



## Media Scrutiny Has Shut Down Too

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There's a fine line between the government protecting people and punishing them. It might be that in the context of the COVID-19 crisis that line is about to be crossed – if it hasn't been already. Why the health authorities in some states have decided that someone can't sit by themselves on a park bench is just one of the many unexplained aspects of the crisis.

Another unexplained aspect of the crisis is why there has been so little scrutiny from the public or the press of the decisions made by the government and by the health authorities.

Many media outlets are members of the [Your Right To Know](#) coalition which aims to make the operations of government more accountable and transparent. Yet until the last week, with the notable exception of this newspaper and one or two journalists in other organisations, those same media outlets that belong to Your Right To Know have refused to ask of our politicians fundamental questions such as for how long 25 million Australians can expect to be under what is basically house arrest.



The Canberra press gallery has obediently recited the “modelling” offered up by the authorities about the medical impact of the crisis, yet hasn’t bothered to ask about whether any government has done any modelling of the social, community, and economic consequences of the lockdown lasting up to six months.

To put it bluntly, much of the Australian media has failed to fulfil some of their most basic responsibilities in a free society, namely to question the government and hold it to account. With parliaments around the country suspended, the role of inquisitive and sceptical voices has never been more important.

It’s gone largely unremarked in the media that the initial justification for the draconian lockdown of the country, which was to “flatten the curve” and prevent the hospital system being overwhelmed, [appears to have been achieved](#).

Likewise, it’s barely been commented upon by most of the journalists and commentators writing about the crisis that, beyond flattening the curve, no state or federal government minister has actually revealed to the public what is their strategy to deal with the virus.

That the government as yet has no long-term plan is certainly the implication of the comments by the federal deputy chief medical officer, [Nick Coatsworth](#), when he said this week that health advisers were “deeply and thoroughly” exploring measures to combat the virus.

When it comes to telling the Australian public about the health authorities’ measures of success or failure in dealing with COVID-19, it’s not that so much that the government keeps on moving the goalposts – it’s more like the government has taken them down and buried them, and refuses to tell anyone where they are. That’s not good for democracy.

Too many journalists, especially those at the ABC, are so fixated on signalling their own virtues through their support for a semi-permanent lockdown that they refuse to countenance any alternative viewpoint. And it might be that part of the reason Liberal MPs are so reluctant to talk about beginning to end the lockdown is because they like, for a change, not being attacked by the national broadcaster.

The lack of debate in this country about what an exit strategy from the lockdown looks like and when it might be implemented is in sharp contrast to what’s been happening in, for example, the United States and Britain.

[Keir Starmer](#), the new leader of the British Labour Party, is hardly a radical free-market libertarian, yet a few days ago he expressed a view which in Australia at least has only been heard in places such as the website [Catallaxy Files](#).

Starmer [urged the British government to be publish its exit strategy](#) from the lockdown. He said that some aspects of social distancing would have to be maintained, but: “We’ve got to have the



trust of the public ... for that trust there needs to be transparency and openness.” He said the “silent pressures” on communities “cannot be underestimated” and “to maintain morale and hope people need a sense of what comes next”.

Hope and a sense of what comes next is what Australians, at the moment, do not have.

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