



Power To The People

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After COVID and Cancel Culture have incited fear and guilt, it is time to restore the virtues and attitudes that made Australia a country to be proud of, argues IPA Distinguished Fellow Tony Abbott.

Back in 1986, John Howard observed that “the times will suit me”. They did not at the 1987 election, but eventually they did, and he went on to become our second longest serving prime minister. As well, he was the first Australian PM to describe himself as a ‘conservative’, albeit a ‘Burkean’ one. With the pandemic still inhibiting daily life and generating almost unimaginable public spending, even from governments of the centre-right, this is a dispiriting time for everyone wanting government that’s smaller, tax that’s lower, and freedom that’s greater. Yet even in the face of a pandemic, it remains a fact that government cannot spend a dollar that it does not raise today or will not pay back tomorrow. And once the fear of disease has passed, people’s instinct for freedom will reassert itself.

In the meantime, those with a preference for freedom and a concern for lasting prosperity still



have to 'fight the good fight'. Perhaps their focus has to be even more on the one main element of conservatism that's not in temporary eclipse, namely love of country, with all that involves: respect for our institutions, pride in our history, and faith in our future.

Scott Morrison was right when he said at the start of the pandemic that 2020 could be the worst year of our lives. The challenge is to make sure that it's just one bad year; and not the start of a dismal decade or a lost generation. That means trying to learn from this experience rather than entrenching what is unsustainable.

As Health Minister in the Howard government from 2003 to 2007, I massively upgraded the National Medicine Stockpile, including all-but-cornering the world market for anti-viral drugs, in anticipation of a possible bird flu pandemic. Back then, the National Pandemic Plan included early international border closures, special isolation facilities, mobile testing and treatment, and ramped-up ICUs. It never included, even in its August 2019 iteration, advice to close state borders, shut workplaces and cancel mass gatherings in a moderate pandemic. Its "ethical framework" included "ensuring that the rights of the individual are upheld as much as possible" and "that measures taken are proportional to the threat".

Because bird flu had a case fatality rate approaching 50 per cent and because even a readily transmissible pandemic variant was thought likely to be at least as deadly as Spanish Flu, the challenge, I thought back then, would be to keep essential services going—not to order people to stay at home. It is curious how much of the response to Covid has mimicked the response to the Spanish Flu pandemic of a century ago, with state borders closed, large events banned, hotels and restaurants shut, and compulsory mask-wearing, even though Covid-19 has turned out to be far less dangerous. In Australia, Spanish Flu is thought to have killed about 15,000 people from a population of five million. In America, it killed more than half a million from a population of 100 million. Around the world, it is thought to have killed upwards of 50 million. Unlike now, people in their prime were most at risk.

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Then, there was a stoic acceptance that disease was part of life. Now, the emphasis is on banishing disease and stoicism is mostly reserved for the restrictions needed to bring this about; even though the health impact of this pandemic, so far, is about as severe as the Asian Flu pandemic of the late 1950s, and the Hong Kong Flu pandemic of the late 1960s, which both had well over a million deaths worldwide without triggering anything approaching large-scale shutdowns. My sense is that the seismic cultural shifts, now underway in the West, have driven a pandemic response so different from that envisaged under plans drawn up even just a short time ago. We are materially rich but spiritually poor, and generally more fearful.

More self-confident governments would not have placed so much faith in unelected and unaccountable experts. The experts would not have so readily changed their minds about needing mandatory shutdowns. Societies that retained more 'faith in the world to come' would have been less alarmed by a virus like those that have readily been seen off before.

Governments have become almost neurotic about after-the-event accusations of doing ‘too little too late’ so instead tend to do ‘too much too soon’; to rush to eliminate risk rather than to mitigate it. And social media has exacerbated people’s tendency to lose perspective on the latest threat, whatever it might be. Yes, but for the social-distancing measures put in place, this pandemic could have been worse. Even so, it is not realistic to subsidise wages and businesses indefinitely, to shut venues whenever cases spike, and to keep borders closed in the absence of a vaccine that still cannot be counted on—or could take years to become universal.

At some point people will start to count the costs of COVID against the costs of the measures to deal with it. This may have happened already in parts of America, which seem to be managing the virus rather than trying to suppress it, let alone eradicate it.

