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## Living Through COVID, Looking Beyond COVID: The Political View

John Milloy<sup>1</sup>

“Our heroes wear scrubs.”

**A**s our country works its way through the pandemic, there are probably few Canadians unfamiliar with that slogan. When our world was confronted with a devastating pandemic it was the medical community that stepped up to keep us safe - doctors, nurses, personal support workers and a multitude of other health professionals who put their own health at risk to care for us.

A hospital in my community sold lawn signs with the slogan as a fundraising initiative. As my family went for innumerable lockdown walks (complete with a new pandemic puppy), we encountered them everywhere. My emergency doctor wife seemed particularly heartened by their presence. I believe that there is another group that deserves credit for helping to manage the pandemic – our politicians.

Although elected officials are rarely the subject of praise, put yourself in their shoes for a moment. With little warning, they had to scramble to respond to a crisis that literally seemed to change by the hour. How to respond to an avalanche of information, much of it contradictory, and not sow panic? How to balance safety and the need to keep the economy going? How to put up with the deluge of criticism that seemed to follow each and every decision?

Yes, I think our politicians might qualify as heroes (although I doubt a yard sign with that slogan would sell particularly well). As someone who spent more than a decade in elected office and before that advised a series of high-ranking politicians, including the Prime Minister, I have had great sympathy for them during the pandemic. They are undoubtedly exhausted, feeling a little beaten-up and unsure what comes next.

Indeed, the “what comes next question” is probably at the top of their minds. The idea that “COVID changed everything” is another common sentiment that demands a response. Although there were positive stories about us all looking out for each other, there were also many negative stories about the way that COVID-19 shone a spotlight on the fault lines within our society. Canada, we learned, is not as just and caring a society as often advertised.

The pandemic seemed to reveal two Canadas, one full of middle-class individuals who continued to receive a steady paycheque and faced only minor inconveniences during the lockdown. Then there were those who truly suffered. The front-line workers in grocery stores, coffee shops and restaurants who put their health at risk for low wages and few benefits. People in precarious work who lost their jobs. The homeless who couldn’t “go home and stay home.” The elderly, many of whom often face neglect and mistreatment in long-term care homes and other facilities.

Another set of issues also rose to the surface. Whether reflecting a renewed sense of social justice or a frustrated population responding to something that had been simmering below the surface for a while, other types of inequality gained prominence. The tragic death

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of George Floyd brought thousands to the streets to protest racism within Canada. The struggles of our Indigenous Peoples also received wide attention. At first it was tied to inadequate health care and poor living conditions within many Indigenous Communities. More recently, the tragic discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves at the site of several of Canada's Residential Schools brought a sense of shock and horror to many Canadians. Once again, our nation came face to face with the tragedy of these church-run institutions designed to assimilate young Indigenous people in settings that were often the scene of abuse and mistreatment.

This is obviously only a partial list of the ills exposed by COVID-19. You could certainly add other ongoing challenges to the catalogue of issues facing our world including climate change or the plight of the Global South, scrambling to deal with the pandemic.

Once again, it is difficult not to feel sorry for our politicians. Not only is their post-pandemic "to do list" bursting at the seams but the population has grown increasingly impatient. "Never again," has become the battle cry of many social justice activists and our political leaders will need to deliver meaningful change if they want to keep their jobs.

It would be easy to end the story here. To point out that although our politicians will have to work hard over the next few years, the moment has come. The future of politics in Canada is clear – a clash between good and evil where good is bound to prevail as the public finally demands transformative change. We should feel some sympathy for the busy lives that our politicians are about to face, but with our support they will succeed.

There is a problem with that story – our world in general and our political system specifically doesn't work that way. The situation faced by Canada as it emerges from COVID-19 is much more complicated and nuanced, and that is why we should have even more sympathy for those we elect to represent us.

Let's start with the basics. There are no perfect policies. Despite the self-righteous way that many present their solutions for all that ails us, their prescriptions for change will undoubtedly fall short. It is not a cliché to say that we are a broken world run by broken people and most decisions are not only imperfect, but they demand serious trade-offs which the public has a difficult time acknowledging or accepting.

