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Political aftermaths

EDITORIAL

LAST JANUARY, the political situation in North America seemed pretty well estsblished. In both Canada and the United States, the governments in power seemed fairly secure, with the Republicans almost certain to retain the presidency in November's election.

Even in Canada, the Liberal minority government seemed secure, with support on most issues coming from the New Democrats and the Conservatives needing to select a new leader in the spring.

That was, of course, before the onslaught of COVID-19, which threw a wrench into planning on both sides of the border but led to pretty sharp distinctions between how things were handled here and there.

In the U.S., President Donald Trump ignored the advice he was getting from the scientific and intelligence communities and predicted the virus would vanish before becoming much of a problem. Later, as the deaths mounted, he turned to blaming China for the pandemic and led moves to end lockdowns in hopes of seeing the U.S. economy roaring at election time. When hospitals complained of not having enough protective equipment for their doctors and nurses, the president suggested it was up to the state governors and their legislatures to fix things.

By comparison, Canada's leaders opted to cooperate, with regular communications taking place between Ottawa and the provinces and all the federal parties at least initially agreeing to have skeleton sittings of Parliament and/or virtual sessions during the pandemic.

As a result. Canada has done marginally better than the U.S. in terms of the overall death toll from COVID-19, with roughly 8,000 deaths to date, more than four-fifths of them in long-term-care facilities, while the toll south of the border soared past 110,000.

Further complicating matters was the murder by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which set off an unprecedented wave of protests on both sides of the border with demands for an end to racism and police brutality. President Trump's reaction included a threat to used the U.S. military against the protesters and a photo op holding a bible in front of a church near the White House after having protesters tear-gassed to open a path for himself.

In the circumstances, one might have expected to see a further dip in Mr. Trump's popularity, yet one poll this week showed that he had the support of 88 per cent of Republicans.

All the pandemic and racial unrest seems to have done in the U.S. is to further polarize the population, with Republican senators refusing to comment on strong criticism the President has faced from top military leaders who normally would be thought to be politically neutral.

Now, with former vice-president Joe Biden as almost certain to be the Democratic presidential candidate, it's anyone's guess as to who will win the presidency in November.

Meanwhile, it's just as difficult to predict the political COVID-19 aftermath in Canada. All we really know is that the government is facing deficits unheard of in peacetime, and already there are calls for a full return of Parliament well before next September.

Assuming that the Conservatives will have picked a new leader by then, they would likely jump at any opportunity to defeat the government and force a new federal election at which the argument would be that the Trudeau Liberals needed to be punished for mishandling the pandemic.