

We need more healthy scepticism to keep the powerful in check

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The Weekend Australian
22 August 2020



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Scott Morrison visits an AstraZeneca laboratory

Our incompetent, error-prone governments no longer deserve our blind trust and acquiescence

Remember when we were concerned about declining trust in government? We wondered why it was happening, and what it would mean for the future of good government and an engaged citizenry. Today, the issue is different. There is a surfeit of trust

— and this raises even more serious questions.

Why do people place so much trust in governments? How much easier will it be for future governments to operate as benevolent, but authoritarian, regimes? And what if, through our submission, benevolence slides into something worse?

Eight months after the first recorded case of COVID-19 arrived in Australia, governments have grabbed hold of a plethora of draconian powers that few of us could have imagined, except in the plot of an old sci-fi movie or a history book about East Germany.

Understandably, facing the unknown, most of us accepted the first wave of restrictions. Cancelling inbound flights to prevent the virus arriving and spreading made eminent sense. Social distancing remains sensible. We accepted lockdowns, fenced-off beaches, and police patrolling parks and streets for miscreants.

But many restrictions that made sense many months ago no longer make sense. This week, school formals were cancelled in NSW. School sport has been neutered. And dancing at weddings remains verboten. But if polls are to be believed, Australians are on board with submitting to a growing list of government decrees.

Put another way, the healthy Aussie scepticism of authority has disappeared faster than a fart in a windstorm.

This week, drones were introduced in Victoria to make it easier for police to catch people venturing outside their homes for illegal reasons. Senior Constable Ruben Gilles told local news source The Port Phillip Leader: "It will be a brilliant tool for crowd control." Yes, indeed. How much easier policing could be with some more Soviet-style techniques.

Premiers aren't erring on the side of constitutional caution when it comes to borders either. Witness the current arms race of border controls by South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Qantas's Alan Joyce is right to be exasperated that there is no clear set of rules, based on sound health advice, to offer Australians and Australian businesses hope about the borders opening.

But why would Premiers take much notice of the Prime Minister berating them about state borders when the federal government continues to ban Australians from leaving the country without a special exemption, based on exceptional circumstances, signed off by some unaccountable bureaucrat in a back office. The border commissars gave

Shane Warne permission to commentate on the cricket in London. But three out of four applications by other Australians have been rejected.

Again, most Australians seem just fine with these continuing incursions and double standards on lives and livelihoods, with no end game from state or federal governments. Voices of dissent are still few and far between.

Making Australians fearful has been critical in lulling us into quiet submission. And to maintain a sense of fear, goalposts have kept moving to the point where they are no longer visible. The Morrison government locked down the economy relying on modelling with a best-case scenario of 50,000 deaths. As of Friday, the number of deaths from COVID-19 stands at 459. Flattening the curve has been and gone. Hospital capacity has been built, ICU beds lie empty. And why would state and federal governments lay out an exit strategy to the continuing lockdown when most Australians seem content with disproportionate restrictions that continue to destroy lives and livelihoods?

Our unquestioning submission is causing other dire consequences. It is becoming clear that when we don't expect accountability from government, none is forthcoming from politicians prone to blame-dodging.

This week, the NSW Premier apologised for the deadly consequences of the Ruby Princess fiasco: hundreds of passengers infected with COVID-19 were allowed to leave the ship on March 1, spreading the virus into the Australian community and causing at least 28 deaths. But no one, not Health Minister Brad Hazzard, nor a single health official, has been sacked or even disciplined, for deadly mistakes inquiry chief Bret Walker called "inexplicable" "unjustifiable" and "inexcusable".

In Victoria, the Andrews government has been sitting on information about the source of second-wave community transmission — 99 per cent from two Melbourne hotels. The Andrews government has been caught out misleading the public about offers of ADF help too. Yet no one has stepped down, even stepped aside, for the single biggest policy failure in Australia, one that continues to kill people and cause untold damage to lives and livelihoods.

At the federal level, while the Prime Minister blames the Victorian government for the disaster in Victorian aged-care homes, it is clear that the Morrison government is responsible for catastrophic deaths of our most vulnerable citizens.

Deaths in March and April at Newmarch House and Dorothy Henderson Lodge in NSW should have been a wake-up call. But as Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission into Aged Care Peter Rozens QC said earlier this month, "neither the commonwealth Department of Health nor the agedcare regulator developed a COVID-19 plan specifically for the aged-care sector".

The government's failure was slammed the same day the Prime Minister accused Andrew Bolt of being "heartless" and "amoral" and offering up the elderly to this deadly disease. Is this what we should expect when raising questions about some of the nonsensical pandemic rules? Normally this kind of rubbish emanates from the waves of ABC radio.

There is, of course, a thick black line between scepticism that encourages a government to govern better during a health crisis, and wicked distrust that undermines safety and good government.

The latter will come to the fore now that the Morrison government has locked in a deal for the Australia-wide supply of the world's first potential COVID-19 vaccine. The letter-of-intent signed with drug giant Astra-Zeneca means that every Australian will be offered the University of Oxford vaccine for free if and when it becomes available.

The prospect of a coronavirus vaccine has given new lease to anti-vaxxers who, this week, bombarded social media sites with irrational conspiracy theories. Their distrust of science, corporations and government is nothing short of deranged. A cab driver told me this week the pandemic is a conspiracy caused by 5G, and that Bill Gates secretly wants to implant us with a tracking device using a COVID-19 vaccine.

As someone on Facebook said of the optimism of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, they obviously have never been project managers: getting even a dozen people to act in

concert with no blabbing is impossible.

Alas, anti-vaxxers have always been with us. In December 2014, when parents could lodge "conscientious objections" against childhood vaccinations, more than 39,000 children aged under seven were not vaccinated. There was nothing conscientious about their objections: children, and the most vulnerable in our community, were threatened with entirely preventable diseases such as polio, diphtheria and whooping cough.

The Abbott government's "no jab, no play" policy introduced in early 2015, making some family tax benefits, including childcare rebates, contingent on children being vaccinated, has boosted the number of vaccinated children. This week, the federal Department of Health said Australia was on track to meet the 95 per cent target needed for herd immunity, with more than 94.6 per cent coverage for one- and five-year-old children, and more than 91.6 per cent for two-year-old children.

Anti-vaxxers will remain lurking below the surface or hollering on social media like Pauline Hanson. While no serious person will sink to the dangerous and pathological distrust of governments by COVID-19 anti-vaxxers, there is such a thing as a healthy dose of scepticism. Refusing a "vaccine" plugged by Vladimir Putin, for example. Getting the trust balance right is just as critical when Australian governments are exercising powers more at home in Putin's Russia. Speaking of which, Victorian Premier Dan Andrews said this week that it was unlikely that the virus would ever be completely eliminated. You don't say.

That means a healthy level of scepticism of government is our best shot at guarding against future governments assuming draconian powers at gradually lower bars, and making even worse mistakes than those made over the past six months.