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## History, the pandemic and the future

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The COVID-19 pandemic exposed various features of Australian society, culture and values less visible during ‘ordinary times’. In particular, government’s handling of the crisis indicated the utilitarian caste of the nation’s politics. While collective memory of various episodes from the country’s twentieth-century history – such as the Spanish Influenza pandemic, the Depression and World War II – would be mobilised during the COVID-19 pandemic, the place of this event in the sweep of global and Australian history remains uncertain.

T. S. Eliot’s line from ‘The Hollow Men’ – ‘Not with a bang but a whimper’ – has been recalled to describe how pandemics end (Oster, 2020). Yet, even more than four years after the beginning of the pandemic, it was still difficult to imagine quite what post-COVID life might look like. Is there even something that might be called ‘post-COVID’? When I recently completed a political history of Australia, I called the concluding chapter, covering the 2019–22 period, ‘In the Age of COVID-19’ (Bongiorno, 2022). A reader of the manuscript in the autumn of 2022 thought this title might be changed: that it was likely to date as we all emerged out of the pandemic. But it was a matter on which I pushed back: it seemed to me that we were likely to be living in something that might reasonably be called a COVID era for some time yet. A new and virulent wave of infections occurred in the winter. I retained the chapter title.

COVID-19 is unlikely to be a demographic turning point like the Black Death of the fourteenth century (1346–53), which some modern historical research suggests wiped out as much as 60 per cent of the European population, or 50 million people, but had transformative – and often positive – economic, technological and cultural impacts (Belich, 2022; Benedictow, 2005). Twentieth-century epidemics and pandemics have not carried off anything like such high proportions of the population – not even the Spanish Influenza, which might nonetheless also have killed 50 million. COVID-19 has, however, reduced life expectancy in many countries and there are growing concerns about its long-term health effects, such as on heart-related disease; notably, historians of the Spanish Influenza have begun searching for signs of its longer-term impacts on public health in the decades that followed 1918–19 (Chavez, 2023). COVID-19 has also disrupted supply chains and labour mobility, both of great importance to Australia given its diminished pre-COVID industrial capacity and high permanent and temporary immigration rates. The Albanese Labor government, elected in May 2022, is committed to boosting local self-sufficiency and lowering barriers to some immigration. The task of economic recovery has become all the more difficult against the background of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Some recent research suggests that vaccination might well have been more effective in the Spanish Influenza pandemic than historians have normally assumed, even in the absence of an understanding that the disease was viral (Roth, 2023). In the absence of effective vaccines, COVID-19 would have killed many more people in general, with the old and frail being most vulnerable – a different age profile from Spanish Influenza, which killed many younger people. Even in Australia with its high COVID-19 vaccination rate, few people have had more than two shots. The low booster uptake may well have assisted the spread of infection, although it cannot on its own account for Australia's slide down the international league tables (Toole & Crabb, 2022).

The public health system in Australia, like in other places around the world, will, to some extent, need to be geared to the management of COVID-19 for years to come. Periodic vaccination and COVID-19 wards – along with antiretroviral drugs – will form part of our lives for some time, at least among people in the developed world fortunate enough to enjoy such access. And so will measures to control infections and hospitalisations, although

the apparent complacency involving high numbers of deaths in Australia during 2022 and 2023 has formed a strong contrast with the earlier years of the pandemic. I suggest a possible explanation for that paradox below.

There will be likely effects on civility – on the way we think and behave in everyday life. The great German sociologist Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process* (originally published in 1939) traced changes in personal and social behaviour across centuries, explaining how and why behaviour considered perfectly acceptable in one era would be transformed, via various forms of restraint, into the rudeness of another – and vice versa:

People who ate together in the way customary in the Middle Ages, taking meat with their fingers from the same dish, wine from the same goblet, soup from the same pot or the same plate ... stood in a different relationship to one another than we do. And this involves not only the level of clear, rational consciousness; their emotional life also had a different structure and character.

The introduction of a fork, in such circumstances, could (and apparently did) become a cause of scandal. What Elias called ‘the thresholds of embarrassment and shame’ (Elias, 1994, pp. 55–56) shifted according to culture and context; good and bad manners are not fixed for all time.

