



Pandemic Slogans Mask Public Scrutiny

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George Orwell would have had an absolute field day analysing the great slogans of the great COVID-19 pandemic. “We’re all in this together”; “The government is following the science”; “We must flatten the curve”; “Just a little bit longer” are just some of them. All of them are largely meaningless and, as Orwell himself would have been the first to point out, the reality behind the slogan is actually the exact opposite of its purported meaning.

“We’re all in this together” is not true and never was. For example, [analysis by the Institute of Public Affairs](#) reveals that during the lockdowns in Victoria last year, in the six months to September the average private-sector worker had their pay reduced by \$1225 while the average public-sector worker received a \$1574 increase.

“Following the science” connotes a degree of objectivity that simply doesn’t exist. For one thing, when it comes to how to respond to the pandemic there is no such thing as “the science”. Scientists such as Professor Susan Michie of University College London and a member of the advisory committee to the UK government have argued that people should wear masks and





socially distance “forever, to some extent”.

Other scientists such as Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford University have described the reaction of governments around the world to the virus as “the single biggest public health mistake in history”.

In any case, “science” doesn’t tell you what to do, only how to do it. Science can tell you how to build an atom bomb, but it can’t tell you what to do with it.

It’s a scandal that the Morrison government has refused to release the Treasury department’s assessment of the costs of measures such as border closures, lockdowns, and schools beingshut. Economist [Saul Eslake](#) is absolutely correct that it is “outrageous that the government won’t share with the public any of the basis for the decisions it has made”.

Professor Peter Swan at UNSW is almost certainly correct in his assessment of what the government is hiding – “It would seem highly likely that the government has ignored advice from Treasury and elsewhere that [the] lockdown is almost entirely unproductive and ineffective, as well as being economically crippling.” Swan may well be wrong – although he probably isn’t. Whatever the case, the public deserves to be presented with the evidence.

During the pandemic politicians and public servants have become quite used to treating the public with a high-handed disdain. If you’re Mark McGowan and you’re the Labor premier of Western Australia with 53 seats in Parliament compared with the Liberals’ two and the Nationals’ four it’s perhaps easy to forget that it’s preferable not to mislead the public.

In November, the West Australian government required businesses to maintain a register of the attendance of staff and patrons. The health minister at the time reassured West Australians that their details would be kept private and “the data in Safe WA will be encrypted at the point of capture, stored securely, and only accessible by authorised WA health contact-tracing personnel”.

A few days ago West Australians discovered that statement wasn’t true. And they only discovered it wasn’t true when the WA government announced new legislation to prevent the police from gaining access to the personal data compulsorily collected to control COVID-19.

The WA Police Commissioner subsequently admitted police had sought the information to solve a suspected murder and an assault, but he refused to acknowledge the public had been misled. He said the government’s terms and conditions allowed the data to be accessed for a lawful reason and that “people don’t always read fine print on insurance policies or whatever”.

It’s ironic that after a decade-long public service fetish with concepts such as “joined-up governance”, “evidence-based policy” and “accountability and transparency to stakeholders”, none of these ideas appear to have been put into practice.

And what’s more, politicians, public servants and many sections of the media seem willing to accept that COVID-19 justifies the throwing out of the principles of good policymaking – in much the same way as the pandemic has allowed governments to almost entirely disregard Australians’ civil liberties.

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