There will be other realities at play in our post-pandemic world. As well as shining a light on injustices within our society, the pandemic also revealed something else – a growing inability by governments to do their jobs. Many Canadians are rightly asking why we were so caught off guard by COVID-19. Why was our planning so poor? Why were proper protocols, procedures and equipment not at the ready? Beyond the pandemic itself, why were many long-term care facilities allowed to operate so poorly? Where were the inspectors? Why do our schools not have proper ventilation? Why are our classrooms crowded? The list goes on.

Deep down we all know the answers to those questions. Voters don't respond to governments that are simply good managers. Instead, we want to hear about grand policies and bold visions, even though they usually get abandoned once the election is over. Be honest, when is the last time you asked a political candidate looking for your vote what they are going to do about ensuring that we have a healthy supply of personal protective equipment in case of an emergency?

One of the lessons of the pandemic is that politicians are going to have to focus more on making sure that our systems are working and that the public service is doing their jobs – not exactly subjects that bring the crowds to the streets. There is another reality that

politicians will have to deal with post-pandemic – we are broke. Governments at all levels have borrowed amounts of money that are so staggering few can wrap their heads around it. It doesn't matter where on the political spectrum you find yourself; it has to stop. No government can continue borrowing at that level without ultimately destroying the economy.

Put those two factors together – the need to focus on delivering government services more effectively and the lack of resources - and the type of rapid, transformative change that many have been hoping for starts to feel out of reach. That doesn't mean change is impossible, but our politicians are going to have to make difficult choices. They are going to have to identify priorities.

When it comes to politics in Canada, we hardly ever talk about priorities – yet they are the heart and soul of governing. In fact, the first thing that strikes you when you get into office as a politician is how little you can realistically hope to achieve. Determining which battles to pick is perhaps the most significant decision that an elected politician can make.

The public doesn't like to hear that kind of talk. We want our politicians to do it all and quickly. Not only do we avoid any discussion of which areas the government should focus on but even if we did talk about them, could we agree? Our society is polarized and divided. We speak past each other, condemn each other and show little interest in finding any common ground – not an ideal recipe for meaningful dialogue and collective decision making.

My intention in painting this somewhat bleak picture of political life post-COVID-19 is not to cause despair. Its purpose is twofold. First, to help people understand the true nature of the struggles being faced by those we elect. The second is to prompt all of us, including people of faith, to reflect on how we can help them in our post-pandemic brave new world.

People of faith have a very crucial role to play in supporting those we elect. My Christian faith may have a strong personal element, but it also focuses on the “other.” If we truly believe that we have a responsibility for our neighbours, then our faith automatically has a public dimension. As a result, Christians can't avoid being involved in politics – what Christian Theologian Luke Bretherton defines as “a way of solving shared problems and negotiating a common life between friends, strangers and enemies.”<sup>2</sup>

So how can our Christian faith contribute to negotiating this common life as we emerge from the pandemic? We should never forget the obvious; we need to pray for our political leaders. We also need to see them as part of God's creation, respect them and show them goodwill – even those we disagree with. This is no small demand. We live in a society that often unfairly dismisses those in elected life as charlatans that are “in it for themselves.” Not only is this unfair but it does nothing to support those doing a difficult job.

We need to be patient with our politicians. Progress will take time and there will be many mistakes along the way. Christians should be familiar with patience. The story of our personal as well as our collective faith journey is one of “two steps forward and one back.” Scripture is full of examples of Christ's followers enthusiastically trying to follow God's path and falling flat on their face. Being human is about recognizing that progress doesn't follow a straight path.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Bretherton, “Meet this book: Christ and the common life,” *The Eerdmans Blog* (blog), May 13, 2019. <https://eerdword.com/2019/05/13/meet-this-book-christ-and-the-common-life>

We also need to join our political leaders. People of faith need to get involved, run for office or support those brave enough to put their names on a ballot. Advocate for a cause either in partnership with others from your faith tradition or through ecumenical or interfaith groups. Resist the temptation to limit your fight for social justice to complaining loudly to friends, liking a particularly poignant tweet or simply waiting for someone else to “do something.”

Christians also need to recognize that aspect of our faith that calls on us to fight polarization and division. Those concerned with social justice like to focus on the prophetic tradition of our faith. We identify with those voices unafraid to stand on the fringes of society and call out the sinful ways of the mainstream culture.

There are certainly times to call out the world but much more frequently there are times to build bridges and see the humanity in “the other.” Ours is a faith of humility. Claiming that we have all the answers, and that the rest of the world is “wrong” or “evil” is not living up to Christ’s call. Jesus was never afraid to interact with those seen as a threat to the Jewish community – tax collectors, Roman Centurions or even Samaritans. Not only was his love unconditional but he saw the value in every human being.

