

# BC SOLUTIONS

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JUSTICE

STATUS QUO

## Lessons for a just recovery from COVID-19

BY SHANNON DAUB

The coronavirus pandemic has crystalized something that as progressives we have long known and asserted: that we are in this together. That our ability not only to weather crises, but to thrive in “normal” times, depends on how well we look after each other—through social solidarity and mutual aid, and through collective action via our governments and public sector.

From the start of the pandemic, we at the CCPA have been calling for government responses that are bold, courageous and forward-looking—during the emergency phase, and as we look towards recovery and longer-term rebuilding.

Seemingly overnight, political leaders across the spectrum abandoned their obsession with austerity (largely, at least for now), in order to keep us safe and to meet people’s basic needs. Measures that would be unthinkable a few months ago—border closures, school closures, mass movement of workplaces to virtual operation—have been taken in order to contain the virus. We should be equally brave when it comes to economic and social measures throughout the recovery and rebuilding to come. →

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There's a famous quote from Milton Friedman—yes, the father of neoliberalism—that's been on many people's minds during the crisis:

*Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.*

When we went into this crisis, it is progressives who've had the most to offer—our ideas were waiting at the ready to be taken up. That's because we have long been focused on collective solutions and mobilizing governments to respond to major societal problems—from poverty to climate change.

The right, in contrast, was relatively quiet during the early stages of the pandemic, at least here in Canada—because, at best, it has little to offer. The right spent decades arguing for individual “solutions,” and for governments to get out of the way of private interests—the very policies of austerity that this crisis has exposed as bankrupt.

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Instead, over recent months we've seen science, public health evidence and collective wellbeing drive policy making and our societal response to the crisis, imperfect as it may be on a number of fronts (such as the ongoing gaps in the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, or CERB). But we think this is how our priorities should be organized all of the time. Not just in a crisis.

At worst, as we've been seeing in the US (and alarmingly to some degree in Canada too), the right has defaulted to the same profound mistrust of science and public health that is at the heart of the climate denial movement. A fatal error that led to the denial of medical and epidemiological evidence about the coronavirus by US President Donald Trump and various far-right state governors at a terrible and growing cost.

At the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, we've spent the last few decades debunking and challenging the ideology of neoliberalism and its wrongheaded agenda of tax cuts, the hollowing out of public services, privatization and deregulation. It's been a strange experience to witness neoliberalism become pretty much irrelevant overnight. Suddenly the things we advocated for years are not only possible, but becoming the new

common sense. From workplace rights to seniors' care to beliefs about government spending and debt, the terms of debate have fundamentally shifted.

One of the things that makes social change efforts difficult is the sense people have that the major problems we face—like poverty, inequality, inadequate and fragmented seniors care, climate change—are intractable. That they are too big and complex to really tackle effectively. In large part, that's because governments claim to be concerned about these problems, but then take only small incremental actions, lacking the political will to go further or get to the root causes. We've seen some reversal of that trend over the past three years in BC, thankfully. But suddenly now, despite all the years of austerity and its impacts on the public sector, the public is seeing that governments are in fact very much capable of acting remarkably quickly and effectively, on a massive scale. That the big ship, so to speak, can be turned on a dime after all.

This sudden change is powerful evidence for all of us as citizens, and for movements that want to see this kind of courage in “normal” times too—because we know there's nothing just, equitable or sustainable about the “normal” we were living in before the crisis, and our goal should certainly not be to go back.

I don't mean to suggest that progressive ideas and solutions will automatically be taken up, during or after the pandemic. Far from it. We know that private interests were seeking to take advantage of the crisis from early on—as we've seen for example with the lobbying efforts of big oil, which nearly managed to secure a massive corporate bailout from the federal government practically on day one of the crisis. And within a few weeks of the major economic support programs announced federally and here in BC, we started to hear the drumbeat of austerity once again as corporate-backed think tanks and business groups make the false claim that the bill will soon come due for the debt being accumulated now. And we know exactly where that narrow, self-interested thinking leads.

