

# Democracy & accountability in the pandemic

## *Democracy & Accountability Program submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry*

**Bill Browne**  
December 2023

### Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry. Given the Inquiry's broad remit, it is not surprising that The Australia Institute's Democracy & Accountability Program has carried out significant research into topics that might be of interest to the panel. This submission outlines how these research papers come under each of the Inquiry's terms of reference.

The Program would welcome the opportunity to discuss research findings in further detail.

### GOVERNANCE

---

Term of reference 1: Governance including the role of the Commonwealth Government, responsibilities of state and territory governments, national governance mechanisms (such as National Cabinet, the National Coordination Mechanism and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee) and advisory bodies supporting responses to COVID-19.

### National Cabinet

The pall of secrecy cast over National Cabinet documents and deliberations was wholly unnecessary and damaging to public trust. In some cases, such as the bifurcation of energy policy responsibilities, it led to uncertainty and duplication.

Browne (2021) *Vanishing Cabinet: Submission on COAG Legislation Amendment Bill 2021*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/vanishing-cabinet/>

Browne (2021) *National cabinet secrecy hurts energy policies*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/public-sector-informant-national-cabinet-secrecy-hurts-energy-policies/>

## The role of state governments

Australia's states and territories took the lead in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by constitutional powers and popular mandates. Australia Institute polling research found that Australians rated their state or territory government as doing a better job than the federal government. The paper below asks if Australia's federal nature may have contributed to its relative success in managing the pandemic. It also elaborates on the concerns with National Cabinet and how it could be improved or modified going further.

Browne (2021) *State revival: The role of the states in Australia's COVID-19 response and beyond*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/state-revival/>

## Parliamentary scrutiny

In March 2020, New Zealand adopted the Epidemic Response Committee to provide for parliamentary oversight of the government's COVID-19 response while the Parliament was not sitting.

The Australia Institute and the National Integrity Committee of former judges urged the Parliament of Australia to follow New Zealand's example. Some 17,900 Australians signed an Australia Institute petition calling on the Australian Parliament to create a New Zealand-style multi-partisan select committee to enable proper accountability and scrutiny of the government's COVID-19 response. Australia Institute polling research found that two in three Australians supported Australia setting up a New Zealand-style parliamentary committee.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Australia Institute (2020) *Former judges call for establishment of NZ-style multi-partisan COVID-19 parliamentary oversight committee*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/former-judges-call-for-establishment-of-nz-style-multi-partisan-covid-19-parliamentary-oversight-committee/>; (n.d.) *We need proper parliamentary scrutiny of COVID-19 decisions*, [https://nb.australiainstitute.org.au/covid19\\_committee](https://nb.australiainstitute.org.au/covid19_committee)

Browne (2020) *Parliamentary scrutiny during the COVID-19 crisis*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/parliamentary-scrutiny-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Browne (2020) *Polling – Parliamentary oversight of COVID-19 response*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-parliamentary-oversight-of-covid-19-response/>

In April 2020, the ACT established the Select Committee on the COVID-19 Response and the Australian Parliament established a Senate select committee to provide parliamentary scrutiny. The Australia Institute welcomed the establishment of the Senate committee.<sup>2</sup>

That month, prominent Tasmanian individuals and organisations signed an Australia Institute open letter calling for an equivalent committee in Tasmania.<sup>3</sup> In May and June 2020, Tasmanian crossbenchers endeavoured to establish an oversight committee.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, the Tasmanian Public Accounts Committee held an inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Minshull & Browne (2020) *Parliamentary scrutiny during the COVID-19 crisis in Tasmania*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/parliamentary-scrutiny-during-the-covid-19-crisis-in-tasmania/>

---

<sup>2</sup> The Australia Institute (2020) *Federal COVID-19 parliamentary oversight committee welcomed*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/federal-covid-19-parliamentary-oversight-committee-welcomed/>

<sup>3</sup> The Australia Institute (2020) *Broad alliance of Tasmanian organisations call for establishment of NZ-style multi-partisan COVID-19 parliamentary oversight committee*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/broad-alliance-of-tasmanian-organisations-call-for-establishment-of-nz-style-multi-partisan-covid-19-parliamentary-oversight-committee/>

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor (2020) *Joint Select Committee on Tasmania's COVID-19 Response and Recovery*, <https://tasmps.greens.org.au/parliament/joint-select-committee-tasmanias-covid>; Webb (2020) *Parliamentary committee to inquire into COVID-19 response and recovery*, <https://megwebb.com.au/parliamentary-committee-to-inquire-into-the-covid-19-response-and-recovery/>

<sup>5</sup> Parliament of Tasmania (2023) *Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/committees/joint-committees/standing-committees/public-accounts-committee/completed-inquiries/completed-inquires-2023-2024/tasmanian-governments-continuing-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic>

## Diminished state capacity

Consultants took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further entrench private advice in public decision making.<sup>6</sup> Australia Institute research identifies concerns with the advice given by consulting firms during the pandemic, and places these concerns within the wider context of a general trend of consulting firms contributing to poor government decision-making.

