

## **The Politics of the Pandemic: The Rise of Authoritarianism in Australia**

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### *Abstract*

Undoubtedly the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic have been challenging for every nation. The response, however, has been varied. In this paper, beginning with a brief overview of how the virus has progressed in Australia, we consider some worrying developments. Although the speed with which state governments assumed emergency powers to deal with the virus showed a commendable degree of leadership, the continuing reliance on these powers to close state borders and to lockdown their citizens demonstrates a shift towards authoritarianism. Worse still, is the willing compliance of the majority of citizens in their own incarceration. The state of Victoria has the dubious honor of being the most locked down state in the world. The effect on mental health, particularly school children who have missed a significant portion of the school year, small businesses that have been forced to close, and workers unable to work from home, has been severe. State governments, by and large, have ignored this and continued to use lockdowns as the means of trying to control the spread of the virus. More recently, has come the realisation that eliminating the virus is not possible, and the end of lockdowns can only be achieved through mass vaccination. Rather concerningly, this has resulted in a further lurch towards an authoritarian state with growing support for mandating vaccination. We argue that the turn to totalitarianism should be resisted.

*Keywords: Covid-19, lockdown, authoritarianism, Victoria, pandemic.*

### *Introduction: Historical Context*

It cannot be doubted that the Covid-19 pandemic has generated a large number of challenges for us all as we move well into its second year. These challenges have been very different for different countries, cities and regions. In this short reflection, I will deal with the context of the pandemic in Australia, and from the point of view of someone resident in Victoria, the state in which the

largest number of deaths from Covid-19 occurred – 820 out of a total of 910 deaths<sup>90</sup> for the whole of Australia – and which has suffered the longest period of lockdown and greatest frequency of them. To date, there have been 30, 356 total cases in Australia. By any measure, Australia has been remarkably successful in containing the virus. This success has come at a cost.

In 2020, when Victoria experienced a spike in Covid cases, and a surge in deaths, mostly in aged care facilities, Melbourne, the state's capital, was locked down for 112 days. Regional Victoria, despite having very few or no cases, was also locked down, but the restrictions eased as time went on, so that there was more freedom of movement outside Melbourne. To prevent movement from metropolitan Melbourne to the regions, police were stationed on the major highways to prevent people in Melbourne from travelling to regional Victoria. Similarly, people from regional Victoria could not travel to Melbourne either. Severe restrictions were in place in relation to funerals and marriage ceremonies.<sup>91</sup> Religious services were unable to be held and churches were closed. Only two visitors were allowed to anyone's home and outside gatherings were forbidden. Masks were to be worn both indoors and out, reasons for leaving one's home were restricted to grocery shopping, visiting a medical practitioner, doing essential work (such as health care work), exercise and care giving. A curfew was in place.

Other states did not experience the same surge in either Covid cases or deaths, and were able to ease restrictions much sooner, however, each state determined that it would close its borders to those states which continued to have Covid cases. During Victoria's long lockdown in 2020, Victorians were prohibited from entering the other states. International borders were also closed, and only some flights were allowed into the country, mainly in order to repatriate Australian citizens who had been overseas. This has continued during 2021 with international borders still closed and unlikely to re-open until sometime in 2022, if then. More recent outbreaks of Covid have been the result of returning travelers while in quarantine infecting people, and Victoria in August 2021, entered

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<sup>90</sup> "Coronavirus (Covid-19) numbers and Statistics," Australian Government Department of Health, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers>.

<sup>91</sup> For instance, only 10 mourners were permitted to attend a funeral. Marriage ceremonies were restricted to the bride and groom, the marriage celebrant and two witnesses. These restrictions were re-introduced for Victoria's sixth lockdown in August 2021.

its sixth period of lockdown, and has remained under severe restrictions. This time, however, during July 2021, New South Wales, the largest Australian state by population, experienced a surge in cases of the CoVid-19 virus Delta variant, and was placed under lockdown, that by the middle of August 2021 extended to the whole state. Parts of the northernmost state, Queensland were also in lockdown in August 2021. In all, by mid- August 2021, 15 million people in the eastern mainland Australian states were in lockdown.

There is no question that the draconian measures taken by state governments to contain the Covid outbreaks have worked up to now, but this has come at considerable cost. Leaving aside the economic ruin faced by many small businesses such as restaurants and cafes, there have been significant social costs. The effect on people's well-being as a result of anxiety, of stress due to changed work circumstances and the inability to lead a normal social life has yet to be quantified. There is growing evidence to suggest that there has been a significant rise in mental illness as people struggle to cope with daily life under the restrictions that have been imposed.<sup>92</sup> Children had a disrupted school year in 2020, but in Victoria, have also faced a disrupted education for some months in 2021 also. Learning has taken place via Zoom, but it is evident that this has not worked very well, and pupils have struggled with its impersonal nature. The same situation has also faced students in higher education, with universities being forced to move nearly all their teaching to an online form. Face to face teaching has still not fully resumed. The use of Zoom or some other like platform to conduct meetings, teaching and other activities has become normal during this period, but it is obvious that it is a poor substitute for face-to-face interactions. The loss of human contact has been severe.

