

Québec Government has Lost Control of the Pandemic? Controlling COVID (and Us) Is “Mission Impossible”

There is a point where governments’ attempts to control our lives become so arbitrary and rights-infringing that they are counterproductive

By [André Pratte](#)

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This article was published in the National Post under the title Controlling COVID (and Us) Is “Mission Impossible”.

Below are relevant excerpts with a link to the complete National Post article, emphasis added. Our thanks to renowned Canadian journalist and former Senator André Pratte.

In recent days, the government of Québec has had to backtrack on some of the measures it had announced in its campaign against COVID. For instance, after insisting for weeks that people who think they may be infected get tested, Québec announced on Tuesday that PCR tests would from now on only be available for specific groups, amongst them health-care workers.

Those changes have led to very critical comments in the press. Star columnist Patrick Lagacé, in La Presse, wondered if there was a pilot on the plane. A headline in the Journal de Montréal asserted: “Quebec is playing with our nerves.” There is a sense, increasingly shared, that the provincial government has lost control of the pandemic.

While all this is happening, I am reading Why Liberalism Works, by distinguished American economist Deirdre Nansen McCloskey. Quote:

“A complicated economy far exceeds the ability of even a government-sized collection of human intellects to govern it in detail. ... Governing in great detail from the capital the trillions of plans shifting daily by the nearly 330 million individuals in the American

economy is a fool's errand ...”

I wonder if the same applies to the unprecedented attempts by governments, in Canada and elsewhere, to control their citizens' private lives in the hopes of containing the COVID-19 pandemic. Isn't there a point where such attempts are so fastidious, arbitrary and rights-infringing that they become futile, counterproductive even? More importantly, if we accept this extent of state intervention in our private lives now, what will prevent governments from doing it again to contain another crisis, real or apprehended? What if this becomes the new normal?

What if this becomes the new normal?

I am not advocating that governments lift all the restrictions that have been put in place since the beginning of the pandemic. Contrary to Ms. McCloskey, I have always been convinced, and I think that history bears that out, that there are things that only a government can do; dealing with a public health emergency is one of them.

...

if we are to draw the line between proper and excessive government intervention in our lives. As John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859:

“There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political despotism.”

...If COVID-19 is to stay amongst us for years to come, we cannot allow governments to interfere with our basic rights forever, to submit our society to those ruinous stop-and-go exercises, to try to control our lives up to minute details. At some point, we will have to learn to live with the virus. This means that governments will need to rely less on restrictive measures and more on peoples' discernment. This also means that each of us shall act as a responsible citizen, as is required in a liberal democracy.

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*Featured image: Montreal police question a woman while enforcing curfew orders on Dec. 31, 2021.
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