Nevertheless, a time of great change is unfolding, one way or another. Our task is to ensure we bend it towards a new social contract, and towards a watershed moment in how we deal with societal crises now and in the future. At the CCPA, we've thrown ourselves at this challenge with everything we have—and are so glad to have you with us in this fight.

*Shannon Daub is the Director of the CCPA-BC Office and Co-Director of the Corporate Mapping Project.*

The CCPA-BC has been called on like never before over the last few months. We hope you get a flavour of what we've been up to from this issue of *BC Solutions Magazine*—and take a look at page 11 for a full listing of our latest blog posts.

# Excess profits tax needed to prevent profiteering amid COVID-19

BY ALEX HEMINGWAY

People and businesses are hurting as large parts of the economy have shut down due to COVID-19. A subset of businesses, however, will see a spike in profits, including in big tech, e-commerce and logistics, and cleaning products as well as vendors of scarce goods who engage in price gouging. But no one should make windfall profits from a crisis causing so much suffering, particularly when billions in public dollars are flowing to keep businesses afloat.

To underscore this, two leading economists in the United States are calling for an excess profits tax of the type previously imposed during World War I and II in countries including Canada, the US and Britain.

A wartime-style excess profits tax would help prevent profiteering amid COVID-19, discourage abuse of government support programs for business, tamp down on price gouging and raise public revenues from large, profitable corporations that are booming during the crisis.

Canada should move to implement an excess profit tax now.

To understand how an excess profits tax works, it's key to also understand how the ordinary corporate income tax works. Corporate income tax is applied only to a company's profits, not its total revenues. So businesses that are losing money or merely breaking even pay no corporate income tax even in ordinary times, and companies in this situation certainly wouldn't pay an excess profits tax.

No business or individual accrues profits or wealth on their own, but only with the help of workers and the critical public investments that make our society and economy tick. All of us who create this wealth should share in it.

Under an excess profits tax, companies making extraordinary profits during a war or crisis pay a steep corporate income tax rate on profits above a set "normal" rate of return. A typical approach to calculate the normal rate of return might exempt profits using an average over recent years. For example, Canada's WWII-era excess profits tax exempted "normal" profits taken as an average between 1936 and 1939 and applied a tax rate of 100 per cent to the rest (with a 20 per cent post-war tax credit).

In the context of Canada's wage subsidy program for business, an additional but complementary policy would be a steep tax on any corporate profits for businesses receiving the subsidy. The federal wage subsidy is an important program to help



protect workers' incomes and employment, but businesses should not be profiting from these public funds. As currently set out, large and profitable corporations facing temporary revenue declines may be able to do just that.

How might this happen? In businesses where payrolls are a large portion of expenses, a public subsidy of 75 per cent or more of payroll costs could end up more than offsetting a drop in revenue of 15 or 30 per cent (the wage subsidy program's proposed eligibility thresholds for March and April, respectively), leaving the difference as profit. Another scenario could involve big banks becoming eligible for the subsidy in part because their revenues temporarily decline when they defer some mortgage payments.

No business or individual accrues profits or wealth on their own, but only with the help of workers and the critical public investments that make our society and economy tick. All of us who create this wealth should share in it. Taxing excess corporate profits is one good way to ensure that, as Franklin D. Roosevelt put it when enacting such a policy, "a few do not gain from the sacrifices of the many."

*Alex Hemingway is an economist and the Public Finance Analyst at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC Office.*

# BC's relief measures for people on income assistance are welcome but more is needed

BY IGLIKA IVANOVA & VIVECA ELLIS

On April 2, the BC government announced emergency financial support for some of the most vulnerable British Columbians: an extra \$300 per month for people receiving income and disability assistance and some very low income seniors, for three months.



With this welcome change, BC became the second Canadian province to extend COVID-19 financial relief measures to people on income and disability assistance, after Nova Scotia's much smaller \$50 per month supplement. And fortunately the \$300-per-month emergency crisis supplement is automatic, not requiring a special application.