Shields, Adhikari, & Browne (2023) *Neither frank nor fearless*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/neither-frank-nor-fearless/>

## Inappropriate use of defence reserves

Allan Behm, the head of the Australia Institute's International & Security Affairs Program, criticised the securitisation of major domestic policy problems and the militarisation of public policy management in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Behm (2021) *Operation Khaki Creep: Why public policy management is being militarised*, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/operation-khaki-creep-why-public-policy-management-is-being-militarised-20210801-p58ern.html>

## HEALTH RESPONSE MEASURES

---

Term of reference 2: Key health response measures (for example across COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments, key medical supplies such as personal protective equipment, quarantine facilities, and public health messaging).

## Public attitudes to the COVID-19 pandemic response

In May 2020, the Australia Institute surveyed nationally representative samples of people in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US, Italy and South Korea about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australians and Americans were equally the most likely to report having already lost their jobs and the least confident of keeping their jobs, but Australians maintained high trust in government compared to their American counterparts. New Zealanders

---

<sup>6</sup> Vogelpohl et al. (2022) *Pandemic consulting. How private consultants leverage public crisis management* *Pandemic consulting. How private consultants leverage public crisis management*

were the happiest with their government's response to COVID-19 and recorded the highest level of trust in government advice and recovery.

Browne (2020) *Global attitudes to COVID-19 pandemic and response*,  
<https://www.tai.org.au/content/trust-time-covid-19-global-polling-shows-government-only-institution-trusted-lead-world-out>

In January 2021, the Australia Institute surveyed Australians on whether Prime Minister Scott Morrison had a responsibility to clearly and publicly criticise a federal Liberal politician who posted misinformation about the pandemic on social media. Three in four Australians agreed (77%), including as many Coalition voters (77%).

The Australia Institute (2021) *Polling: Prime Minister Morrison's response to COVID-19 misinformation and the US Capitol riots*,  
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-prime-minister-morrison-s-response-to-covid-19-misinformation-and-the-us-capitol-riots/>

The Australia Institute's exit polling following the 2022 federal election asked respondents about 20 issues in the context of whether they were a strength or weakness for the Morrison government. Half of Australians (48%) identified the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as a weakness, 22% as neither, and 30% as a strength. However, the Morrison government scored even worse on most issues than it did on its handling of COVID-19.

The Australia Institute (2022) *Exit poll – Coalition strengths and weaknesses in the election*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/exit-poll-2022/>

## SUPPORT FOR INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS

---

Term of reference 5: Support for industry and businesses (for example responding to supply chain and transport issues, addressing labour shortages, and support for specific industries).

### Arts and entertainment

The arts and entertainment sector was unnecessarily, illogically and cruelly neglected in the support provided to industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the performing arts were badly affected by COVID-19 restrictions, and polling research found that three in five Australians (58%) supported the industry's request for a \$750 million federal relief package for live performance.

Browne (2020) *Art vs dismal science*,  
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/art-vs-dismal-science/>

The neglect of the arts and entertainment sector occurred despite the sector's economic importance and its high level of exposure to the pandemic's economic consequences. Conservative estimates were that, prior to the pandemic, the sector employed 193,600 Australians and contributed \$14.7 billion to Gross Domestic Product.

Browne (2020) *Economic importance of the arts and entertainment sector*,  
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/background-brief-economic-importance-of-the-arts-and-entertainment-sector/>

In 2021, the Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work identified the ongoing, devastating impact of COVID-19 on Australia's arts and entertainment sector and made recommendations to government to reboot the creative sector after the crisis.

Pennington & Eltham (2021) *Creativity in crisis: Rebooting Australia's arts and entertainment sector after COVID*, <https://futurework.org.au/report/creativity-in-crisis-rebooting-australias-arts-and-entertainment-sector-after-covid/>

## The ABC

Australia Institute polling research in 2019 and 2020 found that an increasing share of Australians agreed with the general proposition that the ABC's funding should be increased (35%, vs 12% who thought it should be reduced). When the additional funding was associated with the ABC's emergency role, support rose dramatically to three in four Australians (75%).

The Australia Institute (2020) *Polling - The ABC and public broadcasting*,  
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-the-abc-and-public-broadcasting/>