People in Victoria, after a few half-hearted public protests about mask-wearing and the severity of the restrictions countered by the presence of a very large contingent police in riot gear, have meekly submitted to the authority of the state. The premier, Dan Andrews, has enjoyed a cult following for his severe restrictions over the long lockdown in 2020, and there is little questioning of the need for further restrictions in 2021 over more recent single figure outbreaks of Covid. The sixth severe lockdown has come a scant nine days after the fifth and is more severe in that people are

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<sup>92</sup> K. M. Bliźniewska-Kowalska, A. Halaris, S.C. Wang, K. P. Su, M. Maes, M. Berk & P. Galecki et al., "A Review of the Global Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Mental Health, with a Comparison Between the USA, Australia, and Poland with Taiwan and Thailand," *Medical Science Monitor: International Medical Journal of Experimental and Clinical Research* 27 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.12659/MSM.932220>.

prohibited from visiting their families and may not travel more than five kilometers from their homes. People are assured that imposed restrictions are necessary, for everyone's good and based on scientific evidence. Unfortunately, none of the scientific evidence on which continuing restrictions is purportedly based has been released and little attempt to provide a justification for them. Nor is it at all clear that such severe restrictions are necessary. There is, for instance, little evidence that masks are effective in preventing Covid transmission or protecting people from infection, but they are mandatory both inside and outside. The government expects people to trust them and accept the curtailment of their freedom of movement. There is no debate about the nature of the restrictions nor their necessity. Along with freedom of movement, freedom of speech has also been restricted. Questioning government decisions is met with the mantra that the decision is what "the science" advises and there is an overtone that suggests question the government is somehow subversive and undermining its efforts to keep everyone safe.

In June 2021, Victoria was once more locked down under quite drastic restrictions after an outbreak of Covid occurred in hotel quarantine and escaped into the community. This was the Delta variant, originating in India, and described as a "beast of a virus." It was said to be transmitted by even the most fleeting of contacts and the state was locked down, even though it was not present outside Melbourne. Transmission of this virus variant has been shown to not be as virulent as claimed.<sup>93</sup> There was no discussion about the wisdom of closing down businesses that were just beginning to revive nor whether it was necessary for schools to close. There was no thought given whether it was necessary to impose the same restrictions on regional Victoria, where there were no cases of Covid. The government simply imposed the restrictions and expected people to obey.

From the actions of the government, it seems plain that the intention is to eliminate the virus, rather than contain it, even though publicly it is said that the aim is to contain and learn to live with the virus. Restrictions, however, do not generally ease until community transmission reaches zero cases over a number of days. This appears to be the strategy in all states. The only state which appeared to be learning to live with the virus and was taking steps to do so has been New South Wales, the most populous Australian state, with 8.2 million people. There, the approach has been to

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<sup>93</sup> It is said to be more contagious, but not as virulent. That is, it is more easily transmitted, but is not as deadly in its infection.

decentralise the response to outbreaks of the virus and to place restrictions only on those regions where it is necessary. Unfortunately, the most populous parts of the state, including Sydney and city of Newcastle and the Hunter Valley to the north of Sydney have been locked down due to an escalating number of cases of the Delta variant of Covid. Victoria, on the other hand, has a highly centralised, bureaucratic approach that tries to protect the populace by the blunt instrument of blanket restrictions across the whole state, when the vast majority of infections have been confined to Melbourne. NSW has a right of centre, liberal conservative government, while Victoria has hard left socialist government, and this undoubtedly has significant influence on decision-making. The Victorian government in this regard resembles the old Soviet Union, in which all power is centralised, and in the hands of one individual, the Premier.

Vaccinations against the virus are now beginning to be rolled out, but again there are various political issues which surround their availability. The roll-out of the vaccinations is the responsibility of the federal government, which has purchased a very large number of vaccines – the Astra-Zeneca (now called Vaxzevria) and the Pfizer vaccines. The Astra-Zeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine has had quite a negative press in Australia because it has been associated with blood clots and several people have died.<sup>94</sup> Originally the Astra-Zeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine was only available to those over 50, but now has been restricted to those over the age of 60 as a result of adverse reactions to the vaccine among those aged below 60. More recently, due to the rising number of cases, governments have shifted ground again and now are proposing that anyone over 40 should get the Astra-Zeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine, if his or her General Practitioner agrees. There has been a slow uptake of the vaccines in Australia, possibly because there is such a low number of cases of Covid in the country, so there does not appear to be a great urgency to get vaccinated. The delivery of the vaccines is in the hands of the states, which leads to the shifting of blame for shortages of vaccines to the federal government, even though Victoria has been accused of hoarding vaccines and not

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<sup>94</sup> “Covid-19 Vaccine Weekly Safety Report,” Australian Government Health Department Therapeutic Goods Administration, accessed June 27, 2021, <https://www.tga.gov.au/periodic/covid-19-vaccine-weekly-safety-report-27-05-2021>.

rolling them out.<sup>95</sup> The opportunity for political points scoring seems to be too good to miss.

With the rising number of cases of the Delta variant of the virus, the decision has been taken by the Federal government to attempt to increase the rate of vaccination with the aim to have at least 70% of the Australian population vaccinated by Christmas 2021. It is clear that policy has now shifted towards the opinion that with 70% of the population vaccinated, the need for lockdowns will be unnecessary. Various government strategies have been employed to cajole people to get vaccinated. In Victoria, the state government's main strategy is to use threats, rather than positive incentives. The Premier has stated rather menacingly that lockdowns will continue until people come to their senses and get vaccinated. Those who object to vaccination are described as dangerous lunatics, jeopardising the health of the community.