A bit of background: income and disability assistance, also referred to as welfare, are the programs of last resort for people who find themselves without work, or who are unable to work because of a disability, illness or caregiving responsibilities. Income assistance falls under provincial jurisdiction, unlike employment insurance (EI) which is a federal program. In BC, there are two streams of benefits: temporary income assistance (for people who are considered employable) and disability assistance. Both are extremely difficult to access, with asset limits that require people to exhaust virtually all their savings before they can even apply. In nearly all provinces, income and disability rates leave recipients with incomes far below the poverty line.

/// The Canada Emergency Relief Benefit points to a current standard that Canadians consider the bare minimum needed to live on: \$2,000 per month. Why are people on provincial income and disability assistance forced to live on much less?

Also, in BC those on income assistance who qualify for the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB)—a small group who have been able to earn some income through paid work in 2019—or regular EI will not have that money clawed back. An estimated 10,000 BC households with disabilities and 1,000 households on temporary assistance will qualify—and for them it means they will be able to escape poverty for a few months.

The pre-COVID-19 monthly assistance rate for a single person considered employable was \$760 and \$1,183 for people with disabilities who face extra costs. For these people a \$300 crisis supplement represents a very significant increase. However, even with this temporary increase, the welfare income for a single person only amounts to half of the poverty line (as measured by

Statistics Canada's Market Basket Measure). The monthly poverty line for 2018 is around \$2,000 per month for a single person in large BC cities with populations over 100,000 (and between \$1,730 and \$1,785 for smaller towns and rural areas).

We know these pitifully low welfare rates have forced many to live in sub-standard housing or to become homeless if they're unable to get a subsidized housing unit (and waitlists for those are long).

In the past we have called on the Province to immediately and permanently raise welfare rates to at least 75 per cent of the poverty line, and for a road map to bring welfare rates the rest of the way up to the poverty line. The Canada Emergency Relief Benefit points to a current standard that Canadians consider the bare minimum needed to live on: \$2,000 per month, which is remarkably close to the 2018 MBM for urban areas. Why are people on provincial income and disability assistance forced to live on much less?

As it stands, the income assistance application process is burdensome with barriers that discourage applications or delay support. While some very positive changes to several of these rules were made in BC Budget 2019, the asset limits remain low for those on temporary assistance, forcing people to exhaust most of their savings before receiving assistance even for a month or two.

As we reassess social programs coming out of this crisis we should maintain the increases to income assistance with a goal of getting rates up to the poverty line. We should also overhaul the application process, put an end to unfair clawbacks and consider higher asset limits to ensure that all British Columbians who find themselves in need can receive income support without being forced into even deeper financial insecurity.

This crisis has forced us to look closely at the inequities in our society, and provincial responses aimed at addressing them in the short term should be carried forward in the long term.

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# Blockades aren't the crisis. It's the crumbling legitimacy of Canada's democracy.

BY MATTHEW NORRIS

The Indigenous re-occupation of Wet'suwet'en land and nationwide solidarity actions earlier this year sparked debate and deliberation. The debate is defining—and threatening—Canada's future.

We heard Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's address to the House of Commons and Opposition Leader Andrew Scheer's response. Neither one presented a path forward that would ease tensions and address the root causes. Trudeau asked for patience, co-operation and deliberation, while Scheer demanded the enforcement of the rule of law and the prioritization of our national economy.

Canada's colonial history and democratic institutions are founded on this constructed divide between Indigenous peoples and the rest, which still exists today. It shows up most visibly when the interests of the status quo come into conflict with the interests of Indigenous peoples. This story has played out time and time again. And it's revealed in the justice system.

As a result of this societal divide, Indigenous peoples have been denied the right to determine what's best for them and their communities. They have been denied their inherent and treaty rights.

Our democratic institutions were not designed to address these social schisms, and Indigenous peoples have been denied the ability to participate in these institutions in a fair manner.

The actions and protests throughout Canadian history are a direct result of this failure to address these schisms. Because some voices are favoured over others, Indigenous peoples (land defenders) and their supporters no longer perceive our representative institutions as legitimate.

When our governments are viewed as illegitimate, so are their processes, decisions and proposed projects. This lack of trust in our government should be of national concern. But the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader's statements showed no recognition of the extent of racism Indigenous people face, and no acknowledgement that the legitimacy of our institutions are in question.

