



Commonwealth Government Covid 19 Response Inquiry

Submission on Behalf of *Students For Liberty Australia/NZ*

Students For Liberty Australia/NZ

Students For Liberty is a global non-profit organisation that seeks to develop student leaders and empower them to spread the ideas of liberty and freedom. My name is Max Payne, and I am the staffer based in Australia, managing Australian programs. *Students For Liberty* were shocked with the levels of government overreach and the trampling of human rights that occurred throughout the pandemic in Australia, and our submission reflects on these measures and makes recommendations to improve processes for future emergencies and pandemics.

Introduction

The Commonwealth Government's response to the Covid 19 pandemic from March 2020 over the following two years or so has inflicted considerable social, economic and health damage to a generation of young people. While the virus was perhaps a more potent threat to older or more vulnerable Australians, this inquiry should seek to understand the vast gap between the benefit and cost to many young Australians who have borne the consequences of Government overreach during this period.

From a government perspective, the handling of the pandemic was marked by panic, inflexibility on the part of bureaucrats and the abandonment of reason and common sense. Having thrown out all prior planning and pandemic preparations, Australia embarked on a great experiment in policy that resulted in vast suppression of human rights with seemingly no cost benefit analysis. The legacy is a scarred generation with fewer economic opportunities, vast government debt, poorer health outcomes including mental health, and unnecessary gaps in both educational and social development.

The fundamental error throughout the pandemic at all levels of government was to essentially boil all government policy down to two metrics: covid infections and covid fatalities (not to mention the failures in accurately recording and reporting even these metrics!)

Border Closures and Quarantine

- Slamming international borders shut threw families into disarray, and trampled over the rights of citizens to free movement, as did banning citizens from leaving the country. Important family milestones and events were missed, couples were isolated from each other for months, and the tourism industry languished for 2 years.
- Initially requiring returning or departing citizens to be 'fully vaccinated' had little impact on transmission or infection but resulted in an unnecessary divide in society. This came to a head during the comical handling of protocols during the 2022 Australian Open tennis.

- Quarantine arrangements at hotels proved to be unfit for purpose, particularly in Victoria where contracted security guards without infection control training became a point of vulnerability. Use of hotels also made mandatory quarantine an expensive exercise for returning Australians once financial support was removed, home quarantine measures (in some cases employed for high profile visitors) should be explored for future pandemics.
- Purpose-built quarantine facilities were built too slowly to become useful, the acute stage of the pandemic had already passed and the vaccine rollout was near complete when they opened.
- It is a source of national shame that Australians had difficulty returning home and leaving the country for 2 years, it is an example of the bureaucratic inflexibility that marked governance during the pandemic.

Debt and Economic Management

- Apart from the many other direct and indirect harms caused by lockdowns and other emergency pandemic measures, the economic harm is disproportionately felt by young Australians.
- As of this year, treasury forecasts interest on national debt to be the fastest growing budget item, this will continue to be a chronic issue for successive federal governments and will draw taxpayer funds away from more productive spending or critical support measures.
- The sheer scale of spending, the subsequent period of low interest rates and the resultant inflation over 2022/23 proved to financially benefit older Australians with more wealth and exposure to assets such as residential housing. Young Australians are now disproportionately struggling with rent payments, increases to utility bills and inflation across industries related to supply side shortages and input costs. Over their working lives they will see a greater share of their taxes devoted to paying off covid debt and the interest due on it.
- Programs such as JobSeeker (which increased unemployment benefits by 100%), JobKeeper and a raft of other direct payments continued for much longer than necessary and the effects on the labour market and productivity are still being felt.
- Industry support such as HomeBuilder proved to have a disruptive and distorting effect on demand, we now have a shortage of labour and building materials which has caused huge numbers of insolvencies throughout the construction sector.

Vaccine Mandates, Health Messaging, Transparency

- While not administered by the Federal Government, vaccine mandates across industries at a state/territory level became commonplace in Australia from late 2021. These mandates were only possible to implement due to the access the federal government gave to the states of the Immunisation Registry. These mandates were extremely harmful to social cohesion, undermined confidence/trust in government and had terrible social and economic consequences for those who chose not to have a covid vaccine.
- The Federal Government's advisory bodies such as ATAGI played a key role in communicating to Australians about vaccines and other health measures/directives throughout the pandemic.

- Information about vaccines provided by federal departments did not outline risks associated with vaccines clearly, they were also responsible for reducing patient choice in regards to other treatments for covid 19.
- AstraZeneca - the Federal Government's preferred vaccine throughout the middle of 2021 has now been discontinued and is subject to a class action patient lawsuit, highlighting the folly of the Federal Government's messaging around vaccines during the pandemic.
- The Federal Government adopted fearful language throughout the pandemic, and the Home Affairs department actively engaged in the suppression of critical voices. Many government directives and pieces of information turned out to be false despite the confidence and sureness it was first conveyed with, this approach to messaging was highly damaging to trust in government and authority.
- Further to this, the secrecy under which National Cabinet operated and the difficulty former Senator Rex Patrick had in publishing the minutes of those meetings is endemic of the opacity displayed by the Federal Government during the pandemic.

Recommendations

1. Consider alternatives to hotel quarantine including home quarantine to allow for more flexibility and greater numbers of Australians to return home during a pandemic.
2. Adopt a policy of flexibility in quarantine/border arrangements and case-by-case analysis to allow for more positive outcomes and common sense to prevail despite broad restrictions. The focus on blunt compliance caused unnecessary harm when the risk was not always potent.
3. Economic cost-benefit analysis and impact on human rights must always be considered when implementing broad health-based measures, even in an emergency.
4. Continued direct payments and industry support that is not means-tested should be avoided due to likely economic impacts later down the line
5. Industry support and economic policy that ignites demand must be considered against inflationary pressures that it will create.
6. Patient data and the privacy of doctor/patient relationships should not be interfered with by the Federal government in future pandemics
7. More careful consideration of overall language and directives from a health perspective to avoid fear and panic, and increase choice for patients and consumers to restore trust in authorities and health professionals during a health emergency.
8. Establish a culture of transparency within government that highlights the need for clear, consistent and open communication with Australians during emergencies.
9. Establish a Royal Commission into the national pandemic response that also investigates the role of state/territory governments, who were responsible for causing some of the most egregious harms by Government during the pandemic.

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