For all governments at all times, the challenge is to get the balance right between keeping people safe and keeping people free. The way we have expressed this in Australia has been to try to give everyone a ‘fair go’ without restricting individuals’ ability to ‘have a go’. The pandemic has presented invidious choices to all governments, but especially to conservative ones that are normally intent on minimising official intrusions into people’s daily lives. Largely thanks to the early closure of our international borders, Australia has been remarkably successful in minimising Covid deaths; but with \$300 billion currently committed, essentially paying people not to work, at what cost to our ‘have a go’ spirit, especially given that finding people to fill jobs—thanks to the higher dole—has become harder than ever?

It has been instructive to compare the pandemic responses of the Victorian Labor government and the NSW Liberal National one. It is hard to discern any health justification at all for the curfew and the ‘ring of steel’ imposed around Melbourne. At times, Labor premiers have seemed almost to revel in closing their borders, restricting their businesses, and giving orders to the public. The pandemic has been a plausible rationale for the much bigger and more interfering government that voters would normally reject. The Liberal premiers, on the other hand, certainly NSW’s Gladys Berejiklian, have been reluctant health despots. Their emphasis has been on keeping the economy open as far as possible.

There is no doubt that ordering people to stay at home for long enough can stop infectious disease in its tracks, as Victoria has shown. But while the memories of this pandemic are fresh, and well before the next one arrives, different potential strategies from attempted eradication, to suppression, to management need much further study and public debate. To what extent should everyone be locked down in order to protect a vulnerable minority; and is there a better option than locking up the elderly on the one hand; or exposing them to premature death on the other, because selective shielding was too hard to manage?

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When the Italian hospital system seemed to be collapsing under the strain of COVID cases, a degree of public panic was understandable. But many months on, with the virus much better

understood and much less likely to kill, it is still being treated like the grim reaper. More perspective on this virus, at least going forward, could help to dispel the climate of fear that, once created, is hard to shake, and that tends to bring out the authoritarian in officials and the conformist in citizens.

Every death is sad but is a coronavirus death any more tragic than a death from cancer, heart disease, traffic accident, or suicide? Every day, in Australia, nearly 500 people can be expected to die from various causes, some preventable, including about 150 people in nursing homes.

Provided governments can prevent the health system from collapsing under the Covid strain, and can protect the most vulnerable in nursing homes, what extra social and economic costs should they impose? The answer cannot be none; but it can hardly be whatever it takes either.

Although conservatism is pragmatic, it is still a pragmatism based on values. Even for public safety, centre-right governments are reluctant regulators and cautious spenders. What is important now, if conservatism is not to suffer a serious loss of morale and crisis of conviction, is to wind all this back as quickly as possible; and to try to ensure that the response to the next pandemic is a more sustainable balance between suppressing the disease and suppressing normal life.

“We’re all in this together” has been the pandemic’s background chorus, but that hasn’t been people’s everyday experience. Public servants and politicians have had their pay maintained or even increased, while working from home. While the JobKeeper wage subsidy has lasted, some workers earned far more than usual, but with less actual need to work; while many others took a 20 per cent pay cut. Thanks to government decision-making, many business owners saw their income slashed, but not their expenses.

Current good polls for most incumbents notwithstanding, I doubt that the public’s ‘better safe than sorry’ initial response to this lost year will survive much reflection. When state governments get away with imposing tougher restrictions on churches than on brothels and on religious services than on sporting events, keeping state borders closed for months longer than any health imperative could justify, requiring people on the street to produce their ‘papers’ in order to avoid heavy fines, denying sick and dying people ready access to their families because of minute infection risk, failing to notice storm-trooper tactics against people in parks or in their own homes, and announcing draconian new restrictions based on impossible-to-question ‘expert advice’ (invariably not released), public trust is unlikely to be sustained.

The job of a thoughtful conservative is to question and to doubt.

The unity the National Cabinet was supposed to symbolise and engender lasted only as long as the initial lockdown that the federal government almost entirely had to pay for. On state border re-openings, school resumptions, and business freedom, there has been a states’ veto over national leadership, even if it might have been worse without the PM’s steadying influence. Our sense of nationhood could take a long time to recover from the Queensland Premier’s declaration that



“Queensland hospitals are for Queenslanders”; or the Western Australian Premier’s refusal to allow Australians from other states to enter his, even with quarantine.