For governments with a desire to be seen to be in charge and providing leadership, the virus is heaven-sent. It allows leaders of all political persuasions to be seen to be protecting people and fighting the virus. In Australia, it has seen several state governments returned with increased majorities on the strength of their handling of the pandemic. It has allowed governments to invoke emergency powers and to hang on to them and especially state governments in Australia discover a relevance that had all but been lost. The temptation to continue to hold onto the emergency powers for as long as possible is strong, but hopefully state leaders will realise that the real work of rebuilding economies and people's lives will begin once the pandemic is over.

### *Saving the body but destroying the soul*

The reaction of many people, particularly in Victoria, about the severe restrictions that they have had to live with during the pandemic has generally been meek and mild. A large number approve of the lockdowns and the bellicose stance of the Premier against criticisms of the severity and length of lockdowns.<sup>96</sup> He

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<sup>95</sup> "Victorian Authorities Hit Back at Claims the State is Hoarding Vaccine Doses," The Global Herald, accessed June 22, 2021, <https://theglobalherald.com/news/victorian-authorities-hit-back-at-claims-the-state-is-hoarding-vaccine-doses-7news/>.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, this report from the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). The ABC has been heavily criticised for being overtly left-leaning: Richard Willingham, "Premier Andrews needs to offer hope to ease mounting anger, but it is nearly an impossible task," ABC

frequently begins his daily press conference with stating that he makes no apologies for wanting to keep Victorians safe from the virus, from hospitals overflowing with sick and dying people and doing everything he can to return the state to some semblance of normalcy. Although he claims that he understands that people are missing their families, that sons and daughters cannot visit their elderly parents and vice versa, but without harsh restrictions, the virus cannot be beaten, and we cannot emerge from lockdown. While it is possible that as the series of lockdowns grows longer people might begin to rebel at the curtailment of basic freedoms,<sup>97</sup> there seem to be many people who seem to enjoy being ordered about by the government and treated as naughty children and spoken to patronisingly.

This phenomenon, of the willingness of people to give up their freedoms without much thought seems at first glance strange, but it seems clear that they value their lives above all else. In return for the loss of freedom, they will be protected by the state and their lives will be preserved. The emphasis is on saving the body, but at the cost of the soul. We have already alluded to the rise in mental health illnesses. The state government's justification for the harsh lockdown is that this is the only way in which the pandemic can be controlled, otherwise, both infections and deaths will likely run into the thousands and the state's hospital system will be overwhelmed with patients suffering from the virus. Certainly, as the very large number of cases and deaths that occurred in the United States, Italy and other countries in 2020 showed, a rapid response could in large measure prevent an explosion of cases and deaths. The Victorian situation, however, has been far from dire with relatively small numbers of infections from the Delta variant of the virus in the current lockdown. The government points to the situation in New South Wales where the number of daily cases have been escalating as a justification for introducing a severe lockdown. For example, in New South Wales in the first week of August 2021, the average number of daily cases was 252 in a state of 8.2 million people. This equates to 3.073 cases per 100,000 residents. By comparison, in Victoria, with a population of 6.7 million, the average number of cases of CoVid in the first week of August was 9, which equates to

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*News*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-24/victorian-government-retains-confidence-despite-lockdowns/100318930>.

<sup>97</sup> Sporadic protests have occurred. Calla Wahlquist, "Protestors in Melbourne clash with Victoria Police after Seven Day Lockdown Announced," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/aug/05/victoria-covid-update-snap-lockdown-being-considered-after-eight-new-cases-recorded>.

0.134 cases per 100,000 residents.<sup>98</sup> There has been only three deaths recorded from CoVid in the whole country, all three having occurred in New South Wales, during these most recent outbreaks of the virus. In New South Wales only Sydney, Newcastle and Hunter Valley are locked down, while in Victoria the whole state is locked down, despite few Covid cases being detected in the regions outside Melbourne.

The statistics are stark, pointing to a massive over reaction to the number of infections. If we accept the government justification that since the Delta variant of the virus is much more contagious than earlier iterations of the virus and that if it is not contained it will spread exponentially through the community, resulting a very high death toll, then its imposition of a strict and severe lockdown is reasonable. It is possible, however, to point to countries where the virus has spread rapidly through the population resulting in a high number of deaths, but lockdowns have been less onerous. The Indonesian government has a much stronger case for lockdown than either New South Wales or Victoria, yet, despite high numbers of cases daily, has prioritised keeping the country open and is not locked down, though restrictions have been implemented. These are not as severe as those imposed in Victoria. This has resulted in a high number of average daily cases. In the most recent statistics, there were 49,000 daily cases in the country. With a population of 272 million, this amounts to 18 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>99</sup> This is considerably more per 100,000 inhabitants than in either New South Wales or Victoria. It would be expected that, given the much larger number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants, the response in Indonesia would be correspondingly much harsher than in Australia and that restrictions on people would be more severe. This does not appear to be the case, however.

