

Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

Second Discussion Paper – COVID-19

The committee is inviting submitters to consider a number of questions in relation to COVID-19 and the implications for nationhood, national identity, and democracy, and make a submission (or supplementary submission) by 30 August 2020. Below are some issues the committee asks submitters to consider.

COVID-19 is testing governments, communities and societies around the world. Where governments have acted slowly, or chosen not to act, tens of thousands have died from the virus. Where they have acted decisively, the restrictive measures put in place to slow the spread of the virus have put pressure on social, political and economic systems, revealing cracks and tensions. However, these measures have also brought out strength of character, resilience, kindness and generosity.

Already reeling from a summer of bushfires and droughts, Australians feel as if they have been hit again. The economic impacts of social distancing measures have seen many lose their jobs, or have their incomes reduced. Some have lost their homes. Some have lost loved ones. Yet we have seen Australians rally, and we have seen governments set aside differences, working together to shield as many as possible from the blows. Surveys suggest that most Australians have supported the restrictive measures, and believe our governments are doing a good job.ⁱ

As restrictions are eased, we can begin to reflect on what Australia's response to COVID-19 may tell us about our nation, and about ourselves.

- *What is it about our democracy that has enabled Australia to weather the storm as we have so far?*

Freedom and responsibility

Responding to COVID-19 has required us to give up some of our freedoms temporarily. We have faced restrictions on who can enter the country, enforced quarantine for new arrivals, state and territory border controls, and limits on public gatherings. Police were granted new powers of enforcement, with penalties in some states as high as \$50,000 for corporations and jail time for individuals. There were significant differences between the states and territories, with some state enforcement measures coming under criticism.ⁱⁱ

In a democratic country like Australia, we are not used to having our freedoms restricted like this. Yet most Australians accepted that restrictions on our freedoms were necessary to contain the virus. Some countries have tried to control the pandemic without resorting to restrictive measures. Sweden, unlike other Nordic countries, chose not to enforce strict social distancing measures. Its infection and mortality rates have been higher than its neighbours, and its government has faced criticism for its approach.ⁱⁱⁱ

While we value our freedom, it appears most Australians have been willing to comply, willing to temporarily give up many of our freedoms to protect the health system, our families, and our communities from the threat of an uncontrolled pandemic. Early research indicates that many Australians identify the desire to protect the vulnerable, and to do 'the right thing', as their primary motivations for social distancing, rather than self-protection.^{iv}

- *Which of our freedoms should we be willing to give up for protection? For how long should we give them up?*
- *What is a proportional response to a pandemic? At what point does the remedy become worse than the disease? Did any of the enforcement measures cross the line?*

Alongside citizens, governments have played their part, acting swiftly to support Australians in difficult times. The federal and state and territory governments are providing unprecedented social and economic support and stimulus. Initiatives including JobKeeper, JobSeeker, the childcare package, state-based rates relief, and direct cash payments among others have helped to cushion the impact.

- *Without these supports, would Australians be willing to accept the limits on our freedoms?*
- *Do the restrictions and supports during COVID-19 offer any insights into the relationship between the state and citizens, their obligations and responsibilities?*

Trust

While trust in governments has been declining worldwide over a number of decades, research conducted during the pandemic suggests that Australians and New Zealanders have placed high levels of trust in their governments at this time.

Multi-country research by the Australia Institute found that government is the ‘most trusted’ source of information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.^v Similarly, the Lowy Institute found that government was a key source of trusted information during the pandemic. Lowy reported that: ‘Australians have preferred to look to the Prime Minister (59%), government websites (50%) and the ABC (50%) as their sources of information during the pandemic’.^{vi} It seems most Australians have continued to rely on the government and continued to trust Australia’s chief scientists and medical advisors over social media ‘influencers’.^{vii}

Over seventy per cent of Australians, and over eighty per cent of New Zealanders, surveyed by the Australia Institute said their governments’ response to COVID-19 had been ‘good or better’. Less than half of Americans said the same.^{viii} The Lowy Institute reported that over ninety per cent of Australians ‘express confidence’ in the chief medical officers, over eighty-five per cent in state and territory governments, and over eighty per cent in the federal government, in responding to the coronavirus outbreak.^{ix}

It appears that those levels of confidence have not extended to the COVIDSafe app. Around 6.1 million of Australia’s 16.4 million adult smart phone users have downloaded the COVIDSafe app – just under 40 per cent.^x Some are unable to download it due to technical issues, some are worried about privacy or their data, but research suggests a majority of those who have chosen not to download the app ‘just don’t think COVID-19 is severe enough’ at this point to warrant downloading the app.^{xi}

Some have commented that COVID-19 appears to be *increasing* levels of trust in the institution of government, at least in countries where the pandemic is being controlled, such as New Zealand and Australia.^{xii} Some suggest the trust placed in medical science and epidemiology during the pandemic may also offer an opportunity to engage citizens in a broader, ongoing discussion around trust in science.^{xiii}

- *Why does trust in governments appear to increase in times of crisis?*

- *What is it about the response to this crisis that has inspired Australians to place more trust in their governments?*
- *Why do Australians report slightly higher trust in state and territory governments than in the federal government?*
- *What lessons can governments take away from times of crisis to ensure they can maintain the trust of Australians?*