How will COVID-19 affect our social interactions, our sense of the difference between civil and uncivil, considerate and inconsiderate, good and bad? Will we come to see turning up in certain situations without a mask in the way we came to regard body odour and having cigarette smoke blown in your face? Already, the signs are that, in Australia at least, mask wearing will not take on this significance; however, a minority does continue to criticise the failure of people to wear masks in social situations where infection could spread, as well as the complacency of governments and even some medical professionals about infection, hospitalisations and deaths. Given the continuing spread of the virus, and that during January 2023 (to take an example) the rolling seven-day national average of COVID-associated deaths exceeded 50, they surely have a point (Australian Government, n.d.).

There are many other forms of social interaction that may well still be reshaped by the experience of COVID-19. What about standing too close to someone in a queue? Will we shake hands as readily as before, or greet an old friend with a kiss on the cheek? Will we see cleanliness and dirtiness

in new ways, with all the social, cultural and moral baggage that we know is connected with those distinctions? And what of the attitude of the vaccinated to the unvaccinated?

Will we see collective responsibility differently? Until 2020, many people went along to their workplaces with bad colds or flu symptoms, marching on like a trooper: 'Soldier on, with Codral, soldier on', an old TV advertisement for cough medicine urged us. This was despite the possibility that the virus one was carrying, and possibly spreading, would eventually kill somebody. It is almost impossible to imagine a marketing campaign of this kind in the wake of COVID-19. Will we ever quite look at someone with a bad cough, a croaky voice or a dripping nose in the same way? These are not trivial matters because they form the essence of social life and express wider understandings of what it means to belong fully to a community, our sense of obligation to one another.

The pandemic will also likely affect our understanding of how to manage work and leisure time, given that so many of us were forced to invite our jobs into every corner of our homes. And as well as reshaping domestic space, COVID-19 might have long-term effects on our urban spaces: will the daily ritual of commuting to a city office ever quite resume its pre-pandemic patterns? So far, the signs are that working more frequently from home will, for certain occupations, be more common. That is a potential source of freedom and flexibility for workers, but also of potential conflict with employers, and between employees.

Will we, more generally, regard the meaning of freedom differently? If you had asked Australians before the pandemic which freedoms they thought most important, they might have said freedom of speech or freedom from discrimination. Some might even have nominated religious freedom, which was a matter on which the Morrison Coalition government would try – and fail – to legislate in early 2022. But they would probably not have thought of freedom of movement: the freedom to travel across state boundaries, to leave one's home, to go overseas, or to come home to Australia. These freedoms were all taken for granted; borders between states and territories had long been treated as soft by most people even while differences between jurisdictions might be an inconvenience in fields such as education and business. But understandings of freedom are cultural and historical. If one had asked a Soviet citizen or a black South African in the 1970s whether they thought freedom of movement important, their experience might well have led them to say that it was. Indigenous Australians of the 1950s might

have felt the same way, as would a Palestinian in the Occupied Territories today. Australians are never likely to look at their passports, their state boundaries – or even perhaps their own gardens, if they have one – in quite the same way again.

Or perhaps, as the years pass, the experience will not be etched in collective memory, or will be recalled in ways that would seem inaccurate to many of us now. Memory scholars in the humanities and social sciences have shown that the ways the past registers as collective memory are subject to complex cultural and historical (as well as biological) processes. Both individual and collective memory change as personal and social contexts change. Individual memories can be sensitive to shifts in wider public narratives; testimony that might not pass muster historiographically is nonetheless true in the way it expresses lived experience (Thomson, 1994). Lucy Taksa, in a study of memory of the Spanish Influenza in Australia, found that several of her informants recalled living through the ‘Bubonic Plague’ in 1919. In reality, Sydney had experienced this epidemic in 1900, but for those who had lived through the events of 1919, the term ‘Bubonic Plague’ expressed ‘the collective experience of a rampant and deadly disease’ (Taksa, 1994, p. 81). We can expect that the evolution of memory of COVID-19 will have its own complexities, although we can barely even begin to speculate what they might be.

The pandemic will likely affect how Australians view political authority, as we have been reminded that governments still have something like power of life and death over us. People had politics and government thrust on them: government decision-making determined whether or not one could walk to the end of the street to buy a cup of coffee and then, if you could, the circumstances in which you were allowed to drink it. The Australian pandemic response also seems rooted in the deeper patterns of the country’s political culture. Scholars have called Australia a Benthamite society, arguing that rights are seen not as existing in the abstract, but as emerging out of law and politics (Collins, 1985). In 1930 the historian W. K. Hancock famously presented Australian democracy as having ‘come to look upon the State as a vast public utility, whose duty it is to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. The citizen, Hancock explained, claimed not ‘natural rights’ but rights received ‘from the State and through the State’. Collective power was, in this way, mobilised in the service of individual rights, so that Australians saw ‘no opposition between ... individualism and ... reliance upon Government’ (Hancock, 1930, pp. 72–73).

