

Scrap ArriveCAN

by MICHAEL ZWAAGSTRA

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland thinks her government is too humble. At least that's what she said when a reporter asked her why travellers are still forced to fill out the ArriveCAN app before entering Canada.

After extolling the virtues of national humility, Freeland went on to take credit for saving 70,000 lives by enacting strict public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the tail end of her response, Freeland added, "The ArriveCAN app was one of a sweep of measures that were a part of this highly effective COVID response."

That's the type of answer we'd expect from a politician who isn't even trying to be taken seriously. I'd like to see Freeland present even a shred of evidence that the ArriveCAN app has saved a single life, never mind 70,000.

Now, if we're looking at inconveniencing 70,000 lives, the app more than fits the bill. This useless app has caused enormous stress at the border, forced travellers into pointless quarantines, and contributed to the chaotic situation at our major airports. It's also been highly effective at discouraging tourists from visiting our country.

The ArriveCAN app has been an unmitigated disaster. But there's one thing we can say about this government - it never lets an abject failure prevent it from doubling down on its mistakes.

CTV News recently reported that the federal government intends to make the ArriveCAN app permanent. According to senior government sources, the app collects lots of valuable information and the government wants to keep using it. We shouldn't be surprised by this since the natural tendency of any government is to make temporary measures permanent.

After all, income tax was initially introduced as a temporary measure. That was 105 years ago.

We recently saw yet another very good reason to scrap the ArriveCAN app. The Rogers network went down for an entire day, leaving millions of Canadians without cellphone service. Unsurprisingly, this meant that many Canadians couldn't access or fill in the ArriveCAN app. Canada Border Services Agency had no choice but to announce that travellers could submit their documentation via paper forms during the outage.

So ArriveCAN really isn't that essential after all. The network outage reminded us that it's entirely possible to safely cross the border without using an app. Too bad this government doesn't care about common sense.

Ironically, this isn't the only government app that turned out to be completely useless. Remember the COVID Alert app? It launched two years ago with great fanfare and was supposed to make contact tracing simpler.

However, COVID Alert turned out to be a colossal bust. Only a small fraction of Canadians bothered to download the app, and an even smaller fraction made use of it. The total cost of this app was nearly \$20 million - \$3.5 million to develop and maintain it and \$15.9 million to advertise it. I think we can call that a failure.

Last month, the federal government announced it was discontinuing the COVID Alert app. That must have been a tough announcement to make. After all, think of all the valuable information they won't be able to collect anymore. At least they still have the ArriveCAN app for that.

Freeland believes that national humility is a virtue. However, humility is only a virtue when one is modest about success. There's nothing virtuous about quietly keeping a policy in place that, by all objective measurements, is an abject failure.

Of course, it's even less virtuous to boast about your failures. Only narcissists do that.