Trying to avoid partisan rancour in a time of crisis should not preclude pointing out obvious paradoxes, such as state governments legislating in favour of assisted suicide for people with limited life expectancy at the same time as society is at least partially shut down to stop very old and sick people from succumbing to Covid. It is a strange moral order where dying of natural causes is a tragedy that government has a duty to prevent; but killing yourself is a right that government has a duty to provide for.

Always, it is the job of a thoughtful conservative to question and to doubt; to insist that new measures be justified and proportionate, especially when change goes counter to considered positions that conservative political movements have been supporting for decades. Of course, as Cicero once declared, “the people’s safety is the highest law”, but that hardly makes ‘safety first’ the only principle, or even the first principle that should guide government. Especially when the impact of action or inaction is speculative; and when not knowing the future makes it hard to decide what to do now; it is more important than ever not to overreact. Even if Australia’s Covid toll remains low and there’s a quick recovery from the policy-induced economic slump; even if an early vaccine means Australia does not need to remain closed to the world, this is unlikely to be a time anyone recalls with much pride because so much that has happened has been out of character with an Australia accustomed “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”.

Not only will the Australia that emerges from the pandemic have more debt, higher unemployment, and bigger, more-intrusive government; it is likely to be more lost about what holds us together as a nation and more confused about the things we value.

The pandemic has coincided with a renewed assault on our history as fundamentally racist, and requiring atonement, despite the fact Australia became a magnet to migrants, eventually from all over the world, even while still a penal colony. It cannot have been lost on anyone concerned about political correctness and the cancel culture, that police in Victoria failed to make a single arrest when 10,000 people marched for Black Lives Matter; but made 400 arrests at a much smaller protest against ongoing health restrictions. Yet almost nothing was made of this double standard; partly because the leaders who would normally notice it were preoccupied with the pandemic and trying to make a national cabinet work.

On balance, that the British settled Australia was a blessing.

As well as habituating people to accept restrictions on freedom and massive government spending ‘for our own good’, the pandemic seems to have accelerated the elevation of opinion over fact and how we feel about things over what actually happened. We know Aboriginal people inhabited Australia for tens of thousands of years prior to British settlement. Post-1788, their society was disrupted and their population decimated, mostly by disease, occasionally by violence. They were not always given a vote. They didn’t always get the same wage. They didn’t always get the same justice.



But we also know Captain James Cook appreciated the qualities of the Aboriginal people he found; that the British government enjoined Governor Arthur Phillip to “live in amity” with the native people; that Phillip refrained from vindictiveness or punitive measures as a matter of policy, even after he had himself been speared at Manly; and that white men were hanged for the murder of blacks as early as the 1830s after the Myall Creek massacre. We also know massive efforts have been made to give Aboriginal people a better life, first by missionaries and later by government.

Aboriginal people are hugely over-represented in our gaols, even now. But that’s because they are heavily over-represented in our courts and crime statistics; as are all people who do not finish school, do not have jobs, and live in dysfunctional households. At least as much as some belated measure of recognition in the Constitution, Aboriginal people need to go to school and to take jobs at the same rate as other Australians, for reconciliation to be complete.

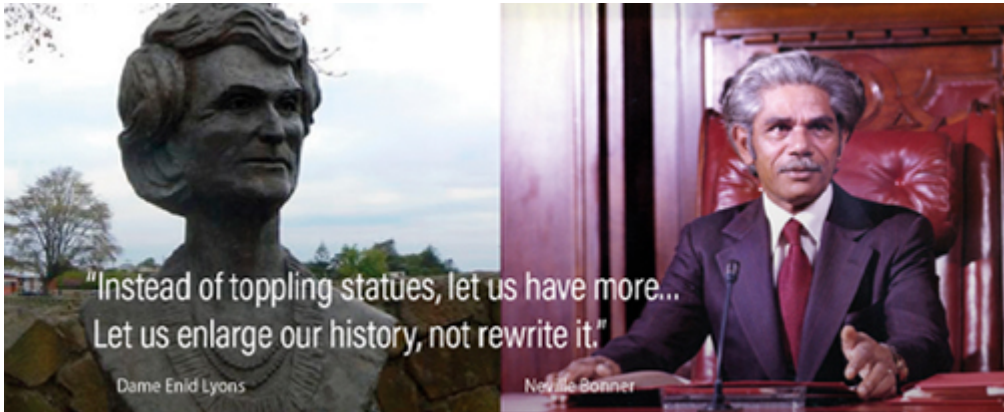
In the end, cancel culture is not about correcting a particular injustice or righting a particular historical wrong. It denies moral legitimacy to the whole Australian project, just as it also does in the United States and Britain. You can argue things could have been done better and more must be done now; but it is hard to maintain that British settlement should not have happened; or that, on balance, it wasn’t a golden moment in human history. On balance, that the British settled Australia was a blessing. It is hard to imagine a contemporary Portuguese, Spanish or French governor declaring, as Phillip did, that there could be “no slavery in a free land”. Even in those days, it was the Royal Navy that was doing its best to extirpate the West African slave trade to the Americas.