The first way to address this legitimacy crisis is by genuinely implementing the United Nations Declaration the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We can arrive at inclusive solutions that will rebuild broken relationships and start to provide renewed legitimacy to our democratic institutions. It is critical that they are shaped by Indigenous communities and title and rights holders.

While we work to renew faith in our institutions, we cannot continue to use illegitimate processes which support the status quo. We need to ask ourselves how we want to move forward as a country. Lurching from conflict to conflict with a



PHOTO: JASON HARGROVE / FLICKR

short-sighted “might makes right” approach? Or with new processes that provide space for legitimate, inclusive deliberation and debate that will stand the test of time?

We must ask ourselves, when the very legitimacy of our institutions and our laws is in question, what does enforcing “the rule of law” truly mean?

We can fix this crisis, but it will take considerable effort and a genuine commitment to reject the status quo and accept the challenge of building processes based on co-operation and consent. Indigenous peoples are exhausted from seeing their words and input ignored.

Canada must adopt fair, accountable and transparent processes that promote negotiations with Indigenous peoples, built upon the UN declaration's principle of free, prior and informed consent. We must create a level playing field with renewed institutions designed for inclusivity, and disavow the status quo power structures fueling mistrust.

That's not what Trudeau proposed. He proposed keeping the faith and hoping things would improve under the same broken system. We need more than this. We need substantive systemic change. The legitimacy of our representative institutions are in dire crisis, and it will take more than speeches to repair them.

*Matthew Norris is a member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, the Vice-President of the Urban Native Youth Association, and was a policy analyst for the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. He is a PhD student at UBC focusing on international Indigenous rights frameworks and is a board member with the CCPA-BC.*

# Time to end profit-making in seniors' care

BY ANDREW LONGHURST & KENDRA STRAUSS

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on serious problems in Canada's seniors' care system, as nursing homes quickly became the epicenters of the outbreak. These problems are not only due to the greater vulnerability of seniors to the disease, but also to how care is organized and staffed.

As a part of the pandemic response, BC announced extraordinary and positive measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the province's long-term care (nursing homes) and assisted living facilities. Specifically the public health order has:

- Required that most staff work at one facility only ("single-site order");
- Enabled public health officials to ensure compliance with the single-site order;
- Required that all workers are paid the unionized industry standard; and,
- Committed to full-time hours for workers required to work at a single site.

These changes were necessary because many seniors' care workers have to patch together a living by working multiple low-wage, part-time jobs in different health care facilities. The BC government will temporarily "top-up" wages to bring them in line with the industry standard for unionized staff.

Notwithstanding these important and welcome changes, a number of concerns remain about how BC's home and community care sector is meeting the needs of seniors during the pandemic.

Going into the crisis, our system had already been weakened by policy decisions beginning in the early 2000s that:

- Reduced access and eligibility to publicly funded care;
- Produced vulnerabilities and gaps that are impacting seniors and those who care for them; and,
- Encouraged profit-making through risky business practices such as subcontracting, which undermined working conditions and created staffing shortages.

## Rebuilding seniors' care in BC

The COVID-19 crisis is exposing the long-term impacts of policies aimed at cutting costs and expanding the role of for-profit companies in the seniors' care sector in BC. Reduced pay and benefits and understaffing are bad for workers; they are also bad for vulnerable older people who depend on those workers. Over a short period of time the BC government has been trying to rectify workforce instabilities brought about over years of labour policy deregulation and business practices intended to drive profits.

Going forward, policy can be steered in a different direction, however. Over the medium and long-term, the BC government should end its reliance on contracting with for-profit companies and transition exclusively to non-profit and public delivery of seniors' care.

Over the medium and long-term, the BC government should end its reliance on contracting with for-profit companies and transition exclusively to non-profit and public delivery of seniors' care.

In the immediate term, there are a number of steps that the provincial government should take, including requiring much greater transparency of how public funds meant for direct care are used, banning subcontracting, protecting seniors in assisted living from evictions, and rejecting potential calls to bail out over-leveraged seniors care corporations.

