



Why It's Time To Get Back To Point-Scoring

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The sooner politics in Australia returns to normal the better. A national cabinet of the Prime Minister and premiers was a good idea at the time, but it has now served its purpose and should be wound down.

The former Liberal leader John Hewson is right when he says the national cabinet has for the moment at least, suspended the “point-scoring and blame-shifting” of traditional politics. Everyone on the national cabinet likes to pretend that, regardless of their politics, they agree with each other and are united during this national crisis.

But the essence of democratic politics is point-scoring because that's how governments are held accountable. Point-scoring has a purpose.

At this time when governments are exercising unparalleled power over people's lives and livelihoods, Australia needs the accountability, the scrutiny, and yes the point-scoring, of traditional politics back as soon as possible.

The federal and state parliaments should be sitting, oppositions should be opposing, and the media should stop being so complaisant to politicians and public servants. There's been remarkably little debate on things like the size and scope of the government's fiscal response, how and when the lockdown should be lifted, and even the efficacy of the telephone-tracing application.

Other than being successful political theatre, it's not clear what the supposed unity of the national cabinet has achieved. [The two premiers who have been most extreme and most unreasonable during the crisis](#), Gladys Berejiklian and Daniel Andrews, appear to be doing what they want anyway.

When the crisis began, around the country the response of governments was 100 per cent determined by health considerations – as it should have been. Now a few months later it looks suspiciously like some governments' policies are being decided according to considerations weighted 50 per cent to health and 50 per cent to politics.

Schools is where politics is most obviously being played.

[There's no medical reason why schools can't reopen](#). As the Queensland chief health officer acknowledged a few days ago, schools are not a high-risk environment but "If you got out to the community and say, 'this is so bad, we can't even have schools, all schools have got to be closed', you are really getting to people. So sometimes it's more than just the science and the health, it's about messaging."

In other words children can't go to school to make a symbolic gesture. It's a gesture that the Victorian government is keen to make as it refuses to follow the other states and reopen its schools.

Education Minister Dan Tehan was completely right when he said "The question to Daniel Andrews, sure, take a sledgehammer to defeating coronavirus, but why are you taking sledgehammer to the state education system". But in order to maintain the façade of the false *bonhomie* of the national cabinet, Tehan was forced to apologise to Andrews for "overstepping the mark".

The way in which the Victorian government has been so quick to highlight and publicise every outbreak of the virus to justify its draconian lockdown law, but then refused to identify a meatworks company at the centre of the state's biggest virus outbreak, which also happened to have well-known Labor Party links, demonstrates how the Victorian government is willing to operate.

Eventually Scott Morrison will realise that Andrews and the Victorian Labor government are not his friends. In the lead-up to last year's federal election, the Victorian government ran a taxpayer-funded campaign against the federal Coalition about hospital funding. Outside of the constraints of a national cabinet, federal government ministers are going to be free to point out, as Victoria's state government debt triples over the next few years, that the state risks becoming what it was in



the early 1990s – the sick man of Australia.

Hewson's hope that the national cabinet could be used to pursue policy reform in the wake of the crisis is unlikely to be realised for the simple reason that the political interests of the state and federal leaders are simply too different.

It's nice to think that in a few months' time a new spirit of unity will have transformed Australian politics. Realistically the chances of that happening are close to zero – and politics returning to normal won't be an entirely bad thing.

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