

“ FAIR PLAY AND DAYLIGHT ”

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OPINION



Once the vaccine has done its work, in-person activities of every kind will boom, predicts writer Robert Wright. *ASHLEY FRASER FILES*

Welcome to the Roaring Twenties

We'll put the crisis behind us with lightning speed, says **Robert Wright**.

As 2020 limps towards its dénouement, there's nothing to say we cannot have a little fun. Here are my prognostications for what we're now calling the post-pandemic world.

To date, most of what passes for insight into our post-pandemic future has been fanciful. In particular, the idea that ordinary citizens will seek to extend the state-imposed isolation and asceticism of the last eight months into a permanent political program or even a lifestyle choice is patently daft.

Once the vaccines have done their work and things actually return to normal, we'll stop taking about the new normal. People will put the crisis behind them with breathtaking speed, and they will show little interest in pandemic post-mortems. They will not wear masks as fashion accessories. Liberated from the oppressive myopia caused by lockdowns and social distancing, they will reject elitist pleas to "reimagine" the world in the image of pandemic-era social control. All the talk of Great Resets will be consigned to the slag heap of grand delusions, haunting our historical lexicon only with irony and pathos, like the slogan "The war to end all wars."

Instead, people will cut loose — as pent-up desires for all things cherished and denied are loosed upon the world.

People will travel in droves — in cars, on planes, on foot. In-person activities of every

kind will boom. Virtually everyone will delight in the restoration of family-centred holidays, in-person romance and backslapping camaraderie. Handshakes will resume, as will hugs and kisses. Malls and main streets will buzz, as glamour returns to in-person shopping. Amazon orders will decline. So will the company's stock price.

The restoration of safe, in-person intimacy will feel novel initially — enough to leaven people's attachment to technology. They'll curtail their Zoom and Netflix use, and happily. The exodus of urbanites to rural and suburban locales will reverse — not wholesale but enough to produce a perceptible renaissance in city life. Cottage prices will retreat, condo sales will boom. Our obsession with diet, fitness, fashion and personal grooming will accelerate, as people once again revel in the pleasures of the social and the material. Our puritanical cultural gatekeepers will bemoan the marked rise in ostentatious consumerism.

Culture will displace politics. Our Trump/pandemic-era tendency to filter all social experience through the prism of partisan politics will attenuate. Like Charles Lindbergh in the 1920s, the person of the decade will be Elon Musk — an exemplar of bold and unorthodox thinking on problems we have come to believe are essentially political but are not. Twitter will be exposed as a cynical sectarian accelerant, and be displaced by social

media whose currency is actually social.

Flamboyant politicians bearing Big Ideas will be supplanted by sober-minded technocrats whose preeminent concern will be the relief of the financial hangover brought on by pandemic spending. Voters will discover that governments are broke, as they always do. Our public conversations about health care and long-term care will be enlivened by emergent data on medical procedures deferred by pandemic lockdowns. Austerity will again be the watchword for governments everywhere, despite herculean efforts to stigmatize it. Finance ministers will again have recourse to phrases like "hell or high water," and they will be popular.

Diverted from their screens, many people will seek out sources of real-world comfort, reassurance and pleasure, and focus their productive energies on the here-and-now. They will reacquire themselves with passé concerns like the material progress of their own communities and even the national interest. The advent of a new *realpolitik* — visible now in the democracies' mounting worries about China — will accelerate. Post-pandemic revelations about freewheeling government waste, patronage and abuse of power will exacerbate the democratic deficit throughout the West.

Unless we are bedevilled by an economic downturn on the scale of the Great Depression, 'Twenties' pop culture will be smart and inspired, even playful. Common sense will temper the vocabulary of media-driven hysteria, as cit-

izens continue their historic defection from legacy media they no longer trust.

As in the 1920s and the 1960s, youth culture will be exuberant and self-referential. New subcultures will emerge. We will again see young people together navigating the poles of ideological radicalism and apolitical hedonism, as they rediscover their birthright and embrace an ethos that allows them to live expansively and in the moment. The unconscionable exploitation of children and youth by unprincipled activists will continue apace, but not without resistance. The young will be hammered by fiscal austerity, as they always are. Some will emerge from the fog of lockdown questioning the fairness of the burdens they have borne and will be expected to yet bear. Others will defiantly reject the smug political pieties on which they were reared and educated, baffling their elders.

It is all the rage at the moment, in legislatures throughout the West, to fanaticize about vast, expensive, all-encompassing projects bearing deadlines of 2030, or 2050, or even beyond. This, too, is fanciful. Here in the real world, where the citizens of democracies rightly deplore the efforts of politicians to handcuff their successors, such schemes will be rejected like the four- and five-year plans that did so much damage to so many people in the 20th century.

We must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and carry on. The future beckons, and it will be glorious.

Robert Wright is professor of history at Trent University Durham.