



09 February 2021

Honourable Jason Kenney
Premier of Alberta
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6
premier@gov.ab.ca

Dear Premier Kenney:

Re: Variants mean you should reverse re-opening plans

Have we seriously learned nothing from the first and second waves of the pandemic? That's the question that came to mind when I heard your government was planning to start easing COVID-19 measures this week.

The consensus among experts is that you removed pandemic restrictions too soon in the spring. Instead of driving infection rates down to zero when you had the chance, you took your foot off the gas and allowed the virus to gain traction and get ahead of us again. That led to the second wave in the fall (and a quadrupling of fatalities between November 2020 and January 2021).

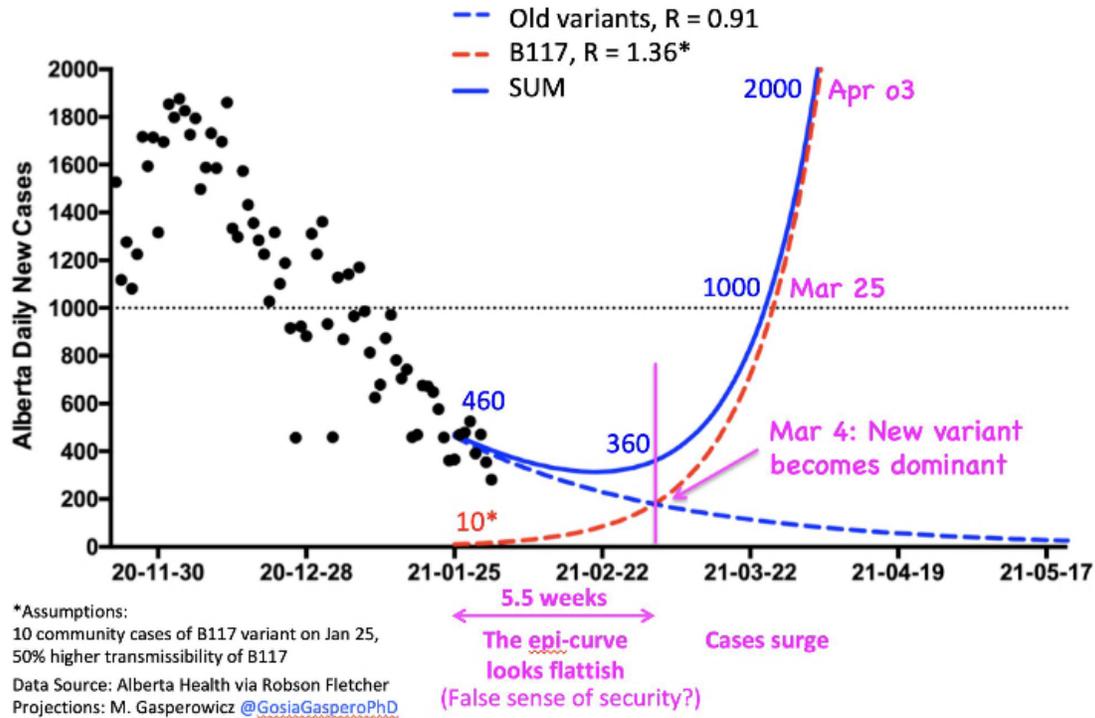
What's happening today feels like déjà vu. You know what they say about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Repeating mistakes of the past would be bad enough if we were dealing with the same threat we faced last spring – but we're not. The new #B117 variant is now spreading exponentially in Alberta. Scientists agree that it's 35-45 per cent more contagious than the original strain of COVID-19, and likely more lethal.

Reducing pandemic restrictions now will only allow the new variant to gain traction like the old one did over the summer and early fall. And, like the old variant, #B117 will race ahead of us again – only this time faster and with more deadly results.

Don't take my word for it. There's a professor of biology at the University of Calgary, Dr. Gosia Gasperowicz, who has predicted the course of the pandemic in Alberta with eerie accuracy. Last week, she prepared a graph (below) that, pardon my language, should scare the crap out of you.

Projection of COVID spread in Alberta under current restrictions (w/o reopening)



Dr. Gasperowicz’s projections illustrate what was likely to have happened in the coming weeks if your government had NOT started reopening the economy. The new variant would have become dominant by March 4, 2021 and new cases would reach 2,000 per day by April 3, 2021. With your decision to ease pandemic restrictions, despite concerns about the new variants, the situation will certainly be even worse than the scenario envisioned in this graph.

I know you will defend your reopening plan by pointing to the dramatic drop in cases in Alberta and the (more modest) drop in the number of patients in hospital and ICU beds with COVID. But, as many experts and observers have pointed out, these are backward looking metrics that are giving us a false sense of security. We need to be looking down the road, not in the rearview mirror. Dr. Gasperowicz and many of her colleagues have called the #B117 variant “the Beast” – and it’s coming for us.

With all of this mind in, I urge you to immediately reverse your decision to proceed with the staged re-opening of our province. Further, I urge you to do three other things.

First, abandon your government’s too-little-too-late mitigation approach in favour of the kind of “zero COVID” strategy implemented to great effect by New Zealand, Australia and our own Atlantic Provinces. The evidence from around the world clearly shows that zero COVID strategies are better than mitigation strategies from both public health and economic perspectives. Second, I urge you to follow Dr. Gasperowicz’s advice and implement a seven-week lockdown so we can stop the exponential spread of the new

variants before they get out of hand. The relatively low numbers of COVID cases we are currently experiencing should be seen as an opportunity to crush the virus in our province, not as an excuse to let down our guard or take our foot off the gas. Third, I urge you to do what you should have been doing from the beginning: pay people to stay home and businesses to restrict operations until the danger passes and the crush-and-contain goals of a zero COVID strategy have been met. Experience from zero-COVID jurisdictions shows that this approach would actually be less costly and less damaging for the economy than your current approach.

At this point, you may be inclined to dismiss me (as you have often done in the past). You might say “why is a union leader sticking his nose into these issues”? Well, if the virus spirals out of control again – and there is every reason to believe it will under your current plan – it will be ordinary Albertans, including working Albertans, who pay the price.

So, why am I speaking out? I’m doing so for the sake of health care workers, who don’t want to be overwhelmed by a third wave. I’m doing so for the sake of packing house workers, camp-based construction workers, warehouse workers and grocery store workers who are already seeing renewed outbreaks in their workplaces. And I’m doing so for the students and staff in our schools, who were never given proper support to deal with the first strain of COVID, let alone the new, more dangerous variants.

I have no doubt that the folly of your plan will become apparent in the next week or two. But if you only return to tighter restrictions at that point, we will have missed the opportunity to get ahead of the variants. More people will be infected than necessary. More people will die. And more workers and businesses will be subjected to the costly yo-yo of opening and closing that is the inevitable result of your discredited approach.

In conclusion, while I started with a plea, I’m going to end with a promise. I know that you won’t listen to me, but your recent retreat on coal shows that you may have no choice but to listen to other Albertans if they push back in large enough numbers. With that in mind, I’m going to lead an effort to galvanize support for a zero COVID strategy in my circles within the province – and I’m going to challenge leaders in other sectors and regions of our province to do the same in their circles. Maybe together, for the sake of our province, we can force you to take the new variants more seriously and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gil McGowan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Gil McGowan
President
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