COVID-19 and democracy

Some autocratic regimes have suggested that democracies may not be as good at handling pandemics as non-democratic countries.^{xiv} China's *Global Times* newspaper argued that China's 'strong' 'accountability system' allowed it to quickly and effectively control the virus.^{xv} However, many have criticised China's early response, saying it withheld information from other nations and downplayed the seriousness of the virus at first – claims that China disputes.^{xvi}

Evidence on the number of COVID-19 infections and fatalities around the world shows that many democratic countries are having success in their fight against COVID-19.^{xvii} Notable examples include South Korea, New Zealand, Portugal, Greece,^{xviii} and Australia. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute notes that, among the top performing countries, a *majority* are democracies.^{xix}

Prominent exceptions include the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), where infection rates and deaths from COVID-19 have been higher than many believe they should have been.^{xx}

The response to COVID-19 in the USA sits in stark contrast with Australia. Where Australian governments have come together, many US governors report being frustrated with the US federal response, receiving inadequate support, and having to compete for medical resources. Protests against lockdown measures in a number of states speak to the views of Americans around personal freedoms and liberty, and reveal a tension between the desire to promote public safety, and the need of citizens to make a living in a country with a limited social safety net.^{xxi}

Perhaps the most striking difference between the USA and Australia is captured in research conducted by the US Studies Centre, La Trobe University and the University of Melbourne, which identified a deep divide in public attitudes towards lockdown measures, and levels of trust in medical experts, divided along partisan lines. These divisions simply do not exist in Australia, where citizens of all political persuasions report support for the actions taken by their governments, and high levels of trust in medical experts.^{xxii}

Division and disunity also characterise the response in the UK, but to a lesser degree. The government was slow to act, initially opting for a 'herd immunity' approach. This approach allowed the infection to spread quickly before the government changed its strategy and implemented a lockdown.^{xxiii} Recent polling suggests UK citizens are now divided on whether it is too soon to relax the lockdown measures, with many fearing a second wave of infections.^{xxiv}

- *What makes a political system 'effective'? What makes it 'efficient'?*
- *How should governments balance the need to protect life with the need to protect livelihoods?*
- *How can democracies best protect and serve their populations in a crisis?*

Political commentators have been concerned for some time about the rise of individualism and demise of liberalism in the USA, UK and some other countries, leading to increasing polarisation, and opening the way for populist leaders.^{xxv}

It has been suggested that failure to act quickly to control the pandemic in the UK and the USA – leading to over 40 000 deaths in the UK and over 100 000 deaths in the USA – should be attributed to populist nationalist governments pursuing untested approaches, rather than their democratic systems.^{xxvi}

It remains to be seen whether COVID-19 will have an impact on the political futures in these countries.

- *Why do countries with ‘populist’ leaders appear to have more deaths from COVID-19?*
- *Why have countries such as Australia and New Zealand not embraced populist leaders up to this point?*
- *What will be the impact of COVID-19 on liberal democracy around the world?*

There is some evidence from surveys, and regular claims from commentators, of negative trends in Australia during the coronavirus, including increases in: racial abuse and assaults, particularly of Asian Australians and Asian temporary residents;^{xxvii} domestic violence during the lockdown and enforced social restrictions;^{xxviii} the number and virulence of conspiracy theories, including about COVID-19’s origins, and its effects; trolling on social media and challenges to expert advice, such as medical and scientific advisers to government.^{xxix}

- *Has COVID-19 presented an opportunity for negative trends to emerge in Australia?*
- *Are these signs of mistrust in the messages and actions of Australia’s governments and other pillars of our democracy, such as the established media?*
- *In which parts of our community does this mistrust exist?*

Decision-making and accountability

A key difference between democracy and some other forms of government is accountability. Democratic governments are accountable for the decisions they make and face scrutiny over their expenditure and administration. The response to COVID-19 has seen governments move quickly and in innovative ways. But even in a crisis, democratic governments must remain accountable to citizens.

Early in the response to the pandemic, many parliaments around the world suspended their sittings to prevent the spread of the virus, including Australian parliaments.^{xxx} This led to fears that the democratic process could be sidelined in the name of the virus, and resulted in calls for safeguards to be implemented.^{xxxi} There are some signs that the arrangements made to cope with the health and economic effects of COVID-19 have put at risk ongoing levels of parliamentary scrutiny of government decisions and actions.

Commonwealth and state parliamentary sittings were reduced during the COVID-19 response.

- *Is that a valid move during an emergency or should parliaments have continued sitting, with appropriately safe arrangements?*
- *Is this part of a pattern of reducing parliamentary oversight and public accountability, reflected, for example, in the number of non-disallowable instruments being presented to the*

Commonwealth Parliament, or the non-public disclosure of the financial and other interests of people advising the government on COVID-19 related issues?