The BC government needs to move boldly on a capital plan to start building new seniors' care infrastructure and acquiring for-profit-owned facilities. BC's longstanding policy approach has allowed corporations and their investors to build up large real estate portfolios on the public dime, while receiving generous public funding that assumes they are paying unionized wages when many in fact are not.

The BC government said that it will cost about \$10 million



per month to provide “top-up” funding to increase wages to the unionized industry standard so that no worker loses income as a result of the COVID-19 single-site order. It appears these public dollars will flow to employers that, up to now, have not been paying the unionized industry standard rate. Structuring the wage top-up in this manner raises some concerns.

The Seniors Advocate found that a significant number of long-term care operators have been funded using a formula that is based on the unionized industry standard rate but have failed to pay their workers commensurately. In practice, the top-up—that will go to these employers as well—means these operators will be double-dipping and will be rewarded for over-charging the public. Instead, they should be compelled to pay the unionized wage rate—without additional funding—and to become part of the public sector labour relations structure.

It is not tenable to suggest that these workers will get a pay cut after the pandemic, or that they should return to cobbling together an income through multiple part-time jobs. All of which reinforces the need to move to consistent public and non-profit ownership and delivery of care.

When we emerge from this crisis, there should be a public consultation on the kind of seniors’ care system we want in our province and across Canada, drawing on lessons from the pandemic. We have the evidence and tools to rebuild seniors’ care. COVID-19 has revealed the urgency of doing so.

*Andrew Longhurst is a researcher and policy analyst with the Health Sciences Association of BC, PhD student at SFU, and a research associate with the CCPA-BC. Dr. Kendra Strauss is Associate Professor and Director of the Labour Studies Program at SFU, and a research associate with the CCPA-BC.*

## **BC needs to significantly boost supply of public assisted living**

In February, the CCPA-BC released a study by Andrew Longhurst looking at trends in assisted living affordability and ownership in BC. It found that BC added a mere 105 units of publicly subsidized assisted living between 2010 and 2017 vs 1,130 private-pay units. At a time when our seniors population is growing, this leaves too many seniors struggling to find affordable, publicly subsidized assisted living where they can be supported as they age. Learn more: [policyalternatives.ca/assisted-living-bc](http://policyalternatives.ca/assisted-living-bc).

# Massive public funds being rolled out to oil and gas industry: Canada instead needs a path to wind down

BY SHANNON DAUB & EMIRA MEARS

In the early days of COVID-19 impacting Canadians, we heard rumours of a \$15 billion oil and gas industry bailout coming from the federal government. Voices from many quarters called instead for aid to workers and communities, not a giveaway to fossil fuel corporations. As of early May when this edition of *BC Solutions* went to print, the only announcement PM Trudeau has made to specifically aid the sector has been a much more modest \$2.4 billion in support, along with an unspecified amount of credit guarantees.

Despite being a more modest announcement than industry was angling for, the targeted funding to date—namely \$1.7 billion to support orphan and inactive well reclamation across Alberta, BC and Saskatchewan, and \$750 million in loans for methane reduction efforts—means industry is still getting public funds for activities it should be privately financing.

Cleaning up abandoned wells will reap positive benefits for the environment and the health of Canadians located near those wells, but these are liabilities that should be shouldered by the companies that drilled them in the first place. That said, to the extent that aid is going to be provided to the sector at this time, investing in what amounts to wind-down projects instead of further expansion of the industry is positive. Of course, fossil fuel companies are also eligible for the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy program, and may also receive support through the Bank of Canada's announced corporate bond purchase program.

/// We need to begin winding down fossil fuel industries, not prop them up amid record-low oil prices with further subsidies and handouts.

A leaked letter from the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers—the most powerful oil lobby group in the country—reveals that CAPP and the federal government have established a joint COVID-19 crisis working group. The 13-page letter outlines a laundry list of industry demands including suspension of pollution monitoring requirements, delaying plans for laws that would protect Indigenous rights and delaying requirements for lobbying activity reporting (to name just a few). Overall these changes would delay or reverse progress made toward meeting Canada's climate goals, allowing the industry to take advantage of this health crisis to further exacerbate the climate crisis.