Though arguably the comparison might be thought to be invalid because it is comparing countries which are very unlike in terms of populations, economic strength and ability to adequately respond to the pandemic, it nevertheless illustrates that in certain

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<sup>98</sup> By late August both these figures have risen. NSW has nearly an average of 600 cases daily, while Victoria has an average of 40 cases daily. Lockdowns do not seem to be working to keep case numbers low.

<sup>99</sup> Data from the German-Indonesian Chamber of Commerce have indicated a drop in daily number in early August 2021, though they remain high. "Covid-19 Developments in Indonesia," German-Indonesian Chamber of Commerce, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://indonesien.ahk.de/en/infocenter/news/news-details/covid-19-developments-in-indonesia>.



areas, Australian restrictions have been very tight. The Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provides data on 17 different indicators of government response to the pandemic and provides a more complete picture of various measures that have been taken globally by different governments. Researchers have developed a Government Stringency Index, which is a composite measure which is calculated on school closures, workplace closures, cancellation of public events, restrictions on public gatherings, closures of public transport, stay-at-home requirements, public information campaigns, restrictions on internal movements and international travel controls. It confirms that in some areas, such as school closures, restrictions on public gatherings, restricting people to their homes, not allowing travel beyond 5 kilometres from your home and no international travel (except in special circumstances) the Australian response has been quite harsh. In other measures, however, Australia has been doing relatively well in comparison to other countries.<sup>100</sup>

The mantra from governments has been that harsh measures are needed to contain the virus and to keep it from infecting the most vulnerable members of the population. It is therefore necessary to restrict people's freedom of movement, as well as engaging in those activities which are crucial for the existence of a civil society and on which the state itself is founded. Preserving and protecting citizens from harm is one of the responsibilities of the state. Even libertarians such as Robert Nozick would agree that defence of the state is one of the few responsibilities that a minimalist conception of the state would accept.<sup>101</sup> Though what Nozick has in mind when he accepts that defence of the state is a government responsibility, is defence against external enemies such as other states. The Covid-19 virus could be viewed as an external threat, but it is unlikely that Nozick

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<sup>100</sup> Hannah Ritchie, Esteban Oriz-Ospina, Diana Beltekian, Edouard Mathieu, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Charlie Giattino, Cameron Appel, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, and Max Roser, "Coronavirus Government Response Tracker," *OxCGRT*, August 9, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid>.

This source, published by the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University, provides the most up to date data on the responses of governments around the world to the Coronavirus pandemic. As such, it is constantly updated.

<sup>101</sup> Nozick argues that the state exercises coercive power, but this should be limited to safeguarding property and the state. Only the state may exercise coercive power. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

would countenance the restrictions imposed on liberty because of the pandemic. This is because in his conception of the state, its role is to be limited to protecting citizens from violence, theft and fraud.<sup>102</sup> In Nozick's state responsibility for health care and its provision is not the responsibility of the government, but of private individuals. It is doubtful that he would regard the provision of mass vaccinations by the government as one of its responsibilities. Nozick's focus is on enabling individuals to exercise as much freedom as possible and for governments to have minimal interference in the lives of citizens.

While we do not accept Nozick's minimalist conception of government, the recognition of the importance of individual freedoms and the right of individuals to pursue their lives with as little interference of governments is crucial. This is because aside from physical well-being, human beings are, as Aristotle points out, social animals.<sup>103</sup> Protecting its citizens from the virus through measures which isolate them from those relationships which give their lives meaning destroys their souls. The price being paid for the preservation of physical health in many cases is the destruction of all that makes life meaningful. Human beings, as social animals, cannot survive without interaction with others, as MacIntyre observes, in *Dependent Rational Animals* since we are dependent from the moment we are conceived on others.<sup>104</sup> The great tragedy of human existence is that too many times human beings are betrayed by those on whom they depend. Nevertheless, as social beings, human persons need the freedom to live, work, play and enjoy each other's company. Though the preservation of life is important, this is not merely our physical life, but our mental, spiritual and relational life. It is the latter which gives meaning to the preservation of the former. Human well-being depends not only on physical health, but also mental and spiritual health. The ailing soul needs to be helped as much as, if not more, than the ailing body.

It is possible to survive poor physical health, but it is far difficult to survive poor mental health. In placing their emphasis on preserving the physical life of their citizens, governments lose sight of the reasons human beings want to live. It is not merely for the sake of continuing to exist, but for the relationships that give that life meaning. Remove someone's reason to live and he or she may

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1981), Book I.3, 1253a.

<sup>104</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1999), 3.

continue to exist, but the joy of living a fulfilled life will be gone. We need to recognise, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn does, that in order to survive we need to recognise that it cannot be at all costs, since the preservation of our physical lives cannot come at the cost of losing our souls, as this destroys our humanity, that is, what makes us human.<sup>105</sup>

The lockdowns described above have taken their toll on people's mental health everywhere. We have already mentioned the increase in stress and anxiety that has been caused. Preventing people from visiting their close relatives, for example, especially elderly parents who may already be living in isolation, is inhumane. Preventing families from being together, even if this prevents infections from Covid may be too high a price to pay. There is some evidence in Victoria, but also New South Wales, that the most recent Covid infection outbreaks that locked down Melbourne and Sydney have originated in parts of Melbourne and Sydney with high concentrations of migrants for whom family contact is vital and necessary for everyone's well-being.<sup>106</sup> Rather than condemning people for visiting their loved ones, perhaps it is more salient to ask why people are willing to risk contracting the virus just to see their families.

