



Australians Are Suffering From Excessive COVID Lockdowns

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When you think about all the twisted, horrible ideas that so-called progressives have unleashed on the 21st century, it's actually somewhat amazing that banal, garden-variety safetyism, of all things, has been the straw to break freedom's back.

At least that is what's happened here in COVID-era Australia. Whatever happened back in March 2020, it has set off some kind of bureaucratic chain reaction — one that has overwhelmed our checks and balances, upended almost every norm of liberal democratic governance, and radically altered the relationship between state and citizen, perhaps for decades.

Almost 18 months after the coronavirus hit our shores, Victoria and New South Wales — our two



largest states, making up almost 60 percent of Australia's population — are under lockdown. Melbourne, Australia's second-biggest city, is at the time of this writing about to surpass London's record as the most locked-down city in the world, clocking up a combined 207 days and counting.

Our lockdowns are also among the world's harshest. Here in Melbourne, you're permitted to leave your home for no longer than two hours a day for exercise and once more to go to the shops. A curfew is in place between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. Travel farther than three miles from your home is prohibited. Fines for breaching these and sundry subsidiary restrictions range from \$1,300 to \$15,000 (U.S. dollars).

The rest of the country is technically "open," but many places are subject to various restrictions, including mask mandates — even outdoors — and occupancy limits so stringent that they render many businesses unprofitable. And lockdowns are never far away anyway, as state leaders tend to trigger stay-at-home orders after absurdly low case numbers. Sydney's lockdown was declared in June when the state had just 82 active cases. Melbourne's lockdown needed only six.

Freedom of movement within Australia has been more or less extinguished. Each state government has — probably unconstitutionally — imposed convoluted entry requirements for interstate visitors, and borders between states are often closed altogether.

Entry requirements are sometimes so strict that returning residents cannot even get into their own state, a problem that has recently seen encampments sprout up along the border between Victoria and New South Wales — effectively, Australia now has a class of internally displaced people.

Going overseas is also prohibited, even for dual citizens and permanent residents, which in any other situation would trigger a small diplomatic incident. It is possible to get an exemption, but more often than not exemptions are refused.

In most cases, these restrictions have been made not by the legislature but by unelected health bureaucrats who have extraordinary powers under open-ended emergency legislation. In fact, parliaments themselves have often been suspended under the pretext of preventing infections. Just last month, for example, an upcoming session of the Victorian parliament in Melbourne was quietly canceled, pursuant to orders by an opaque government body known only as the "COVID-19 Response Division."

None of this is new to long-suffering Australians. Despite making it through 2020 with — thank God — the fewest coronavirus deaths of just about any place in the developed world, it came at an enormous economic and societal cost. We did indeed end the year with no cases of the coronavirus anywhere, and even had some reprieve from restrictions during the hot Australian summer.

But with the arrival of the Delta variant, Australia has been plunged into the same cacophonous blizzard of stay-at-home orders and border closures that we were assured would see COVID-19 off last year. State premiers who saw their approval rates soar toward the "end" of Australia's



coronavirus crisis last year are once again chasing a “COVID zero” nirvana, even as cases rise sharply and it becomes obvious that lockdowns are not working.

What is also becoming obvious — and painfully so — is the toll that this de facto eradication strategy is taking on the Australian people. Lifeline, a 24-hour mental-health-crisis support service that has been operating in Australia since the early 1960s, recently recorded its highest daily number of calls ever received. Emergency wards are also reporting terrifyingly high numbers of self-harm attempts and suicidal thoughts, especially among adolescents. Increasingly, parents of young children are coming forward to voice concerns about the serious emotional damage being done at a time when schools and playgrounds remain closed.

The pain of lockdowns has not, however, been evenly shared. My organization, the Institute of Public Affairs, has conducted extensive research into the economic impact of lockdowns. Overwhelmingly, evidence suggests that lockdowns have had a disproportionate impact on small businesses, low-income workers, and the young. By contrast, jobs in the government sector and with big businesses not only survived lockdowns but actually increased.

This goes a long way to explaining why Australia has clung to its “zero COVID” delusion for so long. The same political class that has dreamed up and cruelly enforced coronavirus restrictions has been largely insulated from the consequences, their salaries and jobs safe. Much of the rest of the population was effectively bought off with crude “stimulus” programs to replace lost wages and business earnings, but most of those programs have since been wound back, and, in any event, even the starry-eyed Keynesians within the government are under no illusions that the government can keep handing out billions in perpetuity.

So only now, almost 18 months into Australia’s coronavirus nightmare, is the mainstream political debate coming to terms with the notion that we will have to learn to live with the virus in some way well into the foreseeable future.

The prime minister, facing reelection early next year, seems to be alive to the fact that Australians have reached a breaking point and is getting increasingly hawkish with the state premiers. But all that this has amounted to is an insistence that state governments reopen their states for good once Australia has vaccinated 80 percent of its eligible population.

That is a long way from the vaccination rate of around 30 percent at which Australia is hovering at the time of writing. And even then, the more “hardline” state governments are already beginning to hedge their bets, cautioning that stay-at-home orders may still be needed from time to time even after vaccination targets have been met.



And so 18 months in, there is still no real end in sight to Australia's coronavirus nightmare. At best, we are a cautionary tale about government excess. But at worst, the Australian experience may point to something more sinister in 21st-century governance — what we once thought was a temporary aberration in the norms of our liberal democracy is slowly becoming a permanent dynamic.

At a time when the political and cultural elite have never been more indifferent to the centuries-old traditions of liberal democratic governance, we may be seeing in Australia the first glimpses of the “post-democratic” state. Australia may end up being the first case study of the proverbial society that traded a lot of liberty for a little security.

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