- *What is the appropriate level of parliamentary scrutiny during a national emergency, at Commonwealth and state/territory level?*
- *Have the COVID-19 arrangements reduced the scope of political debate?*
- *What lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 arrangements to 'improve' Australia's federal system of government?*

Parliaments have found ways to continue their critical work, with some using pairing arrangements to sit while maintaining social distancing, some using technology to facilitate meetings, and some setting up committees to scrutinise government responses. The Australian Senate's Select Committee on COVID-19 has already made an impact, providing a forum for discussion around economic stimulus, the COVIDSafe app, and social welfare packages, and the impact of the crisis response on different sectors.^{xxxii}

The National Cabinet – a COVID-19 innovation – has allowed the federal and state and territory governments to coordinate their responses on a national level, in a largely consistent way. Research on the German response indicates that decentralised and federal systems may actually have an advantage in fighting a pandemic, as state-level governments often have more legitimacy than centralised governments, states can learn from each other, and better-performing states put pressure on those that underperform.^{xxxiii}

It has not all been smooth sailing. There have been disputes between some states and the Commonwealth around whether or not to close schools, and around when and how students should return.^{xxxiv} However, the introduction of a National Cabinet is considered a success, and a rediscovery of Australia's federal system. Hence, current Council of Australian Government (COAG) Leaders' arrangements are being scrapped in favour of an ongoing National Cabinet, with the claim that this will generate faster decisions and regenerate the federal system.^{xxxv}

- *What happens to the policy specific arrangements of the Commonwealth and states which currently support COAG and continue coordinated work between Leaders' meetings?*
- *Are Australians emerging from the crisis with a better understanding of how our federal system of government works?*
- *With the greater co-ordination between levels of government during the COVID-19 event, has there been a blurring of responsibilities and a reduction in accountability to the public?*
- *Has Australia struck the right balance between efficiency and accountability in responding to the virus? Have the measures put in place to ensure scrutiny and accountability are maintained been sufficient?*
- *Are Australia's democratic traditions being challenged by a lack of public debate, for example on the use of Australia's defence forces (ADF) in 'non-military' actions, such as accompanying state police forces during the COVID-19?*
- *Will Australia's democracy emerge from COVID-19 stronger or weaker?*

Australians' engagement with the world

Travel bans and border closures have suddenly and profoundly changed the way Australia engages with the world. Permanent and temporary migration are at a virtual standstill. Many international students and temporary migrants have returned to their countries of origin. Australians have returned from

overseas. Even travel across state borders has been restricted. There is talk of establishing ‘travel bubbles’ with New Zealand, and possibly some of our Pacific neighbours.

The International Air Transport Association has suggested international air travel will not return to pre-COVID levels until 2023.^{xxxvi} It is unclear at this stage how long this situation will last or how it will impact on our society and our national character.

- *Will Australians become more insular?*
- *Will the creation of ‘travel bubbles’ change our habits and preferences?*
- *What will the pandemic change about the way in which nations and peoples relate to each other?*

ENDNOTES

ⁱ ‘Seven in 10 Australians (71%) said their governments’ response to COVID-19 has been good or better’. Source: Bill Browne, ‘Global attitudes to COVID-19 pandemic and response’, *The Australia Institute*, 4 May 2020, at <https://www.tai.org.au/content/trust-time-covid-19-global-polling-shows-government-only-institution-trusted-lead-world-out> (accessed 29 May 2020). See also: ‘Nine in ten Australians (93%) say Australia has handled COVID19 very or fairly well so far.’ Source: Natasha Kassam, *COVIDpoll: Lowy Institute polling on Australian attitudes to the coronavirus pandemic*, May 2020, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ In NSW, citizens were encouraged to ‘dob in’ their neighbours for flouting the rules, and police were seen to ‘crack down’ on people for being out without a ‘reasonable excuse’. Source: Paul Harpur, ‘COVID-19 in Australia: Protecting Public Health by Restricting Rights & Risking the Rule of Law’, *Harvard Law Bill of Health Blog*, at <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2020/05/14/australia-global-responses-covid19/> (accessed 21 May 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Timo Minssen, ‘Sweden’s Response to COVID-19: A Tale of Trust, Recommendations, and Odorous Nudges’, *Harvard Law Bill of Health Blog*, at <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2020/05/12/sweden-global-responses-covid19/> (accessed 25 May 2020)

^{iv} Holly Seale, et al. ‘COVID-19 is rapidly changing: Examining public perceptions and behaviours in response to this evolving pandemic’, [not yet peer reviewed], 8 May 2020, p. 15.

^v Bill Browne, ‘Global attitudes to COVID-19 pandemic and response’, *The Australia Institute*, 4 May 2020, at <https://www.tai.org.au/content/trust-time-covid-19-global-polling-shows-government-only-institution-trusted-lead-world-out> (accessed 29 May 2020)

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^{ix} Natasha Kassam, *COVIDpoll: Lowy Institute polling on Australian attitudes to the coronavirus pandemic*, May 2020, p. 6.

^x Sophie Meixner, ‘How many people have downloaded the COVIDSafe app and how central has it been to Australia’s coronavirus response?’, *ABC News Online*, at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-02/coronavirus-covid19-covidsafe-app-how-many-downloads-greg-hunt/12295130> (accessed 3 June 2020)

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Why do epidemics breed conspiracy theories? And what do scientists say?

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