

GLOBAL

## Early warning and COVID19 — bridging the gap between analysis and response

By DAVID CARMENT (/AUTHOR/DAVID-CARMENT) APR. 29, 2020

Critics argue that failures in early warning are linked to failed early action on COVID-19. This conclusion is both misleading and obstructive. Early warning isn't the problem. Early response is.



Health Minister Patty Hajdu speaks at a press conference with Theresa Tam, the chief public health officer, on Jan. 26. Early response should be taken out of the politicians' hands and embedded institutionally in experts, domestically and internationally, with a proper mandate and full resources, writes David Carment. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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Over the course of four months in 1994, 850,000 people were systematically butchered during the Rwanda genocide. A large body of open-source evidence revealed, well in advance, the killings were carefully orchestrated by groups with malevolent political agendas.

All the indicators were there to derive a robust response, but intervention never materialized. The failure to prevent the Rwanda genocide wasn't a failure of early warning. It was a failure of early response. Despite having the resources and the mandate, representatives at the UN Security Council refused to stop the killing. America's leaders at the time could see no benefit in getting tangled up in a country with little economic or political significance. The media largely ignored the crisis. Only after the conflict had subsided did the international community move in to pick up the pieces. The failure to prevent the genocide resulted in a number of commissions and reports on improving early warning and response.

Fast forward 26 years. Today's enemy is an unseen virus with no hidden agenda, but genocidal intent, nevertheless. We should have seen it coming, some argue, and we should have been better prepared. Failures in early warning are linked to failed early action on COVID-19, they argue. This conclusion is both misleading and obstructive. Early warning isn't the problem. Early response is. There are several reasons for that.

First, the gap between early warning and early response is very large. The idea that somehow a cogent, focused, and targeted political campaign could automatically emerge from the hazy and early signals of a localized epidemic in China is both unhelpful and naive. Politicians are typically risk averse. When confronted with situational ambiguity, they will pass the buck, waffle, or stall. There is no glory in taking early action, especially when the potential for making the wrong decision is high and the perceived political gains low.

The idea that evidence-based policy making is top of mind for any politician must be tempered with political realities. Deriving meaningful policy action from a highly complex medical, economic, and social problem involving multiple points of transmission is difficult at best. Uncertainty regarding policy choices is further offset by the inability to separate signals from noise. Much of that noise is generated from social media with its hearsay, conspiracy theories, and politicized messaging.

Only when all the facts are in front of them, and the people for whom they are responsible are directly affected, are politicians moved to action. Unfortunately, the inadequacies of reacting at a late stage are revealed when measures are overtaken by events. For example, the decision to stop flights from China failed to recognize that many other countries, including the U.S., had already become vectors for the transmission of COVID-19.

Second, it is very difficult to develop an effective and coherent policy response from early warning when the precedent for doing so does not exist. Politicians typically make decisions through analogy. Their reference point is a past event thought to be similar. For example, the SARS outbreak of 2004 was the template for generating a response to COVID-19.

Yet most of the most important decisions taken in 2020, such as reducing air traffic, shutting down borders, and enforcing containment measures, were unprecedented. Three months ago, these responses might have been considered acts of war. Indeed, pundits, think tanks, and policy makers could not comprehend the possibility that such extreme measures were appropriate to resilient Western political systems that placed individual freedom above all else. They had a health sector ranked among the very best in the world. They could manage it without resorting to costly options, like containment and quarantine. Or so they believed.

Third, wilful blindness masked as political opportunism blocks effective response. At the early stages, extreme measures taken by China to contain the spread of the virus were roundly criticized. The media used the opportunity to draw a favourable comparison between "our" political system and "theirs." Politicians, including U.S. President Donald Trump, chose the moment to "slow walk" the crisis in an effort to protect the economy and secure votes in the upcoming election, even if that meant, in his own words, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens.

So, if early warning isn't the problem, are doing nothing or acting late to protect the economy the best options? There are other choices. The first is to make prevention pay. It is a time-worn cliché that it is more cost-effective to act preventively than to pick up the pieces afterward. But risk-averse leaders have little incentive for prevention, especially if they think the costs will encumber future generations. If politicians, by nature, are unwilling to take early action, then who might be?

First, early response should be taken out of the politicians' hands and embedded institutionally in experts, domestically and internationally, with a proper mandate and full resources. A rapid reaction team of experts to be deployed at a moment's notice will be needed. Prioritizing global co-operation in response to a shared threat would require a shift of resources from discretionary and highly politicized files, such as defence and security to health infrastructure and improved global monitoring.