Because schools have been closed, then opened, then closed again, school children have developed various anxieties and phobias, one of which is obviously the fear of becoming infected with the virus. Not only has their schooling suffered, with teachers having to hastily assemble online materials at short notice, creating stress, but also their opportunities to interact with their school friends. For many people, the friends they make at school remain friends throughout their lives, providing support and solace, sharing in joys and other momentous moments. Being unable to attend school robs children of these opportunities to form lasting friendships. This is especially problematic for children who commenced their schooling in 2020, and who have experienced two years of disrupted schooling. It is also a problem for students who are completing their education and whose final year of schooling is crucial for gaining university entry into their chosen field of study. The constant stopping and starting of school has adversely affected

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<sup>105</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (London: Collins, 1974).

<sup>106</sup> Tahlea Aualiitia, and Dong Xing, "Sydney's Multicultural Communities Have Mixed Views on Lockdown – While Some Back the Measures, Others Fear They Target Migrants," *ABC News*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-15/sydney-community-members-react-to-latest-covid-tactics/100292930>.

the ability for children to learn and led to high levels of anxiety and in a sizeable number of children various forms of mental illness.

Education, despite what seems to be a neo-liberal consensus, is not just about the acquisition of skills and capacities which will enable school graduates to be employed, but also about socialisation, the formation of character and the development of spiritual and moral virtues. As embodied beings the online environment does not provide the kind of opportunities for human interaction that the school environment is able to provide. Pupils cannot be attentive to each other if they are not wholly present to each other. It is possible to interact with each other online, and see and hear the other person on screen, but such a presence is vastly different from being bodily present. Since human beings are social creatures, learning to apprehend moods and emotions is an important skill, but this is not possible without the ability to actually read the bodily cues that people give when they are talking to others. Socialisation requires children to be able to apprehend when they are upsetting someone, to know if another is sad, happy or angry. They need to learn to respect one another and to be aware that others may not feel or think the same way that they do. This is hardly possible if they do not have the chance to be together for an extended time in an environment where they can interact together. Learning to cooperate with each other, to learn that they are not the centre of the universe and that what it is that they desire is not the most important thing in the world are lessons that require being bodily present to each other. Bodily presence is necessary so that children can interact and relate to each other, learning to deal with their emotions and navigating personal relationships with others. Although sight and hearing are generally thought to be the most important of the five senses that human beings possess, a strong case can be made for the pre-eminence of touch. This is because the sense of touch is experienced over the whole body, with the hands, feet and lips being particularly sensitive. It is the sense which enables us to experience spatiality, and to feel the world around our bodies. Through a caress, we can experience love, a touch on the shoulder, sympathy, or through a slap someone's anger. Its absence from the lives of children (as well as adults) is crippling for the development and maintenance of healthy human relationships. Online interactions while allowing for visual and auditory presence do not allow human beings to be present to each other as fully as bodily presence does and so educationally are poor substitutes for the classroom.

Of the five sense organs, touch is the one which is most immediately missed in online learning, and as we have argued

contributes more to learning than is immediately apparent. While organs of smell and taste do not seem to be as involved in the learning process as sight and hearing, nevertheless, being bodily present in the classroom enables the deployment of all five senses. Smell and taste are not usually extensively engaged in the learning process, but do have their place, even if only incidentally. In chemistry, for example, the sense of smell is important in detecting the presence of various organic chemicals, such as aldehydes and ketones, while taste is important in cookery classes. After sight and hearing, touch is the next most important sense, and its absence in online learning contributes significantly to the attenuated and unsatisfactory experience that often is online learning.

The effect of constant lockdowns has had a devastating economic effect on small businesses such as cafes, restaurants, small retail outlets, and other small service providers who have been unable to conduct their businesses during lockdown. Financial help was provided by the Australian Federal government in 2020, via a program called Job Keeper,<sup>107</sup> this program ended in March 2021 and its benefits did not flow to sole traders, but those businesses who had employees who could not work because of the lockdowns. In any case, the provision of financial support addressed only one of the effects of the Covid pandemic. Together with financial uncertainty, bad enough in itself, has been the effect on the mental well-being on small business owners who have invested their energies into their businesses. Many are not only facing financial ruin, but also the shattering of their hopes and dreams through no fault of their own. The effect on self-esteem and sense of self-worth has been equally devastating. Moreover, it is not possible to plan for the future if lockdowns are announced randomly and with little warning whenever a new Covid case occurs. Victoria, for example, has experienced six lockdowns, of varying duration, over the past year and a half, with over 200 days being spent in lockdown. Building a client base and planning for the future is not possible if there is no certainty. It is not surprising that there are high levels of anxiety and stress among small business operators, especially those who are providing services that cannot be replaced by online delivery.

