



Masked Intentions

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Even in Liberal-led South Australia, COVID-19 is becoming an excuse to usher in Orwellian controls, warns journalist Paul Mitchell.

Never mind that COVID-lite South Australia is currently trialling an SA government-developed facial recognition app, aimed at returning travellers who are quarantining at home. Disregard the fact this app—marketed as the “safe, sustainable and cost-effective alternative to medi-hotel quarantine” it may well be, and green-lit by a nominally conservative government—beeps and requires users to show proof of their location to authorities within 15 minutes. Focus instead on two points. First, it took a US magazine, Boston-based *The Atlantic*, to question whether this app—combining facial recognition and geolocation—might be a jump-the-shark moment for civil liberties in Australia, and ponder that it was waived through with nary a whisper of dissent. But second, consider the juxtaposition of this potentially precedent-setting, Big Brother technology against the high-trust sentiment South Australians have towards their State government, and its occasionally onerous, even ridiculous COVID-19 restrictions.

[**STOP PRESS** (17 December, 2021): *Erratic and punitive last minute rule changes have forced a fully vaccinated South Australian into Hotel Quarantine for two weeks, as reported by the ABC, [here.](#)*]

The app's creation has led to Orwellian comparisons, and while these mentions have been derided, the government's own Q&A information sheet does state, curiously, that Quarantine SA is voluntary "at this time". But those considerations have exited the State quicker than a pie-floater down a Coopers-swilling R. M. Williams worker's throat, which is not surprising, given the past 18 months in SA.

Like 'The Rachel'—popularised on Friends in the 1990s—and Farrah Fawcett's do in *Charlie's Angels*, SA has embraced its own iconic hair style over the past 18 months. 'The Nicola' sprung from the Croweaters' gushing affection for SA's Chief Health Officer, Professor Nicola Spurrier—she of the grey bob and kindly teacher' tone. Prof Spurrier has become the face and voice of SA's COVID-19 management strategy, outshining—follicly and metaphorically—the State's Liberal Premier, Steven Marshall. To the rest of us it is a puzzling affection normally reserved for SA's AFL footballers—provided they are winning—and the Tour Down Under bike race.



SA's Chief Health Officer, Prof Nicola Spurrier,
with SA Police Commissioner Grant Stevens.
Photo: NCA NewsWire/Naomi Jellicoe via AAP

Given the restrictions Prof Spurrier and the State government have foisted upon the largely COVID-free State over the past 18 months, the love affair can only be attributed to the 'keeping us safe' gratitude seemingly adopted by millions of Australians.



Thanks to its low COVID-19 infection numbers—whether achieved by luck, good (middle) management, or a combination of both—and its national profile, SA has mostly slipped under the media’s guard, save for a few notable exceptions spearheaded by Prof Spurrier.

Dancing restrictions have shimmied all over the place.

Her infamous “duck and do not touch that ball” directive gave the rest of the country a comical but depressing glimpse of life inside SA. She issued the warning to prevent Adelaide Oval spectators from innocently retrieving a football kicked into the crowd and somehow catching COVID-19 from visiting Victorian players.

In the main, it has been an orderly conga line of compliance, with only the occasional questioning of Prof Spurrier, Mr Marshall and the third member of the ruling trio, Police Commissioner Grant Stevens.

In national commentary, Mr Marshall has been criticised for his overly cautious approach, but even then only as a footnote among opinion pieces and panel discussions devoted chiefly to more newsworthy States—those that actually endured high numbers of COVID-19 infections.

But SA has been locked down a couple of times, including when Prof Spurrier speculated that a COVID-positive man may have contracted the virus from a pizza box, amid talk of a new, even-more infectious strain of the disease tipped to quickly engulf the State.

It didn’t, and it wasn’t.

Meanwhile, the Woodville Pizza Bar is still trying to recover and South Australians have been left thinking the government’s finger is perpetually hovering over the lockdown button.



As of early to mid-September, SA was sailing along without community transmissions, but thanks to a July outbreak quickly countered by one of those 'go hard, go early' snap lockdowns, remained lumbered with onerous restrictions for hospitality businesses.

A preposterous ban on drinking while standing has been in, out, in, then out again, while dancing restrictions have shimmied all over the place. At the time of writing, dancing at weddings was a privilege only to be enjoyed by the bridal party; the socially distanced guests presumably reduced to clapping along while stuck in their chairs sipping a Barossa Valley shiraz or a Riverland chardonnay.

