that the provincial government is sending a mixed message to Ontarians by easing restrictions when the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths are on the rise, Premier Doug Ford said "We should all be on high alert. Absolutely high alert, but I will be frank ... people are tired. I am telling you they are tired, they're exhausted out there and they need a little bit of fresh air. But please, do it carefully. That is all we are asking."

Feeling a sense of déjà vu as I went over these numbers, I was overcome with anxiety. Although the premier is correct in saying "people are tired" of the pandemic, he seems to be ignoring the story that the numbers are telling. His excuse for lifting restrictions is flimsy at best. Suggesting that his disregard for the rising COVID-19 numbers is justified because people "need a little bit of fresh air" is, as expected, another attempt to mislead Ontarians away from his government's elitist ideology.

As we all know, we don't need to lift measures in place to protect us from the pandemic to get some "fresh air." All we need to do is take a walk through the forest, go for a bike ride, or step outside. While the Ford government tells Ontarians it is "For the People," by rushing to ease restrictions at a time when the numbers are clearly spiking, it appears that the Tories have again prioritized the short-term profits of the wealthy over the public's health and quality of life.

I hope that I am wrong. However, if the story being told by the COVID-19 numbers to-date give us any insight into the nature of the course ahead, we ought to get ready for a third wave that will be even bigger and more dangerous than the first two. We also need to wake up to the fact that along with this wave - as with every wave of the virus we welcome through our ignorance - we also create the necessity for future lockdowns.

Even if in one's mind the economy is more valuable than human life, if we rush to reopen now for the sake of filling a few pockets, we will pay for it in money and lives this summer.