For the most part, throughout the duration of the pandemic, government employees have been secure in their jobs and unaffected by the uncertainties faced by many of those employed in the private sector, small businesses and as sole traders. Decisions

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<sup>107</sup> “Jobkeeper Payment,” Australian Government. The Treasury, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/jobkeeper>.

concerning the severity of restrictions and what services can continue to operate as the government tries to suppress outbreaks of the virus are made by bureaucrats who are in permanent employment and who have little experience or understanding of the impact on the lives of those affected by their decisions. Bureaucrats seemingly fail to understand that behind the statistics that they are fond of quoting to support their decisions to severely restrict the movement of people in the state and to close schools and businesses, are people whose lives are being destroyed. For example, for small business owners, mortgages are still required to be paid, families fed and clothed, children home-schooled when the schools are closed. Even if some financial relief is provided, generally this will not be sufficient, and unpredictable intermittent lockdowns do not allow for any kind of planning. It is small wonder that there is a significant rise in mental illness. Government, intent on suppressing the virus, fail to see the terrible effects of their chosen strategy in the fight against the virus.

Although people have been wearily compliant in observing the restrictions imposed during the lockdowns and those that continue to be in place, such as the continuing requirement to wear masks in indoor venues, save in restaurants which can provide proper distancing of diners, there is a disturbing trend for the government to use the police force and the army to help enforce its restrictions. This is most in evidence in the enforcement of border closures between states, and the requirement that individuals have permission to travel. The enforcement of lockdowns in, for instance, high rise apartments, is undertaken by police. Protests against lockdowns are met with an overwhelming display of force, with police sometimes exceeding the number of protestors.<sup>108</sup> It raises the question of who the police are meant to be protecting, and whether such displays of state power against its own citizens are necessary. The rising number of people attending such protests

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<sup>108</sup> The most recent protest in Melbourne was held on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2021. It was estimated that there were 4,000 protestors and there were violent clashes with police. See, Rachael Dexter, Cassandra Morgan, and Tom Cowie, "Six Police Officers Hospitalised, More Than 200 Arrested in Melbourne Anti-lockdown Protests," *The Age*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/ridiculous-police-warn-protesters-ahead-of-anti-lockdown-rally-in-melbourne-20210821-p58kp1.html>.

Similar protests were also held in Sydney and in Brisbane on the same day. See, "Covid: Australian Police Clash with Anti-lockdown Protestors," BBC News, accessed August 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-58291873>.

could be because of rising mental fatigue at the number and length of lockdowns, as well as an inchoate sense of alarm at the loss of basic freedoms during the pandemic.

### *Vaccinations, Anti-vaxxers and Permits*

Vaccination roll-out in Australia has been slow, though with the two biggest states, Victoria and New South Wales, largely locked down, and the Federal government aiming to reach 70-80% of the population vaccinated by December 2021, the number of Australians who have received at least one dose of one of the vaccines, Astra-Zeneca (renamed Vaxzevria and recommended for those over 60) or Pfizer, has been climbing. To date, some 46.6% of Australians over age 16 have had their first dose of Covid vaccine, while 25% over age 16 are fully vaccinated. Amongst the most vulnerable group, the over 70 age group, 82.5% have received their first dose and 50.9% are fully vaccinated.<sup>109</sup> It would seem that the government's target for this group at least will be reached in due course. The challenge will be for all age groups to meet the target.

One of the reasons for the slow up-take of the vaccines has been the adverse publicity that the Astra-Zeneca (Vaxzevria) vaccine, developed by the University of Oxford, has received because of the number of people who have suffered blood clots as a result of taking the vaccine. Though the numbers are very small, and there is more likelihood of death from car accidents, the media has highlighted each death in such a way that it seems that the number of deaths is much higher than statistics indicate. In Australia, 6 deaths have occurred that have been due to blood clots attributed to the vaccine, out of a total 6.1 million doses administered.<sup>110</sup> The likelihood of blood clots is greater in younger age groups, those below the age of 60, which is why the vaccine has been recommended for use in those over 60. Nevertheless, looked at dispassionately, the risks of fatal blood clots are low. According to the Australian government statistics, the number of road fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants is 4.8, whereas deaths from Vaxzevria

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<sup>109</sup> Scott Morrison, "National Cabinet Statement. Prime Minister of Australia," Media Statement, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-statement-51>.

<sup>110</sup> Michael Woodley, "Two More Deaths Linked to the Astra-Zeneca Vaccine," *NewsGP*, July 22, 2021, <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/two-more-deaths-linked-to-astrazeneca-vaccine>.

blood clots is only 0.1 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>111</sup> Despite these statistics, many people put off having the Vaxzevria vaccine in the hope that they might be able to have the Pfizer vaccine instead, which has fewer side-effects. Only belatedly, as a result of multiple lockdowns, have people come to the realisation that being vaccinated against the virus is prudent.

Government campaigns to encourage vaccination have oscillated between a saccharine appeal to communal solidarity to threats. An example of the first kind of appeal to solidarity is an advertisement expressing the sentiment, “we are all in this together,” with images of smiling celebrities with band aids (plasters) across their upper arms indicating that they have had their vaccinations and encouraging the rest of the community of laggards to get theirs. There is also a faint hint of a failure to do one’s patriotic duty if one does not get vaccinated. Such advertisements are far removed from reality, as illustrated by the fake band aids over the site of the vaccination injection. Unless the injection is utterly botched, there is no need for a band aid over the injection site. The fakery of the advertisement is hardly likely to encourage anyone to get vaccinated. There is also some inane virtue signaling by people proclaiming their vaccinated status on social media. Of a more sinister turn to authoritarianism are threats by the government to continue lockdowns and make them even more draconian if citizens fail to comply with restrictions and fail to get vaccinated.