Second, instead of chastising and defunding the World Health Organization, this is the time to strengthen it. Not because we benefit from doing so, but because the weakest links in the chain desperately do. After all, preventing the spread of a virus is only as effective as the most fragile of states. They are the primary vectors whose collapse we can ill afford.

Third, the suggestion that early warning and early response are the sole purview of states is misleading. It is time to ditch the secret satellite images of body counts and troop movements and build on the networks of expert medical analysis, whose forecasting and projections galvanize both public opinion and indecisive leaders. Their research, which lays out all possible scenarios—not just the best case—is the single greatest source for developing coherent policies. In developing effective responses, states need to learn from each other and from practitioners with real, on-the-ground experience.

Finally, the media's challenge function needs to be more focused. If indeed early warning signals were ignored, questions need to be asked as events unfold, not after the fact.

Sadly, this is not the first time recommendations like these have been made. Our missed opportunities in Rwanda and elsewhere have produced a number of policy recommendations on bridging the gap between early warning and early response. They are essential reading for those who want to prepare for the next "big one."

*David Carment is a professor at Carleton University and fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, who publishes on risk analysis and fragile states.*

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fossil fuels have to be included in that process.

**'Pandemic bump' pushes March lobbying up 60 per cent over last year**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/29/pandemic-bump-pushes-march-lobbying-up-60-per-cent-over-last-year/245726>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/29/new-green-party-executive-director-sees-opportunity-potential-amid-challenging-times/245774>) 'It's a really exciting time to sort of distill what is the core DNA of the party and invite the people in, in an authentic, meaningful way,' says Prateek Awasthi, who'll mark his first day on the job on May 4.

**Canada ready for June UN Security Council election despite not actively campaigning amid pandemic, says UN envoy**

(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/29/canada-ready-for-june-un-security-council-election-despite-not-actively-campaigning-amid-pandemic-says-un-envoy/245888>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/29/canada-ready-for-june-un-security-council-election-despite-not-actively-campaigning-amid-pandemic-says-un-envoy/245888>) Canada's Ambassador to the UN, Marc-André Blanchard, wouldn't say whether he thinks Canada has the necessary votes to win a place on the Security Council.

**Multilateralism suffering 'collective breakdown,' say Parliamentarians who are calling for increased global cooperation**

(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/multilateralism-suffering-collective-breakdown-say-parliamentarians-calling-for-increased-global-cooperation/245328>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/multilateralism-suffering-collective-breakdown-say-parliamentarians-calling-for-increased-global-cooperation/245328>) 'As flawed as these institutions are, I think they have to be supported by Canada and uniquely by Canada, because Canada gets its influence through multilateral organizations,' says Liberal MP John McKay.

**Some Senators play community fixers with country in lockdown**  
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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/senators-play-community-fixers-with-country-in-lockdown/245405>) 'Because I was a former MPP, a lot of people in and around the area know that they can call for help on stuff,' says Frances Lankin.

**Pandemic forces feds to hit pause on climate legislation; environmentalists sanguine about net-zero pledge**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/pandemic-forces-feds-to-hit-pause-on-climate-legislation-environmentalists-sanguine-about-net-zero-pledge/245486>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/pandemic-forces-feds-to-hit-pause-on-climate-legislation-environmentalists-sanguine-about-net-zero-pledge/245486>) Environmental advocates say they're hopeful the government will still be able to introduce a legislative framework for meeting its pledge to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

**Feds to eventually share 'guidelines' for provinces, territories to begin reopening, says Trudeau**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/feds-to-eventually-share-guidelines-for-provinces-territories-to-begin-reopening-says-trudeau/245812>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/feds-to-eventually-share-guidelines-for-provinces-territories-to-begin-reopening-says-trudeau/245812>) 'We may make some public health measures more flexible, but we have to keep some principles such as physical distancing and proper practices such as frequent handwashing,' says Dr. Theresa Tam.

**Keep border closed until U.S. 'breeding ground' for virus under control, say public health experts**  
(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/keep-border-closed-until-u-s-breeding-ground-for-virus-under-control-say-public-health-experts/245277>)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/04/27/keep-border-closed-until-u-s-breeding-ground-for-virus-under-control-say-public-health-experts/245277>) 'If I were Trudeau I would probably be careful about opening the border with the U.S.' says Professor Melissa Marx of Johns Hopkins University. 'The U.S. doesn't know who is infected and who is not.'

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**Keep border closed until U.S. 'breeding ground' for virus under control, say public health experts**  
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