These strains have been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, reminding us of their deep cultural embeddedness. Many Australians longed for greater freedom, but most were willing to accept not just that there is individual responsibility for the collective welfare, but that government should play the predominant role in defining where the boundaries between individual rights and common good lie. Outside extreme libertarianism, a minority taste in Australia, there tends to be only mild political disagreement. Otherwise, most people get on with their lives, expecting the state to set reasonable parameters for individual behaviour while allowing people a wide scope to pursue their private interests as individuals and families.

They also look to government to protect them. We might see in this a continuation of the ethic of the government store, or the commissariat. It played a critical role in the early history of New South Wales as its central economic institution. Importantly, it was a public institution, adapted from the military, although one that was embedded in an emerging private economy. It issued rations to convicts and bought the produce of local farms operated by military officers and a few free settlers. The commissariat was also a *de facto* banker; its receipts were treated like currency in a colony that had no official coinage and, before 1817, no bank. It would ensure that no colonist, however lowly and however harsh the times, would starve, but it was also a source of profit for canny – and sometimes unscrupulous – entrepreneurs. Military officers were in a particularly strong position to make money from their dealings with the government store when there was no governor around, such as in the interregnum that followed Arthur Phillip's departure in 1792, and in the period following the overthrow of William Bligh in 1808. It provided them with a guaranteed market for their produce, at good prices, all compliments of the British Treasury (Hirst, 2014; McLean, 2012).

It does not take a vivid imagination to see how schemes such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker were descendants of the commissariat. They, too, provided government support for the viability of businesses, and they ensured that despite the lack of an income, people could more or less get by, however modestly. And, like the commissariat, JobKeeper proved a fruitful source of profit for some businesses. While many Australians would have preferred that companies that took JobKeeper and yet reported large profits should have returned the money received from government, most pragmatically accepted business profiteering as a price to be paid for the security offered by the hastily assembled government schemes. In any case, their government

gave them no choice and clearly judged that it would not suffer politically in the process. And it is not clear that it did, despite exposure to the scale of subsidy provided to businesses recording healthy profits (Conifer, 2021).

COVID-19 disclosed other dimensions of Australia's political culture and the wider habits of mind on which the practice of politics and crafting of policy depend. A nation that has spent so much of its history worrying over the uninvited arrival of people in boats drew on this history in various ways, some predictable, and some less so. Certainly, border control quickly came to be seen as the best way to keep COVID-19 out of the country, even when it became apparent that it could not do so. But there were novelties this time around. It extended to internal state borders in a way that had not occurred since 1919 (Finnane, 2021). The restrictions on the country's external borders, moreover, were directed at 'our own people' – Australian citizens and permanent residents wanting to come home. Australian governments – and large sections of the population – reminded us that there was a distinction between 'Australia' and 'Australians', and that they recognised a reduced responsibility to those in the latter category who found themselves outside the country's borders. Australia has a long record of solid consular assistance to its citizens in difficulty overseas, so this distinction might be thought surprising. But when the Australian government criminalised entry from India in 2021, threatening those who tried to land with heavy fines and prison sentences of up to five years, some heard the echoes of a longer racial history, since those affected were very likely to be Australian citizens or permanent residents of Indian descent. It was indeed remarkable how readily Australians stranded overseas were 'othered'. Whereas the queue-jumping asylum-seeker had been part of Australian anti-refugee political discourse for decades, in 2020–21 some complained of Australians who had had ample opportunity to return home but had failed to do so. Bizarrely, such censure sometimes even extended to people who left their state for a holiday at Christmas, despite their having been urged by advertising campaigns to do so. The cultural historian John Williams published a book in the 1990s about Australian artistic anti-modernism between the two world wars called *The Quarantined Culture* (Williams, 1995). It was an evocative title that not only captured something important about Australia of that era but also a deeper psychological and cultural vein that could be mined in other historical contexts as well. It was thoroughly exploited by governments during this pandemic. As public policy, it, for a time, helped create enormous benefits, contributing to low infection and death rates.

In due course, it became a trap: vaccination seemed less urgent given that other methods had seemed to work rather well in keeping infections low by international standards.

