



Dan's Debacle Shows Why Democracy Matters

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The debacle that is the response of Australia's state governments to the coronavirus pandemic has provoked claims such as "the federation is broken" and "the PM must do something about it".

In Melbourne, at the moment, a much-discussed option (and wistful hope) is that if Daniel Andrews doesn't resign, then somehow he's sacked by either the state's governor or even the prime minister. The chances of the first eventuality are for the time being close to zero, and for the second two, zero.

Scott Morrison could no more sack Andrews or Anastacia Palaszczuk than the six premiers could sack him – which is as it should be.

The problem with Australia's system of federalism is not that Canberra doesn't have enough power, it's that it has too much. If the premiers who have shut their state's borders were to suffer [the financial consequences of their decisions](#), they wouldn't be quite so cavalier about what they're doing.



In the immediate term, the suggestion that Morrison impose financial sanctions on states that don't open their borders or economies is, on the face of it, attractive, but misguided. Sanctions seldom work and they more often harm the very people they're aimed at helping

Even if there could be some sort of constitutionally valid means of, for example, the federal government not paying unemployment benefits to Victorians as a form of punishment for Andrews, he won't be directly affected.

Nor will any of Victoria's public servants, none of whom has lost their jobs but who all have received pay rises. Sanctions never hurt the ruling regime – they hit the common people. Whether Victorians get a new Commonwealth-funded road or railway shouldn't depend on whether the state's premier acts like a tyrannical autocrat.

Rule book tossed aside

In Australia, it's not federalism that's broken; it's politics. This, at least in liberal democracies such as Australia, operates according to norms, conventions and customs, nearly all of which have been broken by the coronavirus. It's not just the economics rule book that has been tossed aside by the pandemic.

Up until March this year, it would have been assumed that in Australia federal and state governments attempting to deal with something even as dangerous as the coronavirus would put in place measures that operated according to the principles of basic human rights. This hasn't happened. Education is a basic human right but nonetheless schools were shut to "make a point".

The creation of the [national cabinet](#), comprising the PM and the premiers and chief ministers, was another breakaway from traditional politics. Cabinets by their nature are not transparent and are not open to public scrutiny.

The national cabinet's deliberations imposing unparalleled restrictions on the civil and economic liberties of Australians are confidential as is the information upon which those deliberations are based.

Political partisanship and point-scoring play a vital role in keeping government power in check. Australians realise this, which is why they so often vote for a different party federally compared with the state level.

The desire of politicians and the media to create an environment of "national unity" has meant that the traditional models of political scrutiny that occur when a prime minister is of a different party to a premier no longer apply.

Nowhere is the effect of this more obvious than for Victoria. While it might be true that the



Victorian state opposition was initially unduly circumspect in its criticism of how Andrews was managing the crisis, to be fair it's difficult for a state Liberal leader to call for a Labor premier to resign when simultaneously the Liberal prime minister speaks effusively about how effectively he and that premier are working together.

The Federal Education Minister, Dan Tehan, said in May about Andrews: "Sure, take a sledgehammer to defeating coronavirus, but why are you taking a sledgehammer also to the state education system?"

If a few more federal Liberal ministers had attempted to hold Andrews to account earlier, the disaster that is Victoria might have been avoided. Tehan was prescient.

Because since May, Andrews hasn't taken a sledgehammer only to Victoria's schools – he's taken it to the entire state.