Renewing the Social Contract

Earlier this fall I read an article about the Danish response to the COVID-19 pandemic entitled "No masks, no distancing: Schools in Denmark defy COVID-19 - with success so far." The article outlined how Denmark re-opened schools in August in as normal a fashion as possible and how, at least as of the time the article was published, they had not suffered a consequent spike in Coronavirus cases.

What stayed with me from the article was a sentence which attributed the relative success of the Scandinavian countries in navigating the pandemic to their robust social contract.

What is the social contract? Stripped to its essence, it is the agreement whereby the people consent to give up some of their individual liberties in exchange for the order and security provided by their government.

Like all contracts, the social contract defines a relationship, which, like all relationships, is built on trust. In order for the relationship to work, the people need to trust their government to govern responsibly, while the government needs to trust the people to behave responsibly in return.

When both parties can trust one another in this way, liberty can flourish. As perhaps first expressed by the Chinese sage Lao Tzu over two thousand years ago and most memorably expressed by the American poet Henry David Thoreau, "the best government is that which governs least."

However, when neither party trusts the other, the relationship between the ruled and their rulers frays. As it frays, liberty dissolves in an acid environment of both greater regulation and enforcement on the part of government and reflexive disobedience and even defiance on the part of the people. Both tendencies have been on full display during the recent fracas sparked by the Adamson BBQ restaurant's decision to remain open for business in defiance of renewed lockdown orders in Toronto.

While overall the level of trust and cooperation between Canadians and their governments through the pandemic has been high, the fact that tightened restrictions in the face of rising case numbers are being challenged by people who question even relatively unobtrusive measures such as mask-wearing is troubling. As much as we may wish it were otherwise, contagious diseases can only be contained if everyone works together under the direction of trusted leaders.

Going forward, then, if we are to beat the pandemic and meet future crises effectively as a nation, we need to restore trust and the social contract. How can this be done?

As restoring trust in any relationship hinges on the actions of the more powerful party, it is up to governments to take the initiative. As a first step, they need to commit themselves to discovering and reporting the facts of the pandemic without resorting to censorship. Nothing makes people suspect that governments are hiding something more than censorship (which, in our time, often takes the form of deplatforming).

As a next step, governments must commit to contextualizing the facts so that intelligent, measured pandemic responses are possible. For instance, the rising numbers of reported

COVID-19 cases are at first glance very alarming. However, this alarm subsides when one considers that many more people are being tested now than in the spring. In a similar vein, while every death even partly attributable to COVID-19 is a tragedy, a tighter focus on ICU hospitalizations and deaths and the demographic characteristics of those most at risk can help us craft responses that best protect the vulnerable while simultaneously minimizing the economic and social costs (including isolation and its associated mental health effects) of blunt measures such as lockdowns.

Governments also need to take responsibility for errors made in the early stages of the pandemic, and commit to doing better in the future. For instance, while China locked down the city of Wuhan on January 23rd, travellers arriving from China (and from abroad in general) were not required to quarantine when they entered Canada until the end of March. If we had closed our borders even by mid-February (by which time the seriousness of the virus was apparent), thousands of lives could have been saved. Similarly, the failure to adequately protect the residents of long-term care facilities in March and April needs to be acknowledged and corrected.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, governments need to take responsibility for, and commit to reversing, the poor decisions made in the years leading up to the pandemic which made all of us, but most especially the poor and aged, vulnerable. Why has Canada's ability to manufacture essential medicines and medical supplies been allowed to atrophy? Why were staff in long-term care homes often working part-time in two or three locations? Why have business and household debt levels risen (and savings fallen) to the point where people are facing bankruptcy after only a few months of reduced income?

Clearly, we need to stop relying on global markets and increased borrowing (by governments, corporations and households) to fuel economic growth. Going forward, we need to promote domestic manufacturing, establish job and income protections for low-wage workers, and impose strict limits on bank lending for property in order to keep housing costs and commercial rents affordable.

Crises expose our weaknesses and exacerbate pre-existing divisions. While they can drive a society to fracture, they can also cause nations to reinforce the social contract. Just as the crises of the Great Depression and WWII forged the social solidarity that supported the "30 Golden Years" of the postwar period, so too may this crisis inspire us to make our societies more fair, more transparent and hence more resilient so that we may successfully face the challenges which surely await us in the years to come.

https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/denmark-schools-covid-19-pandemic-1.5720508?fbclid=IwAR1gm93e8i3ZOr2HF-EQASEpngHHiOS_QrWOGekuIrmm9SZy3iDPt8cQ32