That is why it would be such a mistake to change our flag or to remove the Crown from our constitution. It is wrong to see only the flag of another country (albeit our founder) within our own, rather than the crosses of St Patrick, St Andrew and St George representing our Christian heritage; or to neglect the symbolism of the Southern Cross with its significance to indigenous people. It is wrong to focus on a ‘foreign monarch’ when that Crown—and the ideals of duty and service we have assimilated—has been with us every step of our journey as a nation. Besides, it is vandalism to demolish anything when there is nothing better to replace it; and it is arrogance in any one generation to think its collective wisdom wholly surpasses that of every predecessor.

Our response to the Black Lives Matter protests was too apologetic. Instead of looking the other way while their statues were graffitied, we should have resolved to end the neglect of people like Cook and Phillip because, without them, there would have been no Australia. Cook was a scientist and a humanist, as well as one of the greatest explorers in all history. Phillip didn’t so much found a penal colony, as begin a nation; whose freedom, fairness and prosperity quickly became the envy of the Earth.

Instead of toppling statues, let’s have more: to Sir John Monash, for instance, the Jewish citizen-soldier, hailed as “the most resourceful general in the British Army”, who broke the stalemate on the Western Front and helped to deliver victory in the Great War; and to Lord Florey, the inventor of penicillin, that has saved literally hundreds of millions of lives. Let us enlarge our history, not rewrite it, and in order to ensure more inclusion, let us be less blinkered about those who have

made a difference: people like Neville Bonner, for instance, the first indigenous member of the Australian parliament; and Dame Enid Lyons, our first female cabinet minister; neither of whom, as yet, seem to have statues in their honour.



To me, as much as the fashion for ‘government-knows-best’ and Magic Pudding economics, the most vexing aspect of these Covid times is the aversion to almost any risk. The daily drumbeat of infections and deaths, the constant stress on obeying the rules, has gone beyond accommodating people’s fears to the point of playing on them. I cannot recall a time when Australians have been expected to be grateful for getting some freedoms back, such as having 20 rather than 10 visitors to your home; so focussed on merely existing over really living; or so set on prudence over courage. After all, it should not be the prospect of death that scares us, so much as a failure to have lived fully in the meantime.

Australians prefer people who make things happen and get things done.

It is easy enough to spotlight Covid infections and deaths. It is much harder to capture mental health issues or the numbers of jobs lost and businesses closed by policies to keep the plague at bay, or the general timidity that’s being fostered, yet that deserves attention too. It can’t just be assumed that inaction always costs more than action; and that the cure is never worse than the disease. The risk any action might make a bad situation worse has to be considered, too.

Always, the Australian preference has been for people who made things happen and who got things done. Our heroes were those who would meet challenges, rather than sidestep them. For premiers much more on centre-stage than usual; for health officials dictating the terms of daily life; and above all, for the scientists seeking Covid cures, these are the most bracing of times. For everyone else, though, there has been the dull prospect, not of doing more but of doing less: not ‘how much more can I do for my country’ but ‘how much less must I do in order to be safe’. Strange times indeed.



I cannot think of a better way to improve than resolving not to be dominated by a virus; with a renewed emphasis on the active virtues and the robust attitudes that have made Australia a country to be proud of: where sympathy for the weak, encouragement for the underdog and openness to the wider world jostle with scepticism about orthodoxies and a preference for fact over speculation. Let us get back to being people who 'have a go', so that 2020 turns out to be the only year in our history blighted by a focus on what we cannot do, rather than what we can. Of course, our best days are ahead of us; but only if we are determined to make the most of ourselves and build on our strengths.



This essay first appeared as 'Cancel Culture in a Time of Covid', a chapter in *Cancel Culture and the Left's Long March*, an anthology edited by Dr Kevin Donnelly and published by the Page Research Centre. The book can be purchased at the Centre's website: page.org.au



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