The leaked document confirms that we must keep pressure on the government to support workers in *all* sectors as we

navigate the impacts of this pandemic and not to funnel aid to fossil fuel corporations. We need to begin winding down these industries, not prop them up amid record-low oil prices with further subsidies and handouts.

What does it mean to transition away from oil, gas and coal altogether? In February, we published *Winding Down BC's Fossil Fuel Industries*, a paper by Marc Lee and Seth Klein that outlines a framework for BC. When we published it the economic landscape of the country and the sector looked very different than now. The paper outlined the key components of a wind-down over a 20- to 30-year period, such as a just transition for the workers and communities dependent on the industry.

Fundamentally, we know that BC and the rest of Canada must get our carbon emissions to net zero by mid-century. As we look towards rebuilding post-pandemic, governments should shift gears and prioritize investments in infrastructure, skills and training, and the development of a green industrial strategy that we outlined in the wind-down framework.

*For a more in-depth look at the framework that a managed wind-down could follow, read Marc and Seth's paper at [policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/winding-down](https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/winding-down). Shannon Daub is Director of the CCPA-BC Office and Co-Director of the Corporate Mapping Project. Emira Mears is the CCPA-BC's Associate Director.*



This analysis is part of the Corporate Mapping Project, a research and public engagement project investigating the power of the fossil fuel industry in Western Canada, led by the University of Victoria, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (BC and Saskatchewan Offices) and Parkland Institute. This research is supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



# Reinventing the forestry industry: Made-in-Canada masks and much more

BY BEN PARFITT

Of the many lessons Canada can take away from this pandemic is the need to look after citizens by stockpiling adequate amounts of medical supplies. Consider N95 masks that screen out 95 per cent of microscopic airborne particles, including viruses. Canada should not only stockpile them, it should make them here at home and do so with materials that are the least damaging to our environment and climate.

Presently, those masks are made at great climatic cost primarily from oil-based synthetics like polypropylene and polyester. After those non-biodegradable masks are made and subsequently used, they may be incinerated, resulting in even more greenhouse gas emissions, or landfilled, or join the mass of plastic detritus in our oceans.

What might an alternative mask material be made of? One possibility is from specially processed wood pulp. Significantly, after the arrival and subsequent departure of SARS, scientists in British Columbia and Alberta began questioning the wisdom of N95 masks made from oil products. In a peer-reviewed article published more than a decade ago, they showed that it was possible to make a material from beaten and freeze-dried wood pulp that could meet the vaunted N95 standard.

Details needed to be worked out about how to make the actual mask. But the foundational work had been done to make a unique product using a Canadian raw material and ingenuity.

With the federal government throwing billions of dollars at the oil industry, the time has come to help the country's moribund forest industry to diversify.

This is but one example of what scientists say is a huge untapped potential to use wood in a range of "bioproduct" applications that could displace our ruinous use of fossil fuels. Those products include: wood-based "bioplastics" that could form the visors that health care workers use; wood-derived clothing fabrics that displace the use of cotton—a crop that requires massive amounts of water and that eats up land that could otherwise grow food crops; or biochemicals and biopharmaceuticals.

None of this works, of course, without healthy, biologically diverse and resilient forests—something that the Canadian industry and its government overseers have abjectly failed to achieve so far and that will require massive commitments to rectify, especially in light of climate change.



With oil prices already tanking before COVID-19 and the pandemic now pretty much assuring that prices will remain low, a golden opportunity presents itself for a "made-in Canada" solution that begins with restoring the health of our forests and then wisely uses what raw materials we do take from them to maximum benefit here at home.

The federal government should help facilitate that transition.

First, by requiring domestic production and stockpiling of necessary medical supplies.

Second, by funding increased research and commercialization of new bioproduct applications (a new Bioproducts Institute at the University of British Columbia is well positioned to coordinate such efforts).

And third, by providing incentives to pulp and paper companies to convert existing facilities to make new product lines. Such incentives worked in the past to improve the environmental performance at pulp facilities. They could work again.

With the federal government throwing billions of dollars at the oil industry, the time has come to help the country's moribund forest industry to diversify, by encouraging it to make masks, other essential medical items and much more—here in Canada.

