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# Canada Letter

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Ontario's Premier Wants a Tighter Border. A U.S. Senator Eyes Reopening It.



By [Ian Austen](#)

The signals from either side of the border between Canada and the United States this week could not have been more dissimilar.



The Peace Bridge between Buffalo and Fort Erie, Ontario. Lindsay Dedario/Reuters

On this side, the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario's premier, Doug Ford, who has repeatedly blamed travelers for the third wave of Covid-19, [put out an ad](#) condemning Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for not closing the border as Mr. Ford again called for more restrictions. Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat from New York, and the powerful majority leader, went to an airport near the Canadian border to say that he's asked officials in the Biden administration to quickly "[develop a transparent, bilateral and public](#)" plan for reopening the border.

While no one appears to have anything beyond wild guesses about when the border will reopen, interest in that day appears to be increasing as a growing number of people in the United States become fully vaccinated. But several experts agree that its likely to take more than vaccinations for the return of an open border.

"Any opening of the border, a return back to normal, is a very, very long way off," Aaron Ettinger, a professor of political science at Carleton University who specializes in relations between the two countries, told me. "But that doesn't mean there shouldn't be some sort of advance planning about what a reopening would look like. The last thing we want is to be in a good enough situation where we can think about it but have absolutely no idea of how to do it."



Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York, wants a border reopening plan. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Every month since March 20, 2020, the government of Canada has rolled over, and sometimes expanded, the cabinet order laying out the border restrictions on the same day that the United States makes a similar extension of its rules.

While a border closure is often described as an agreement between the two countries, government officials told me that talks between the two governments are mostly limited to coordinating the timing of the extensions. Both countries have, after all, taken quite different approaches even if commercial travelers like truck drivers, health care workers who commute across the border and those with business in Canada have never been blocked by either country or required to quarantine.

But all Canadians can still go to the United States for any reason provided that they use an airplane rather than a motor vehicle, train, a bicycle, their feet or boat to get there. Then there is no federally mandated quarantine period when they arrive.

Canada also has a short list of nonessential workers who are allowed in: Canadian citizens and permanent residents; foreign students; family members; temporary foreign workers, including those going to farms; people allowed to enter for compassionate reasons; and, with special permission, elite athletes.

Aside from essential workers, [all travelers entering Canada](#) must produce three negative tests results and quarantine for two weeks. Air travelers must stay in a government designated hotel for up to three nights to await the results of their arrival tests as part of their 14-day quarantine.

The result has been dramatic. Bill Blair, the public safety minister, said this week that international air traffic entries are down by 96 percent at airports and land border crossings have fallen 82 percent. Federal officials told me that the majority of nonessential travelers are returning Canadian citizens or permanent residents who have a constitutional right to re-enter.



Doug Ford, Ontario's premier, wants to see more border restrictions. Frank Gunn/The Canadian Press, via Associated Press

Many public health officials dispute Mr. Ford's often repeated claims that border crossers are a major source of infections. Mr. Trudeau said on Friday that he asked Mr. Ford a week ago which of the groups, except for citizens and permanent residents, he would like removed from the list of nonessential travelers still allowed to come into Canada. The premier, Mr. Trudeau said, "didn't get back."

It does not appear that Canada has a firm reopening plan of the sort Mr. Schumer is seeking. But what should such a plan contain? Professor Ettinger said that there are obvious factors like a substantial decline in the infection rate in Canada and more vaccinations. Federal officials have said in the past that they need proof that people who have been vaccinated cannot spread the virus to others.

An internationally accepted vaccine passport for travelers is something the federal government has said will be necessary. Already several travelers have been caught with fake Covid-19 test results, with [two more people being fined](#) for that this week.

The uncertainty around travel isn't limited to the border between Canada and the United States. Stephen Hiltner, my colleague from the Travel desk, looked at the global travel scene and found that a "set of swirling crosscurrents — including a surge in global coronavirus cases, lagging vaccine rollouts in

tourist hot spots and the lack of a reliable system to verify vaccinations — may be setting the stage for a slow and tortured return to high-volume international travel.”

Whatever the plan and date, Professor Ettinger said that the somewhat halting and often confused experience of reopening the border following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States will make clear guidance and coordination between both countries necessary.

“The border has only gotten harder and harder,” Professor Ettinger said. “Once things return to something resembling normal, I would expect to see significant cross-border technical coordination in order to avoid the kind of disaster at the border that we’ve seen at different points in the last 20 years.”

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