COVID-19 was, in this way and others, an ‘exposure site’ for society’s strengths and weaknesses. Problems identified before the pandemic came into sharper relief under the stresses that COVID-19 imposed. The inadequacies of aged care, the stinginess of unemployment benefits, the social costs of the gig economy, the indignities of homelessness, the sufferings of family violence and the vulnerabilities of Aboriginal communities: the pandemic brought them into stark relief. Despite Australia’s national pretence of egalitarianism, expensive government relief packages were generous towards those who wear high-vis vests – particularly men – but government was rather less interested in service work done by women, or in fields such as the arts or higher education. Those normally in permanent work were treated as more deserving than those who worked casually. The voices of the young and the old were muted, even more than usual. Children who had been heard over climate change were mainly silenced over matters such as their own health and education. Politicians and journalists discussed pre-existing health conditions, and even simply old age, as if this made someone responsible for their own demise and excused official negligence. Some commentators were even willing to argue that the economic and social cost of locking down populations was so great that the right of the elderly to the protection of their lives should be demoted in any rational order of priorities. ‘Is a person who has lived into their late 70s, 80s or 90s owed the same priority to preserve life as a person in their 20s or 30s who typically has more than 50 years still to live?’, asked *Australian Financial Review* economics editor John Kehoe. ‘Many seniors have had time to enjoy careers, children and grandchildren. My father is 68 and insists he’s had a good run’ (Kehoe, 2020).

Surveys in 2020 told us that the pandemic restored some public trust in government. The Scanlon Foundation, based at Monash University, had 36 per cent of respondents agreeing that government in Canberra could be trusted to do the right thing in 2019, before the pandemic, but a result of 54 per cent in July 2020 was indicative of COVID’s impact (Markus, 2021a). Trust in government had declined to 44 per cent a year later, still above the average (2010–18) of 29 per cent. In July 2022, the figure was still well above the pre-pandemic level, at 41 per cent (O’Donnell, 2022).

The Australian Election Study also found that, on its measure of ‘trust in democracy’, support had increased from 59 per cent to 70 per cent between the 2019 and 2022 elections (Cameron & McAllister, 2022, p. 100).

Government failures across a whole range of responsibilities – from quarantine and the regulation of aged care facilities through to vaccinations – likely undermined trust in both the government and Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Confidence in the Morrison government’s handling of the pandemic itself dropped from 85 per cent in 2020 to 52 per cent in mid-2021 (Markus, 2021b). Morrison’s personal approval rating also plunged. State government performance was rated much more highly, despite numerous failures at that level as well, especially in hotel quarantine and notably in Victoria. In Western Australia in July 2020, 99 per cent of respondents rated the state Labor government’s performance either very well (83 per cent) or fairly well (16 per cent) (Markus, 2021a).

Those figures – amounting to an increase in political trust – raise wider questions about whether the pandemic might be a turning point in the nation’s history, carrying the kind of burden that major events had in the past in the transformation of public expectations and government policy. The last great pandemic, Spanish Influenza, seemed to offer little hope of major change. Australia’s gross domestic product had shrunk during World War I, and it grew in the wake of the Spanish flu (McLean, 2012). The flu, with its absenteeism, closure of businesses, and state border and port restrictions, certainly disrupted economic activity, as did industrial conflict during 1919, some of it related to workers’ concerns about the flu itself. But much of life went on as before. Neither the war nor the flu unleashed any burst of policy creativity among progressives, although it did lead to the formation of a Commonwealth Department of Health (Roe, 1976). The Labor Party moved leftward, adopting a socialisation objective in 1921, but the lean interwar years saw no great advance in social protection, as distinct from efforts to protect Australian urban and rural industries with tariffs and subsidies. Australian society had been divided by the war and its aftermath, and policy innovation of an enduring kind in this country has generally emerged out of policy consensus, not fierce contestation (Bongiorno, 2022).

The Great Depression struck just as dramatically. Australia’s unemployment rate peaked at perhaps 25 per cent in the early 1930s, and the economy again shrank. Joan Beaumont has pointed to how collective memory of the Great Depression, with its mass economic deprivation, would be deployed in public discourse in 2020 (Beaumont, 2022a). When long queues formed

outside Centrelink offices, they immediately recalled for many an economic experience to which only a tiny minority of very elderly Australians could have had any direct access 90 years on.