*Ben Parfitt is the Resource Policy Analyst with the BC office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.*

# Digital equity and community solidarity during and after COVID-19

BY SUZANNE SMYTHE

There is a race among public health agencies to provide timely, accurate information about COVID-19. New, ambitious, vital social programs and anti-poverty policies have emerged in an effort to patch a frayed social safety net.

But persistent digital inequalities threaten these objectives. Timely information and access to benefits and programs require a high speed Internet connection, a working digital device, digital savviness and, in Canada, fluency in English or French. Yet those who are most at risk of COVID-19 are also those who are least likely to be tapped into these Internet resources that our institutions seem to take for granted. Overwhelmingly, these are Black, Indigenous, new immigrant, refugee and other racialized and low income communities.

The claim that 94 per cent of British Columbians have access to the Internet at home might instill confidence within our institutions that they can rely upon the Internet for communications, but the reliability of this data is questionable. This figure neglects differences in Internet access across income, the digital literacy and language skills needed to participate online, and the fact that many families must make financial sacrifices to maintain an Internet connection. Those of us who are accustomed to ubiquitous access to the Internet at home and work across multiple devices can lose sight of how others struggle to maintain connectivity.

Digital inequality is a matter of income. The quality and speed of Internet connectivity also matters; many British Columbians do not have access to Internet that even approximates the 50 mps download and 10 mps upload speeds needed for most online activities. Mobile phones might provide some connectivity, but they are not appropriate for online learning or for applying for benefits, and cell phone plans and data caps remain expensive and restrictive.

Efforts to “flatten the curve” in BC may be encouraging thus far, but they have been encumbered by a lack of appropriate materials in the multiple languages read and spoken in BC, and a lack of capacity among health and government agencies to reach those who live on the digital margins. To compensate, settlement and outreach workers who are still employed, along with many volunteers, spend their time interpreting and translating the information on BCCED, WHO and the Federal Government to make it more accessible.

Online applications for some of the COVID-19 benefits are relatively straightforward, but the process is challenging for

those who have traditionally relied upon librarians, adult English as a Second Language and literacy educators, settlement workers and advocates, to make access to government services and information possible.

A democratic, inclusive digital ecosystem during the COVID-19 crisis and after requires secure, affordable, high speed Internet and mobile data that is available and affordable to all. Canada needs an inclusive digital strategy designed for all its citizens, rather than a piecemeal approach that relies upon the charity of private for-profit companies.

Canada needs an inclusive digital strategy designed for all its citizens, rather than a piecemeal approach that relies upon the charity of private for-profit companies.

But as important as an inclusive digital infrastructure might be, it cannot replace face to face relationships, the caring phone call, multilingual resources and the contextualized learning strategies that community-based educators and advocates are providing. These are the engine for a thriving and effective local information ecosystem.

The logic of digital government is that of efficiency, with the assumption that providing rapid access to high stakes information about health and social policies is best accomplished online. But as this COVID-19 moment is teaching us, this focus on efficiency becomes dangerously inefficient when some people do not have the means to access this information or when the information is not suited to the needs and lived realities of diverse communities.

*Suzanne Smythe is Associate Professor in Adult Literacy and Adult Education in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and a research associate with the CCPA.*

Help us push for the solutions we need at this critical time. Make a donation to the BC Solutions Fund today.

# No in-person gala this year: Please support us virtually in 2020

The CCPA-BC office relies on support from individual donors and our annual gala is our biggest fundraising event of the year. However, for everyone's safety, we have made the very difficult decision to cancel our in-person gala in 2020.

We are exploring alternative ways to gather safely, while still presenting a thought-provoking speaker and bringing a sense of community celebration through another format this fall. Be assured that as a supporter you will be the first to hear about it when we announce our plans.

We have also been holding webinars on topics relevant to these times for supporters and the broader community, and

you can expect more of those in the months to come. So while it's not the same as gathering in person, we look forward to opportunities to stay connected to each other and to explore progressive ideas and solutions.