As vaccinations are rolled out, there is debate about whether vaccination should be compulsory and whether it should be mandated for those who are front line health workers who may be vulnerable to infection, since they are tending to those who have the virus. At present, there is no government policy in relation to this, and hospitals and medical centers are left to make their own decisions. The ethical issue with making vaccinations compulsory revolves around the bodily autonomy of individuals and whether the government is justified in forcibly injecting people with a vaccine. There is no doubt that from a utilitarian perspective, ensuring that as far as possible all people are vaccinated is justified, since vaccination of, say, 90% or more of the population will mean little transmission of the virus. Thus, it can be argued that compulsory vaccination is for the greater good. On the other hand, taking respect for the autonomy of the individual as an inviolable principle would mean that compulsory vaccination is morally wrong because

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<sup>111</sup>“Road Statistics,” Australian Government, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.bitre.gov.au/statistics/safety>.



it is coercion, even if it results in more people contracting the Covid virus. It should be noted that no country makes influenza vaccination compulsory, even though large numbers of people around the world die from the influenza virus. Nevertheless, some companies have already stated that vaccination for employees against Covid is mandatory, if they wish to continue to work for the company.<sup>112</sup>

Other governments have been much quicker in making vaccination a condition for permitting people to leave their homes than has any of the state governments in Australia.<sup>113</sup> Vaccination certificates, similar to those introduced in other countries, are also being considered, but not so much as a means of facilitating interstate and international travel, but as a punitive measure. Those who are unvaccinated will not be able to leave their homes nor work. In effect, they will become prisoners in their own homes, as well as second class citizens since their right to freedom of movement has been taken away. Though there is some discussion about whether vaccination should be mandatory, the proposal to restrict the unvaccinated from participating in ordinary life has the effect of compelling unvaccinated people to get vaccinated. While it is too difficult to tell whether there is majority support for compelling citizens to be vaccinated, the signs seem to indicate that opinion is tending towards compulsory vaccination.

There is, at least in Australia, and particularly in Victoria, a steady erosion of freedom for the ordinary citizen. Over the duration of the pandemic, it has become increasingly evident that

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<sup>112</sup> For instance, on 4 August, 2021, SPC, a Shepparton food processing company, mandated vaccination against Covid for all employees.

Madelaine Morris, "Shepparton Food Processor SPC is the First Company in Australia to Mandate Covid-19 Vaccination for All Staff," *ABC News Breakfast*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-05/spc-first-australia-company-to-mandate-covid-vaccine-staff/100351492>.

Another company, QANTAS, the Australian airline, has also mandated Covid-19 vaccination for all its employees.

Nick Bonyhady, "By Law, Employers can Issue 'Reasonable' Directions to Workers. Will a Compulsory Covid Jab Qualify?" *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/by-law-employers-can-issue-reasonable-directions-to-workers-will-a-compulsory-covid-jab-qualify-20210817-p58jfu.html>. Other companies are considering following the same path.

<sup>113</sup> For example, France has already passed laws requiring a Covid pass for entry to restaurants and for travel. "French Parliament Approves Law Requiring Covid Pass for Restaurants, Travel," Associated Press, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210725-french-parliament-approves-law-requiring-restaurant-covid-pass-vaccine-rules>.

state governments are seizing the opportunity to become more authoritarian and seeking to usurp the Federal government. Though the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, established a National cabinet consisting of himself, the six state premiers and the chief ministers of the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory, to help develop a consistent national policy on tackling the pandemic, there is cooperation only if it suits a particular state's sectional interests. The state premiers act as though they are the heads of their own independent countries, repeatedly blaming the federal government for various administrative failures, while accepting no responsibility themselves. Borders are locked down without consultation, cutting off parts of the country from other parts. Travel from one part of the country requires a permit, which one state may give and another withhold. Cooperation between states is often lacking, since each state guards its territory as if it is facing an invasion from the Covid infected people from neighbouring states. The lack of a single decision-making body has resulted in a number of tragedies, for example, where individuals have not been able to visit their dying parents.<sup>114</sup> Bureaucrats seem to prefer a rigid application of the letter of the law, rather than risking the use of common sense, resulting in decision-making which violates human dignity by unnecessarily restricting freedom of movement when compassion is required.

Much of the problem could be ascribed to the Lilliputian abilities of the politicians and bureaucrats in charge of the states. State politics in Australia cannot be described as attracting the best and brightest minds. While a similar charge might be levelled at federal politics, it is far worse at the state level. With the possible exception of the NSW state premier, Gladys Berejiklian, the rest are mediocre, and the more mediocre the greater the resort to authoritarian edicts directed at controlling their citizens. This is not surprising, since the pandemic situation is complex, with many variables to be taken into account in decision-making about how to handle outbreaks of the virus. Listening to health advice, as some premiers are wont to do (and say they do), is only one part of the picture, there are economic considerations to be taken into account, as well as the social, mental and spiritual aspects of human life.

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<sup>114</sup> Some tragedies have occurred as a result of divided jurisdiction in which more than one state is processing applications for movement from one part of the country to another. Felicity Caldwell, "QLD Premier Says NSW Responsible for Man not Being by Dying Mum's Side," *Brisbane Times*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/qld-premier-says-nsw-responsible-for-man-not-being-by-dying-mum-s-side-20210708-p587xw.html>.

