

Roundtable Summary – Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Date: Thursday 4 July 2024

Hosts: Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together a range of members from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry to discuss the experiences of their industries during the pandemic.

Purpose of this roundtable

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a range of impacts across industries, with public health measures having a significant effect on business operations.
- This roundtable provided key representatives from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, including member organisations, with the opportunity to share their thoughts on what the Australian Government did well and what could be improved for a future crisis.

What we heard at the roundtable

- Good relationships are vital during a crisis. Trusted networks and productive relationships across and between government and industry are one of the most important aspects of an effective response in a crisis.
- Stakeholders want a centralised, single source of information for public health measures. The lack of clear, coordinated communication from the Government during the pandemic resulted in peak bodies having to interpret and disseminate public health messaging to their members. This created a large amount of extra work for these organisations.
- Stakeholders felt that the lessons learnt from the pandemic have quickly fallen away. There was also a strong sentiment that relationships developed between the Government and industry have dissipated since the pandemic. Stakeholders expressed concern over the loss of capability across Government, as people who were in pivotal roles during the pandemic move on.
- A lack of transparency in Government decision-making eroded trust with industry. Transparency improves social licence and is highly valued by stakeholders. Businesses and individuals are more likely to comply with public health orders when they can understand the factors that informed decisions.

COVID-19 Response Inquiry

- Stakeholders want to see that there is data and evidence underpinning support measures. There were concerns around the appropriateness of measures designed to target specific industries. Stakeholders felt that many of these measures did not demonstrate an understanding of the industry that they were designed to support. While stakeholders acknowledged that robust data and evidence is not always possible from the outset of policy design in a crisis, they felt that reviews should have been undertaken to improve policy design at various points throughout the pandemic.
- Industry stressed the importance of review and feedback mechanisms for policy decisions during crises. Industry stakeholders were disappointed by the lack of review processes in place for public health measures. They felt that a lack of review mechanisms led to the preservation of measures that were ineffective and detrimental to businesses.
- JobKeeper disincentivised workforce participation in some industries. Some businesses reported that workers who were able to claim JobKeeper were not incentivised to work, as they could receive the same benefits staying home as they would if they worked.
- It is vital that the Government understands Australia's supply chains. Industry stakeholders conveyed the importance of supply chain resilience as a key tenet of policy decision-making during a crisis. Some stakeholders felt that certain conditions have worsened since the pandemic, making it harder for Australia to have supply chain resilience.