—*Rav Kambo, Development & Supporter Engagement Specialist*

## Recent COVID-19 articles on Policynote.ca

Our staff and research associates have been busier than ever before analyzing new policy announcements, calling attention to who is being left behind, and responding to a constant stream of media requests. As people are seeking analysis on the issues of today, traffic to Policy Note has been up more than 150 per cent since March. Here's a list of some of what we've been writing about.

### MARCH

Bold action in an extraordinary time  
*by Shannon Daub & Alex Hemingway*

What should be next for BC workers and families after the initial federal COVID-19 relief package?  
*by Iglia Ivanova*

Time to #CancelRent and defer mortgage payments  
*by Shannon Daub & Alex Hemingway*

A closer look at the BC COVID-19 Action Plan  
*by Iglia Ivanova*

What do recent changes to the Employment Standards Act mean for BC workers?  
*by Bethany Hastie*

### APRIL

Protecting the health and rights of migrant agricultural workers during the COVID-19 outbreak should be a priority  
*by Anelyse Weiler, Janet McLaughlin, Susana Caxaj & Donald Cole*

Don't force charities and non-profits into crisis before wage subsidy kicks in  
*by Shannon Daub*

Concerns about federal wage subsidy program remain as details emerge  
*by Alex Hemingway*

Open Letter to BC Minister of Labour Harry Bains re: COVID-19 Action Plan  
*by David Fairey & Chris Sorio*

Taking stock of COVID-19 economic policy measures in BC  
*by Marc Lee*

Food insecurity and hunger during COVID-19  
*by Marc Lee*

Time to extend financial supports to local governments  
*by Marc Lee*

Who's left out? COVID-19 & psychiatric detainees  
*by Kendra Milne*

This year's tree-planting seedlings could end up a huge compost pile  
*by Ben Parfitt*

Comparing provincial economic responses to COVID-19  
*by Marc Lee & Arman Hamidian*

A progressive macroeconomic response to the coronavirus crisis in British Columbia  
*by Michal Rozworski*

Dismantling tent cities—why choice matters  
*by Kendra Milne*

### MAY as of our May 11 print deadline

Legislated paid sick leave long overdue  
*by David Fairey*

Working multiple jobs to make ends meet: More common in BC than we might think  
*by Iglia Ivanova*

Flatten the myth: Don't fear government debt after COVID-19  
*by Alex Hemingway*

...and many more—visit [policynote.ca](http://policynote.ca) for the very latest.



## BC SOLUTIONS

News and commentary from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' BC Office

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The CCPA-BC is located on unceded Coast Salish territory, including the lands belonging to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səłilwətaʔ/Seilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is an independent, non-partisan research institute concerned with issues of social, environmental and economic justice. We depend on thousands of supporters for our core funding.

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Any errors and opinions presented in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

# A note of profound gratitude

In this time of crisis and anxiety, I want to offer some thanks.

First, thank you to all the people working on the front lines of this crisis—in hospitals and long-term care facilities, in grocery stores, making deliveries, driving buses and taxis—your value has never been more clear. And for those in precarious or low-paid jobs in these areas, in understaffed nursing homes, in workplaces without paid sick leave—we need to ensure our society's newfound recognition of the value of your work translates into material changes.

I also want to say a huge thank you to all the CCPA staff across the country, and especially the incredibly smart and talented team I work with every day here in BC. The BC Office staff have rallied together under stressful circumstances in a very beautiful and dedicated way—and I am so grateful to have the honour of working with every one of them.

Finally, on behalf of all our staff and board, thanks to you, as a donor to CCPA-BC. Our organization is people-powered—our largest single source of revenues is donations from individuals like you. We've never been busier, and our ideas and analysis have never had more impact than they are having now. We need your help to weather this crisis, and I hope you'll make a donation to our special annual appeal today.

—Shannon Daub, CCPA-BC Office Director

## Donate to the CCPA-BC today

As Canada's leading progressive research institute, the CCPA-BC has an important role to play as the impacts of COVID-19 continue to unfold and new policies are implemented. We are able to do the independent research and media engagement we do thanks to the support of individuals like you. Please make a donation today in support of our annual BC Office appeal: [POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA/BCAPPEAL](https://POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA/BCAPPEAL)