

State of Pandemic Disaster in Australia: Victoria Moves into Stage Four

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Melbourne.

Being in control of a sinking ship is not enviable. Regulations previously passed have a museum feel to them, distinctly obsolete. Directions, once dictated with confidence, lack timbre. Coronavirus is serving as that most wily and cheeky of agents, with the most appropriate of accomplices: Homo sapiens. Human beings are fed up, munching on conspiracy tales, wondering when a vaccine will arrive, and generally fatigued.

Globally, people are exhausted, disgusted, deluded and dying. Somewhere in that cocktail of ill-taste are those who think they are doing their best and abide by regulations with understanding obedience. They are told about a science that is altering. They are told that they must stay home and avoid going to work. If they are infected, they must undertake measures of self-quarantine, irrespective of whether they have support or income. Stiff fines and penalties follow in cases of transgression, including the shaming howls of social media junkies.

The language of political authorities in a state of desperation is ominous, paternal, judgmental. For Daniel Andrews, premier of the Australian state of Victoria, this is starting to seem natural. "Where you slept last night is where you'll need to stay for the next six weeks," he revealed [in his statement](#) on Sunday. Modest dispensation is permitted for those "partners who live apart and for work". A curfew operating from 8 in the evening to 5 in the morning is now in place for six weeks. "The only reasons to leave home during these hours will be work, medical care and caregiving." Exercise is confined to an hour a day within five kilometres. People, at most, can move about as couples.

Like locusts, purchasers have been swarming the aisles, trolleys heavy, and emptying them of meat, vegetables and fruit. The obsession with lavatory paper does not seem as pronounced this time (purchase limits have been maintained), but people are stocking up on certain food items knowing that their access is stifled by both time and geography.

What is in place is similar to the elimination regime used in New Zealand, though it is not articulated as such. It might best be described as suppression with an eliminating spirit, a somewhat more brutal approach. The Melbourne model is even more onerous: no curfew was imposed in New Zealand, or the compulsory wearing of face masks between March 26 and April 27, or a time limit on exercise. But the view from across the Tasman is that merely applying such a regime to Melbourne is not sufficient. Valuable time, [suggests](#) University of Auckland academic Siouxsie Wiles, has been lost. The less restrictive Stage 3 level that came into force on July 8, applying only to Melbourne and the Mitchell Shire

“provided too many opportunities for the virus to spread.” From this less oppressive environment bloomed 7,000 active cases of coronavirus, 2,000 of whom are still a mystery to contact tracers. Wiles’ suggestion? Imposing Stage 4 restrictions across the entire state, thereby giving “Victoria the best chance of success, rather than setting it up to play an endless game of COVID-19 whack-a-mole.”

Pandemic politics is also proving to be a nasty business. On the state opposition benches, Victorian Liberal MP Tim Smith continues to hyperventilate and fantasise about the ultimate demise of the Labor premier.

“These ministers and Daniel Andrews have blood on their hands,” [he spluttered](#) on Sydney radio station 2GB. “They have so monumentally failed the people of Victoria.” Smith sees the crisis as an opportunity for political harvesting. “We are so sick of this man... we’re so utterly sick of him. In the name of God, would he just go!” On Radio 3AW, [he was truculent](#). “We can’t suspend democracy, accountability and the basics of a free society just because we’re dealing with a global pandemic.”

Smith’s demagoguery is proving rather rich fare, even for those on his side of politics. The federal treasurer Josh Frydenberg preferred giving his party colleague a wide berth.

“They’re not words that I would use,” [he admitted](#) to radio host Neil Mitchell. “Daniel Andrews is obviously operating in a very difficult environment.” For the moment, grievance and disagreement had to be put aside. “My message would be, to Tim and to everybody else, let’s work together towards that one single objective, namely to reduce the number of cases and to get the virus under control.”

Frydenberg might well think so, but other party members do not. Craig Kelly, a federal Liberal MP who can always be counted upon to dynamite the waters of moderate contentment, has mounted his own quixotic crusade against the Victorian premier. His particular pet project of late is praising the merits of the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine, and sniping at those who disapprove and ban its use in treating coronavirus cases. Should that disposition, [he asked](#) over the weekend, mean that Andrews face 25 years in jail? This drew [criticism](#) from shadow health minister Chris Bowen as being positively Trumpian, but a [clumsy sidestep](#) from Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who refused to “get into what people talk about on Facebook on a day like this”. This, from a leader keen to take Facebook to task for content extreme and extremist in nature.

The clock has been reset; the gains of the last three weeks regarding the coronavirus annulled. Many businesses were already on the road to ruin during the previous phase of lockdowns. Many more will now assuredly perish. Mental health will atrophy. The death toll will continue to rise. Other states are monitoring and adjusting their responses. The measure of grief and concern just went up.

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