Inconsistency has been the sole consistency among COVID-19 restrictions in SA and, it must be said, the rest of the nation. Like Queensland, football attendances have been in the spotlight, though thankfully the rank hypocrisy blithely employed by Annastacia Palaszczuk has been absent.

However, cynical folk might speculate about the motives behind Mr Marshall's decision to settle on final AFL crowd numbers incrementally. The first week of the finals saw a last-minute increase to the much-publicised capped crowd number at Adelaide Oval—from 15,000 to 20,000. The extra 5,000 was welcomed with open arms and played well in the media. Hmmm.

Complaining about masks in SA seems almost rude, given the experiences interstate, but taken in context, such commentary is telling. The wearing of masks at shopping centres and all indoor venues—plus some outdoor venues, such as community sport—was made mandatory after the July outbreak. After seven days, the lockdown was lifted, but the mask requirements remain in place, and despite a few grumblings it seems most South Australians are OK with that.

It seems we are meant to feel grateful for the freedoms we enjoy, given the dire situations in NSW and Victoria in particular, and any dissenting voices are quickly reminded that “we’re doing much better than they are”.

It is as if our freedoms are treated as the property of politicians and unelected public servants to give and take away at their taxpayer-funded whim.

For a while, daily media conferences were a thing in SA, and look no further than Chris Kenny’s surprise appearance at one of them, back in late June, to best illustrate how the rest have played out.

Questioning experts is a no-go zone in COVID-obsessed Australia.

The Sky News journo dared trying some different questions, querying SA’s elimination strategy and Prof Spurrier’s suggestions of an 80 per cent immunisation target. “Doesn’t that seem unreasonably high given that no country has got to that level and we might not ever get to that level?” he asked. “Also because of the very mild health threat the disease poses to anyone outside those vulnerable groups?”

Prof Spurrier’s reply illustrated that until that time, SA media conferences, while replete with rapid-fire interrogations about the nuts and bolts of lockdowns and restrictions, had steered well clear of any Big Picture questions.

“Look, I really just find it quite surprising to be at a press conference and have somebody suggest that there are very minor consequences to COVID-19,” she said.

Kenny tried to interject, stating: “That’s a fact.”

But the Professor continued, in a tut-tut schoolyard tone: “We still have many, many people dying around the world and we’ve also had four deaths here in Australia.”

Kenny had another go: “Do you know there’s not been one community transmission that’s led to death in this country all year?”

But the rug was pulled from under the journo when the definition of media conference and PR event were blurred and the professor moved on.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I’m here to provide information to the South Australian public.”

Like all Australian leaders, Mr Marshall has deferred decision-making responsibility to his experts, Prof Spurrier and Mr Stevens, and as we all know, questioning experts is a no-go zone in COVID-obsessed Australia.

Adelaide’s sole metro daily, *The Advertiser*, has editorialised its support for our State’s often unnecessarily harsh measures on multiple occasions. After just one term in opposition, the SA

Labor Party is—if you’ll pardon the racetrack expression—considered a better than fluker’s hope of regaining power from the Liberal Party at the 2022 State Election.

Opposition Leader Peter Malinauskas has provided bipartisan support, telling *The Murray Pioneer*: “Grant Stevens and Nicola Spurrier have been making the big decisions to keep our State safe and I continue to back their judgement.”

Since his job is to lead an Opposition we might wonder why, but admittedly all the indicators are it would be an unpopular opinion (less than a year out from an election). At times, it is like some South Australians feel they have somehow missed out on saddling up for the ‘we’re all in this together’ punishment meted out to NSW and Victoria.

Indeed, before the State went into its July snap lockdown, Channel 7 Adelaide news anchor Jane Doyle signed off her bulletin with “Stay safe, and stay home”. Yes, *before*.

But given how quickly politicians of all colours and mainstream media have agreed that Vaccine Passports are sensible and fair (and *The Advertiser* recently had positive front-page coverage of a local winery’s landmark move to impose a hard-line ‘no vax, no entry’ policy), how soon before facial recognition apps and the like are also accepted and unquestioned parts of everyday life, like QR codes, masks, and regarding all lives lost to COVID-19 as priceless, rather than precious?



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This article from the [Spring 2021 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by journalist Paul Mitchell.