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Effective leadership

EDITORIAL

IT'S PROBABLY TOO SOON to know how well it worked, but thus far we think Canada is showing the world how a federated nation should deal with a pandemic, while its neighbour to the south has been doing the opposite.

As we see it, the job of a political leader during an emergency is to listen carefully to the experts and take whatever action is required to minimize the harm to your people.

Thus far in the COVID19 pandemic, that's what we have been seeing in Canada at all levels of government, and as of yesterday the result was that we had about 2,500 active cases of COVID19 and 27 deaths, while the United States had more than 50,000 active cases and more than 700 deaths, or about two deaths per million population compared with Canada's 0.7.

Obviously, part of the reason lies in our different forms of government. In our parliamentary system, governments can act quickly, particularly if they have a majority of seats in the legislature. And even when, as is now the case, we have a minority government at Ottawa, speedy passage of legislation can take place when the opposition parties agree on the need. The Liberal government's $82-billion relief package got unanimous consent early yesterday after hours of behind-the-scenes discussions that succeeded in eliminating provisions that gave the government unprecedented taxing and spending powers without parliamentary oversight.

In the U.S., governors have as much power as Canadian premiers but in Washington the power is shared by the president and Congress, which currently has a Democrat-controlled House of Representatives, a Republican-controlled Senate and a president who never trusts experts.

The result has been almost total chaos, with nothing resembling effective leadership at the top. Seemingly preoccupied by a desire to be re-elected next November, Donald Trump initially dismissed talk of a pandemic as a ?hoax,' and as recently as this week refused to employ the Defense Procurement Act, a wartime measure that permits the federal government to order conversion of industrial output to ships, planes, tanks and armaments and could be used to supply hospitals with desperately needed ventilators, ICU beds, protective clothing and masks.

In our view, one of the few political heroes in the U.S. is New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has been holding daily press briefings during which he has repeatedly sought federal assistance, and whose plea for 30,000 ventilators resulted in the shipment by FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) of 400 of the desperately needed lifesaving devices and the promise of a few more from its 20,000-unit stockpile.

One thing no one knows is when (or whether) the COVID19 virus will subside, but most of the experts think it will take months, not weeks, for the disease to run its course and allow countries to return to something approaching normal.

But once again ignoring the experts, Donald Trump has called for U.S. churches to be packed on Easter Sunday (April 12), suggesting he will relax rules set a few days ago which recommended social distancing. Beyond that, he now is portraying the pandemic as little more than a new version of influenza and encouraging younger Americans to return to their workplaces so the economy can start recovering. Is this what real leadership looks like?

On hearing the president's remarks, senior officials of the World Health Organization said that if that happens, the U.S. might well replace Italy as the epicentre of the pandemic.

Oh yes, and by Tuesday Italy's death toll had reached 6,820, or more than double China's 3,277. And if Italy's current death rate per million population ? 118 ? were replicated in the U.S., the death toll there would be close to 35,000.

But, if COVID-19 has proven anything thus far, it's that it is terribly unpredictable. One thing is, however, for sure - the more government, meaning every government worldwide, does today, the faster we can put this nightmare ordeal behind us.