These are routinely ignored, as premiers, such as Daniel Andrews and Mark McGowan, pursue an unrealistic policy of zero Covid community transmissions.<sup>115</sup>

The demonisation of those who do not wish to be vaccinated is a very concerning trend, as is the idea that vaccination should be compulsory. It is consistent, however, with the ceding of individual freedoms to the government in exchange for being kept healthy, safe and secure. This is consistent with growing interference of government in people's private lives. Political correctness, supported by government, tries to control what people think, while government advertising tries to influence what people eat and drink. The conditions for making vaccination against Covid compulsory are already in place, since the community has already allowed the government to take away various freedoms in order to contain the spread of the Covid virus. Once vaccination is made compulsory, it is a short step to making healthy diets compulsory, to prohibiting the consumption of alcohol (except for no more than one standard drink per day to a maximum of five per week), and to enforcing mandatory morning exercise for everyone.<sup>116</sup> That is, once the government seizes power over the health of individuals in one area, there is no logical reason why it cannot seize it in others. Individuals become slaves to the state, as they have yielded their autonomous decision-making over their own health to the state. Once decision-making in one area has been ceded to the state, a precedent is established for the further erosion of liberty in other areas. These are already in evidence. With border closures preventing Australians from travelling from one state to another, freedom of movement is restricted. More worryingly, with lockdowns restricting movement to a maximum of 5 kilometers from home, freedom of movement is even more constrained within states and cities. Curfews, of dubious support in preventing the spread of the virus, are also imposed. Restrictions on religious worship,

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<sup>115</sup> The Western Australian premier, Mark McGowan, who in the last election virtually wiped out the opposition parties, has declared he wants to eradicate Covid entirely from Western Australia. This is achievable if he can isolate Western Australia completely from the rest of the world.

Peter Law, "Mark McGowan Holds Tough Zero Covid Stance Even When WA Reaches 80 per cent Vaccination Coverage," *The West Australian*, August 15, 2021, <https://thewest.com.au/news/coronavirus/mark-mcgowan-holds-tough-zero-covid-stance-even-when-wa-reaches-80-per-cent-vaccination-coverage-ng-b881969246z>.

<sup>116</sup> There is already an extensive literature which discusses the refusal of health care treatment of people who are overweight, smoke and who have made other poor life style choices resulting in poor health.

weddings and funerals, erode freedom of religion, a process already underway in a society hostile to religion. The Covid pandemic has provided a golden opportunity to accelerate this trend.<sup>117</sup>

### *A Concluding Note*

Given that we are seemingly still in the midst of the pandemic, it is too early to be able to draw any conclusions about the trajectory of the virus. Neither is it possible to make any predictions about how governments will proceed in the face of new strains of the virus, re-infections and the effect that lockdowns, restrictions of various kinds are having on their populations. We have suggested that some dangerous trends have appeared in the way in which the state governments in Australia have handled the pandemic. These, with the complicity of a citizenry too willing to accept the edicts of state leaders, are leading to steady erosion of freedoms that most democracies have taken for granted. The same, unfortunately, is also the case in other countries though Victoria and Australia more generally have led the way in imposing stringent lockdowns that take away essential freedoms from their citizens. Having given up these freedoms because of the urgent need to prevent the rapid spread of the virus, as has been contended by governments following so-called health advice, citizens of different states and countries are justified in having some fear that these freedoms will not be returned. The longer the virus persists as a serious illness that can cause the death of a percentage of the population, state leaders will continue to argue for a continuation of the emergency powers that they have invoked during the pandemic.

In Australia in particular, state premiers having been largely irrelevant for so long find themselves in a position to reassert themselves and to exercise real power over the citizens of their states in defiance of the Federal government. This has been demonstrated over and over again where decisions agreed by the National Cabinet (comprising the premiers of the states, chief ministers of the two territories and the Prime Minister) are subsequently ignored by premiers.<sup>118</sup> The only reason for this is

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<sup>117</sup> In the major cities, Melbourne and Sydney, churches are closed and no religious services can be conducted. Live streaming of services, however, is permitted, but this is a poor substitute for face to face attendance.

<sup>118</sup> Sarah Martin, "Morrison Facing State Resistance Over Re-opening Plan as NSW Covid Crisis Worsens," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/aug/23/morrison-facing-state-resistance-over-reopening-plan-as-nsw-covid-crisis-worsens>.

that defying the Federal government enhances the reputation of premiers in their states as tough and looking after state interests. This does no harm to their re-election chances. It does, however, a great deal of harm to the economic, social and mental health of their citizens and is utterly irresponsible and morally bankrupt. The most recent events suggest that the Prime Minister is willing to override the states in relation to lockdowns once the target of 70-80% of the population being vaccinated is reached. This target is expected to be reached by December 2021. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has also suggested that the pursuit of zero cases of Covid-19 is misguided and that Australians will need to live with the virus, if the country is to open up to international trade and travel once more.<sup>119</sup> Remaining a hermit kingdom is simply not an option. It remains to be seen whether states will relinquish their coercive powers once the target number of vaccinations in the population is reached.

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<sup>119</sup> Jake Evans, "Prime Minister Says that the Country Must Prepare for More Covid Cases and an End to Lockdowns," *ABC News*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-23/covid-prime-minister-vaccination-lockdowns-must-end/100398686>.

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