

Politicization of the pandemic

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From the Editor's Chair

Liberal MP from Quebec J el Lightbound broke ranks with his party this week, commenting on how the pandemic has become politicized and positive methods instead of coercive ones should be used to encourage vaccination.

He also called out the absurd labelling of the 'Freedom Convoy' as racist during a press conference on Tuesday (Feb. 8).

'[As] seen on Radio Canada, an interview with what seemed to be a very kind grandmother who demonstrated for her grandkids, she looked and sounded nothing like a white supremacist,' Lightbound remarked. 'Nor did the black, Sikh and Indigenous Canadians I saw demonstrating on my way to Parliament these last two weeks or in Quebec City this last Saturday. I have enough respect for my fellow Canadians not to engage in these easy and absurd labels.'

Lightbound prefaced this comment by saying he denounces the hideous acts and symbols that were on display by a small number of protestors at Parliament Hill, noting that, 'we must always reject these symbols passionately'. He also denounced far right groups seen at the protest, citing his own experience of threats from extremists in the past.

I personally attended and covered the 'Freedom Convoy' in Ottawa from Jan. 28 to 31 and having spent hours in the crowd, speaking with protestors, and listening to speeches, I observed no racism, hate, or prejudice.

In fact, it was quite the opposite.

What I saw was tens of thousands of Canadians coming together and spreading positivity, love, acceptance, and unity. Everyone I spoke to was in good spirits, and none of them wanted to overthrow the government as has been repeatedly suggested by mainstream media outlets and politicians.

The countless protestors I spoke to wanted a plan for a return to normal, some normalcy for their kids, the elimination of vaccine passports, and vaccine mandates in workplaces.

The main message was they want their government to adapt their COVID-19 response and learn to live with the virus, instead of vilifying those who are unvaccinated, since it has becoming increasingly apparent that COVID-19 is never fully going away ' or at least not anytime soon.

This message is similar to the one that was recently relayed by MP Lightbound on Tuesday, who has recently heard from hundreds of constituents and citizens that are for the most part vaccinated, and concerned with where the country is heading.

'I've heard from parents worried to see their kids sink into depression and slowly lose their joy of living. I've heard from pediatricians in tears telling me about their young patients' despair, anxiety, isolation, as well as the stunning increase in school dropouts they are observing. I've heard from artists [who] are on the brink of mental and financial collapse after two years, barely enough work to get by. I've heard from social workers answering suicide hotlines who are overwhelmed by the number of calls they're receiving,' said the Liberal MP.

Lightbound also commented on how in Quebec, earlier this year, kids age six to 10 who tested negative for COVID-19, had no symptoms, but were in close contact to someone who had the virus, were locked in windowless rooms for 10 days to self-isolate.

'Let that sink in,' said Lightbound. 'This was a public-health measure that had been drafted, approved and applied. I've heard from

people worried that we seem collectively to have forgotten the population's health is kind of like a pie, and Omicron is but a slice of that pie. Economic health, social health, mental health must be accounted for.?

With respect to the seemingly never-ending lockdowns across Canada, Lightbound noted that "not everyone can earn a living on a Macbook at the cottage.?"

He worries that those making the decisions at Public Health or the government level are blind to the fact that lockdowns don't impact everyone equally.

"I've heard people worried that a few might have lost sight of the quiet and discreet suffering of the many,?" Lightbound remarked.

He also commented on how some Canadians, for whatever reason, reasons we may disagree with, are not vaccinated and as a consequence lost their jobs. As a result, they've left their family and friends in Canada and moved to the United States.

Lightbound also noted the division that's been sowed between the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

"I've heard from teachers worried to see kids re-enacting in the schoolyard the kind of discrimination and segregation we see in our society between vaccinated and unvaccinated,?" said Lightbound. "I've heard from people worried to see those they care about fighting each other on this issue, tearing some families and some friends apart.?"

He said he's heard from a lot of people who wonder why just a year ago Canada was united, "in this together?," and is now more divided than ever despite being one of the most vaccinated countries in the world.

"Now these people are increasingly confused?" they hear experts like Dr. Karl Weiss, a renowned Quebec epidemiologist, say last week and I quote "that COVID-19 is here to stay, that those at risk will have to be monitored closely when symptoms appear; that we will have to protect our health-care systems; but then we will also have to live with the virus like we do with influenza; that we can't go back to lockdowns and restrictions not supported by science.?"

Further confusion is created when Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam stated last week that all existing public-health policies, including vaccine passports, need to be re-examined, and we need to have longer-term sustained approaches and capacity building, so we're not in crisis mode all the time as we fight this virus.

"[People are] confused when they see the undeniable trend around the world whereby, for instance, the World Health Organization recently recommended dropping or alleviating many border measures, including vaccine requirements, as they've proven to be ineffective in fighting the propagation of the Omicron variant,?" said Lightbound.

He also commented on how countries like Ireland, Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic, Brazil, Denmark, Spain and the U.K have dropped almost all restrictions and are much less vaccinated than Canada.

"Now while folks are hearing and seeing all of this, they're left rightfully wondering, "where the hell are we heading here in Canada?,"?" said Lightbound.

"I think there lies the frustration. They feel there is no appetite from our government to adapt so as to reflect the changing data and the changing reality of the pandemic, of the world. They're worried that measures which ought to be exceptional and limited in time are being normalized with no end in sight, like vaccine passports, mandates and requirements for travellers.?"

Lightbound added, "They're worried because they feel it is becoming harder and harder to know where public health stops and where politics begins.?"

I agree with Lightbound's comments, governments would do well to not dismiss legitimate concerns or try to label those who would

like the country to adapt its COVID-19 response.

His call on the federal government to provide a clear roadmap with measurable targets to lift restrictions within its purvey is welcomed in my books.

Lightbound said he's not alone in voicing his concerns, as there are many others who agree with him to varying degrees within the Liberal Party's ranks.

I do hope more Liberal MPs start coming together to call for an end to the division sowed throughout the pandemic, and arguably fuelled by their leader Justin Trudeau, who refuses to humanize people that are unvaccinated.

In the words of Lightbound, we need to choose positive instead of coercive methods for controlling the pandemic.

It's what we need to reunite Canadians.