In her recent book on Christian Ethics, Ellen Ott Marshall focuses on the relationship between societal conflict and the concept of *imago Dei* – our call to recognize that others are made in the image of God. Marshall argues that when it comes to discussing social justice, we face a paradox. On the one hand we identify with a victim as one of God’s creations and become outraged. At the same moment, we realize that the oppressor is also made in the image of God. As Marshall concludes:

When taken seriously, the image of God muddies our lives, our politics, and our speech. It does not allow us to divide the world neatly between good guys and bad guys. It binds us to people from who we might prefer to get away. If one takes the *imago Dei* seriously, one cannot dismiss anyone as unworthy of care or beyond redemption. In this sense, the *imago Dei* is a Christian’s greatest affirmation and most challenging truth.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of our struggles to shape society post-COVID-19, Marshall’s observation is difficult to accept. We all think we know the type of change that we want, and we want it now – no questions asked. Meaningful change, however, will only come by building a relationship and working with those who approach the world from a different perspective. It may take longer. It may result in a society different than the one we first hoped for, but it will be one built upon a much more solid foundation.

Even if we are willing to engage with others, even those we dislike, what can Christianity and other faith traditions offer our efforts to build a better post-pandemic common life?

There are two sides to that question – a theological and a practical. From a theological perspective, faith helps us focus on a different set of priorities than our consumer driven, “what’s in it for me,” culture. In a world that is struggling to make sense of itself after the experience of a pandemic, faith offers teaching and wisdom often developed over hundreds or even thousands of years.

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall, Ellen Ott, *Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2018) pg. 56

Christianity turns the world upside down by replacing those we usually place at the centre of the conversation – the rich, the powerful and the strong – with the poor and the marginalized. That change of perspective alone leads to a set of public policy priorities very different from those we follow today. It helps us focus on addressing economic injustice, racism and discrimination. It places reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples front and centre.

Religious faith also transcends borders. One of the most disturbing aspects of the pandemic has been our tendency as a nation to turn inwards even more. We scramble to hoard vaccines and medical equipment from other countries. We ignore the suffering of so many in other parts of the world as we focus on our own misfortunes. Faith reminds us that the neighbour we are called upon to love may live next door but may also live thousands of miles away.

COVID-19 has so dominated our political discourse that our planet's existential crisis of climate change has been pushed out of view. Christians are called upon to be stewards of creation. God has entrusted us with the planet and our faith reminds us of this sacred responsibility.

Finally, to echo what was said earlier, faith demands that we build bridges. It challenges us to break down the deep polarization that exists in Canada and find ways to work together. As we witness numerous politicians stepping down from office due to the hyper-partisan nature of our political system, we need to find a better path forward and make collaboration a priority. All of us, for example, were heartened by the degree of cross-party cooperation at the beginning of the pandemic. We need to think through how to recapture that spirit when it comes to rebuilding our society.

These are the important messages that flow from Christian and other faith traditions. But there is a more practical side to this discussion. People of faith are an important constituency in Canada. Millions of Canadians attend places of worship each week and although millions more may not identify with a particular tradition, they consider themselves spiritual and believe in a transcendent truth or power.

Together we have a role to play in shaping our world post-COVID-19. We can help shape the priorities of our elected officials as they struggle to address the long list of challenges facing our nation and world. It may require us putting aside our selfish interests for lower taxes, fewer regulations and enhanced funding for services that we personally enjoy. It may mean making your voice heard a little more loudly in the public square. But it can make a difference.

As a society we like to hate politicians and politics. Their antics and fierce partisanship may make us cringe. In the end, however, they are a reflection of us. They respond to our demands and their actions and policies tend to be aimed at gaining our support. If we want to blame anyone for the shortcomings in our political system, we need to go no further than the mirror.

As the pandemic begins to subside, we have a moment. It may not be as straightforward as it initially seemed, but it is still an opportunity to change our world for the better. Politics is not simply about those figures we see on TV who talk too much and never miss an opportunity to belittle their opponent. Politics is about all of us and all of us have a responsibility to be involved. Let the end of COVID-19 serve as a call to Christians and all people of faith to recognize the important role that they are called to play in helping us negotiate a more just common life together.