



Retreat At Last From Zero-Covid

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A few days ago Australians got as much of an acknowledgement of the failure of the country's always-doomed-to-fail "zero-COVID" strategy as they're ever likely to get.

On Monday on these pages, [Tony Blakely](#) – an epidemiologist and professor at the University of Melbourne, and probably the nation's loudest advocate for the elimination of COVID-19 by shutting businesses, closing schools and not allowing people to leave their home – wrote about Victoria, where "lockdown No.6 is not going well" and "the numbers [of cases] are going up rather than down".

Blakely presented a number of different models for managing COVID-19 if cases did not fall, involving a variety of "hard" and "soft" lockdowns. However, all the models assumed the same thing – namely, that we must "learn to live with COVID". Blakely was careful to avoid such terminology, but it's the only inevitable conclusion to his argument.

This [retreat from Moscow](#) is better late than never. And credit to Blakely for coming close to



admitting what was obvious eighteen months ago to everyone except, it seems, the “medical experts” advising governments. The cost of eliminating COVID-19 – even if it could be done, which is doubtful anyway – is simply too high for the community to bear.

The truth is that in Victoria, lockdowns 1 through 6 were experiments at attempting to eliminate COVID-19 – and they all failed.

Some of Blakely’s arguments reveal the confused and muddled logic of the “zero-COVID” strategy. For example, he explains that he “strongly supports” the Andrews’ government’s decision of “curfews” and “closing playgrounds” because “it would be so much better to re-eliminate the virus”.

But you can’t “re-eliminate” something. It is either “eliminated” or it is not. To “eliminate” something is to “completely remove or put an end to it”. A thing can no more be “re-eliminated” than it can be “re-killed”. A perusal of the first ten pages of Google search results for “definition re-eliminate” seems to indicate no such word exists – and for good reason. It is an oxymoron.

The implication of the use of the word “re-eliminate” is that somehow Victoria’s plan for “zero-COVID” was achieved. But it wasn’t, just as New Zealand has not eliminated COVID-19 either.

Blakely began his argument claiming “lockdown No.5 in Victoria was textbook” before going on to discuss the apparent failure of “lockdown No.6?”. No matter how textbook lockdown No.5 might have been, again anyone but an epidemiologist might ask what was the point of lockdown Nos.1 to 4 if lockdown No.5 was necessary.

The truth is that in Victoria, lockdowns 1 through 6 were experiments at attempting to eliminate COVID-19 – and they all failed. At long last it appears the Prime Minister Scott Morrison, at first sceptical of lockdowns, then supporting them, then saying they should be an “absolute last resort”, and then supporting them again, is learning the lesson of Victoria.

The NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, has probably always known the pursuit of zero-COVID was a fool’s errand, but without the support of the federal government or her fellow premiers she hasn’t until recently been able to say so. As New South Wales yesterday recorded 1029 cases, there is now no alternative to the state “living with COVID”.

The day after Blakely’s piece, Gary Banks – the former chairman of the Productivity Commission and Dean of the Australia New Zealand School of Government – [provided on these pages a particularly elegant summation of the multiple failures of this country’s approach to COVID-19.](#)

“A fundamental tenet of good regulatory practice is to be clear about the *objective*. Such clarity has not always been apparent in governments’ responses to COVID-19 and rarely so across jurisdictions, despite the exertions of the so-called national cabinet.

“Initially, the state goal was to ‘flatten curve’ to limit the extent of serious illness and demands on hospitals. As this widely supported objective was in sight, the goal morphed (unstated and



unjustified) into eliminating the virus – symbolised by Victoria’s ‘double doughnut’ celebrations last year. No sooner had this objective been openly acknowledged, however, than the delta variant arrived to demonstrate its futility. This seems to have prompted national cabinet to shift the goalposts recently to ‘living alongside’ the virus.”

That’s three different strategies in the space of eighteen months. Hopefully for Australia, at our third attempt we’ll get it right.

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