



Canada's last intact ice shelf, the Milne Ice Shelf, on the northwestern edge of Ellesmere Island, Nunavut.

Summer is winding down and once again, we prepare to send our kids back to school. But this year is very different for parents, school children and teachers. Many people have concerns about the return to classes and additionally, what could happen with COVID-19 possibly ramping up as we approach flu season. Difficult decisions are being made in our community.

This time of year is also wildfire season which up to now in BC has been relatively quiet. But just last week, after some hotter dry weather, a fire in the South Okanagan has had area residents on high alert. Elsewhere, we watched in horror as fires in Australia devastated the country this past winter and now [California](#) is suffering one of its worst wildfire seasons on record. These events underline the reality that we are in two global crises: a pandemic and climate change.

The world has reacted in a dramatic way to the COVID-19 pandemic, shutting down businesses and schools, and wreaking havoc on world economies. The pandemic has literally transformed our lives in many ways. And there has been a range of government reactions, with some acting too late, or not enough. Some, like BC, seem to have been getting it right for the most part, greatly reducing the risk to residents. However, most governments around the globe seem to agree that the threat of the pandemic is serious, warranting strong and immediate action.

So why aren't we reacting to the climate crisis with the same focus as we are to the pandemic?

There are undoubtedly many reasons, but let me share a few possibilities.

One reason for our unwillingness to tackle the climate issue relates to the notion that the most devastating and permanent impacts of climate change are predicted to be felt sometime down the road. For many, climate change hasn't really affected them on a personal level. Yes, climate impacts are occurring all around us, from the recent collapse of the [Milne Ice Shelf](#) in Nunavut to world [record breaking temperatures](#) in Death Valley California, and other record breaking high temperatures in [Western North America](#) this summer. But most of these impacts do not threaten our community every day in the same, highly visible way the pandemic does. For example, while there are more devastating wildfires in BC than in the past, the brutal smoke conditions we experienced in 2017 and 2018 didn't occur here during the 2 years that followed. The pandemic, on the other hand, has many local families concerned right now about grave illness, job insecurity and putting food on the table. And every day we see more and more face masks in use as a reminder of the issue.

Another major factor is that the energy sector has been a huge driver in the global economy for over a century. The industry has momentum, massive investments, and it contributes strongly to employment and tax revenue in Canada. A transition away from fossilized carbon sources is a major challenge, requiring a slowdown of the industry, retooling of power sources and transportation, and a long list of other changes. The concept of de-emphasizing the oil and gas sector is hard to grasp when the same industry has been encouraged and subsidized by governments for decades.

Although a shift from a fossil fuel based economy presents huge challenges, with COVID-19 we saw governments completely shut down businesses of all kinds without any real notice. Millions of people have been impacted and the economic implications are the greatest of any event in the past century. In Canada, emergency federal spending in the billions of dollars has been implemented to address the crisis, and this has been fairly well supported by the public and business community. What a difference in the approach to climate and coronavirus threats!

Unfortunately, misinformation campaigns have also been operating for decades to both confuse and distract people's attention away from the climate issue. The [oil](#) and [gas](#) industry has behaved the same way the tobacco industry did when cigarette smoking was deemed extremely harmful to your health. In the case of the coronavirus, we see some governments playing a similar role by downplaying health impacts, doing little to combat the virus and opening up businesses, favouring economic growth and political gain over the health of their citizens. However, these government communications regarding COVID-19 pale in comparison to long term energy sector misinformation campaigns on climate change.

There is also a phenomenon known as *optimism bias*, where an individual holds the belief that a threat is not going to affect them as it will someone else. With COVID-19, similarities arise again with some ignoring the risks and participating in large parties, thinking they are immune to the virus. Again though, governments typically swiftly condemn and react to control these behaviours when it comes to the pandemic.

Overall, we see both similarities and differences in global responses to the threats of climate change and COVID-19. The advice of the scientific community - the same community that is guiding the massive response to COVID-19 - is that we need to act on the climate issue immediately to avoid an existential crisis. Although we have so far failed to respond appropriately to their advice on the climate issue, COVID-19 has shown us that governments and all sectors of society are willing to make massive changes and sacrifices when an imminent threat arises.

One thing is certain; we do have a voice and there are lots of things we can do on both a personal and civic level to address climate change. I hope the suggestions in [this link](#) are a source of ideas, hope and optimism. And, with two possible impending elections for British Columbians, we can have our voices heard by simply voting for a candidate that WILL commit to real action on the climate crisis.

As Dr. Bonnie Henry says, "Be kind, be calm and be safe"!

Please check out our website www.shuswapclimate.org and follow us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/shuswapclimateaction>

Shuswap Climate Action acknowledges we are on the unceded and unsundered traditional lands of Secwepemc Nation.