

Woodward revelations: Canada's political elite implicated in Trump's suppression of COVID-19 threat

By Omar Ali and Roger Jordan
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The revelations from *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward documenting how US President Donald Trump lied to the American people about the danger posed by COVID-19 have also served to further expose the callous and calamitous response of Canada's ruling elite to the pandemic.

Trump was informed by his National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien on January 28 that the coronavirus was the greatest national security challenge of his presidency to date. This was only one of a series of high-level briefings in which the gravity of the novel-coronavirus threat was repeatedly brought to Trump's attention.

Then, on February 7, Trump told Woodward, in an exchange captured on tape, that Chinese President Xi Jinping had informed him the disease is transmitted through the air and could have a fatality rate of 5 percent. Trump would later tell Woodward that he nonetheless continued to "downplay" COVID-19 because he did not want to trigger a "panic," i.e. a collapse of Wall Street and the financial markets. In this criminal enterprise, which has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the Democratic Party leadership is complicit, since they were provided with essentially the same intelligence in security briefings, yet also did nothing to alert the public.

Canada is Washington's closest military-security partner, bound to the Pentagon and US intelligence and Homeland Security agencies through a vast web of alliances and networks, including NATO, NORAD, and the Five Eyes. Given the breadth of this partnership, which politicians from all major parties never tire of extolling when the issue is supporting war and intrigue abroad or increasing military spending, it is inconceivable that Canada's national-security apparatus and Liberal government were not privy to the intelligence warnings received by Trump and the Democrats in January and early February.

Moreover, the only plausible explanation for Canadian authorities' failure to alert the public and immediately initiate large-scale preventive measures is that they were motivated by the same mercenary concerns—that is class interests—as the US political establishment. They didn't want to roil the financial markets or otherwise impede big business profit-making; with

the possible added motivation on Ottawa's part of not wanting to do anything that would rile Trump and damage relations with Washington.

Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has admitted that the military's medical intelligence unit was gathering information on the new virus and its impact in China for several weeks before it provided him with a briefing in mid-January. The information contained in this briefing was subsequently shared widely across the government.

However, the government's Incident Response Group did not meet to discuss the coronavirus until January 27. One day later, Health Minister Patty Hajdu responded to a question on whether the federal government would provide additional resources to the provinces to strengthen their health care systems by saying, "I think it's very premature to say that there will be additional resources needed at the hospital level. Every indication is that we will not at this point in time."

The first handful of Canadian COVID-19 cases were reported that same week, and on January 28 the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that transmission was "high at the global level," indicating that community transmission was already underway in many countries. Three days later, the WHO declared a global health emergency.

Yet during the next five weeks, the Trudeau government failed to take substantive action, such as procuring increased resources, informing the public of the scope of the threat and its plans to halt the virus' spread, or instituting distancing guidelines. Not until March 10, more than two months after first learning about the virus, did the Trudeau Liberal government even write the provinces to inquire about their stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical medical supplies. Vital time that could have been used to prepare a health care system already buckling due to decades of budget cuts and the privatization of much of senior care was thus squandered.

In Ontario, the hard-right government of Doug Ford also systematically downplayed the pandemic. On March 8, the provincial Ministry of Health declared that the risk to Ontarians remained low and Ford advised Ontarians to go out and enjoy

the spring break holiday. By this point, hospitals were already struggling with an influx of patients. After efforts at quietly lobbying the government to take drastic steps fell on deaf ears, the Ontario Hospital Association wrote a petition demanding the premier declare a state of emergency.

The intervening months have brought to light documents underscoring how the federal government ignored warnings and failed to undertake even the most basic preparatory measures in February. Documents obtained by public broadcaster CBC indicate that government officials were warning of looming shortages of PPE in the National Emergency Stockpile (NESS) in early February. In an internal presentation on February 13, the Public Health Agency of Canada was reporting that the federal stockpile contained only “a modest supply of personal protective equipment including surgical masks, respirators, gloves, gowns and coveralls,” and warned that global supplies would soon dwindle in the face of an enormous spike in demand.

Unless the government moved quickly to acquire these products, argued officials, lives of healthcare workers across the country would be in jeopardy once they were called upon to treat those stricken with the coronavirus. Yet, according to the CBC report, all the contracts the government awarded for PPE in the ensuing days totaled less than \$300,000.

The first orders for significant additional supplies of PPE and ventilators were issued only on March 14, at which point the crisis was already in full swing and much of the country was under lockdown. The procurement of N95 masks was made even more difficult due to the fact that the government had a contract with just one lab in the United States to validate them.

The lack of PPE has been a major factor in the spread of the virus, contributing to the deaths of both patients and health care workers. In July, Statistics Canada reported that frontline health care workers had accounted for more than 21 percent of all COVID-19 cases nationwide.

As of yesterday, Canada has recorded over 139,000 infections and 9,188 deaths, the vast majority of which occurred among long-term care residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

The government’s dilatory and negligent response to what the WHO publicly and Canada’s principal intelligence partner privately were warning was a colossal public health emergency contrasts sharply with the official response to the pandemic’s economic impact on investors and big business. No sooner did the pandemic cause financial markets to quake and force provincial governments across the country to belatedly announce lockdown measures than the Trudeau government and Bank of Canada intervened with a massive bailout for investors, the banks and corporate Canada.

Like Trump and the Democrats in the United States, the Liberal government, Canada central bank and other state agencies came to the rescue of the financial elite, funneling \$650 billion into their coffers by the end of March. This

massive heist of public funds was aided and abetted by the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy. They remained silent about the enormous transfer of wealth to the capitalist elite, while lauding the Trudeau government for providing a meager \$2,000 a month through the makeshift and soon to be terminated Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to the millions of workers who lost their jobs and income.

In keeping with their role as corporatist allies of the Liberal government and big business, the unions have supported the back-to-work campaign, including the drive to reopen the schools so parents can be forced back on the job amid the pandemic. The unions have opposed job action against what they concede are unsafe conditions, on the grounds such action would be “illegal” (see: “Ontario teachers union leader emphatically opposes job action to stop reckless school reopening”).

The Canadian media’s coverage of the Woodward revelations and how they implicate the Trudeau government and Canada’s lavishly funded military-security apparatus in a conspiracy to conceal the threat posed by COVID-19 has been extremely muted.

One of the few reports in a major media outlet to even suggest that Woodward’s revelations and the intimate Canada-US security-intelligence partnerships raise the questions “what did the federal government know” about the developing COVID-19 pandemic “and when?” was a CBC article published Monday. It was entitled “Woodward’s Trump revelations raise questions about Canada’s response to COVID-19.”

However, the article is largely devoted to promoting unconvincing claims that Ottawa would not have had access to the same intelligence as Trump. Its main criticism of the Trudeau government is not that it deliberately downplayed the threat posed by the pandemic in league with the US president and political establishment, but that it relied too heavily on information from China and the World Health Organization during January and February. This echoes the bellicose, geopolitically-motivated campaign spearheaded by the Conservative Official Opposition, the *National Post*, *Toronto Sun*, and other right-wing outlets to blame China for the pandemic, and attribute the Liberal government’s ruinous response to the pandemic to its supposed pandering to Beijing.

The CBC and other media outlets have conveniently blacked out the fact that Trump was briefed on February 7 by Chinese President Xi about the seriousness of the disease, after which he delivered his grim assessment privately to Woodward.

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