Australia's economy was very simple in 1930. Exports then were dominated by wool and wheat; the crisis for Australia, to a great extent, arose from the plunge in prices for those commodities, with an accompanying retreat of overseas loan funds. The growing manufacturing sector, developing behind a rising tariff wall, was mainly engaged in import replacement. Few married women were in paid work. The household economy usually comprised a man engaged in employment, a breadwinner, and a woman in unpaid labour in the home, understood as a dependent. The macroeconomic capacity of the federal government in 1930 was much weaker than today. So, too, was the monetary capacity of the central bank of the day, the Commonwealth, in stark contrast with the kind of liquidity that the Reserve Bank of Australia – like other of the world's central banks – was able to release during the more recent crisis. Australia, following Britain, observed the gold standard when the crisis hit in 1929–30, which also limited room for manoeuvre in the monetary sense until it was abandoned in 1931. The welfare state of today has many deficiencies, but it was rudimentary in 1930, lacking an unemployment benefit, for instance, leaving aside a new and very basic system of insurance in Queensland. Australians of the COVID era demanded and received more protection from their government than those of the Great Depression (Beaumont, 2022b).

The COVID-19 crisis was obviously different, but no less potentially devastating for that. Jobs in the services sector were extremely vulnerable to social distancing measures. Moreover, today's export sector depends on services (e.g. education and tourism) to a much greater degree than a century ago. The economy is integrated and interconnected globally, through movements of people, capital and goods, in more complex ways than in 1930. Australia had accepted many immigrants in the 1920s, but it was arguably more vulnerable to the drying up of immigration in 2020. In the 1930s, Australia's economic recovery was shaped, to a great extent, by that of Britain. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia looked nervously to China, with whom its relations deteriorated drastically, including over the issue of the origins of COVID-19 itself. But iron ore exports continued, protected by Western Australia's isolation and severe and longstanding restrictions on interstate movement that kept the state safe.

Especially early in the pandemic, those optimistic about what might be achieved in its wake looked hopefully to the lessons of postwar reconstruction after 1945. In 2020, federal Labor shadow ministers formed a reading group that studied Stuart Macintyre's monumental history, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Macintyre, 2015). The turn to postwar reconstruction indicated a desire for something other than 'snapback': the idea that government policy should be directed to restoring the status quo ante. The difficulty for those with such ambitions, however, was that the impulse to return to normality is such a powerful one, and Australia's policymakers have, to a great extent, felt the need to acquiesce in it – to acknowledge the public weariness with lockdowns, masks and other disruptions to normal life. Interestingly, that was how a lot of people also felt after World War II. Tired of its restrictions and austerity, and having felt rather isolated and alone, they hoped something like the world they had known before could be restored. The extent to which people in this country wanted to leave behind the world of the 1930s for a new order has been greatly exaggerated (Bongiorno, 2022).

That very likely also forms part of the explanation for what many have found perplexing about government handling of COVID-19 once the period of travel restrictions, border closures, lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccination certificates wound down – mostly during 2022. Government and people now seemed remarkably relaxed about rising levels of infections and an alarming number of deaths. At media conferences during the height of the pandemic, grim-faced state premiers would announce infections and deaths in rituals that seemed to draw the attention of vast audiences. Theirs became among the most widely recognised faces in the nation. Even the names of senior health officials became familiar to millions; some achieved celebrity status, rather as generals have done in wars. And then: nothing. Politicians stopped talking about COVID-19. The health officials returned to their desks. COVID-19 animated a minority of libertarian opinion with a taste for conspiracy theories, and it continued to worry another minority, of varying levels of zeal, who argued that governments needed to reimpose restrictions to bring down the infection and death rates. Most, however, got on with their lives.

The paradox of Australian governments imposing, and most Australians accepting, stringent restrictions, followed by an apparent *laissez-faire* approach, has attracted little commentary. The best explanation, I think, lies in the basic utilitarian patterning of the country's political culture (Collins, 1985). If the appeal is to a 'greatest good for the greatest number'

defined by government with a large measure of popular consent, it becomes easier to understand how the same culture could produce two seemingly contrasting results in two very different contexts. Before vaccination became widespread, and while Australians were able to see the bodies piling up in other places such as northern Italy, the balance of policy moved sharply towards restriction. That process was always negotiated and contested – Morrison himself was much less enamoured of restriction than state premiers – but a consensus emerged that gained wide acceptance. However, once the calculus of risk shifted – through vaccination, especially – the balance moved, uncertainly at first, and then sharply, away from restriction. No doubt public weariness with restrictions played a role in this transition, but the social mood cannot alone explain government behaviour. The latter was conditioned by the political culture.

To recognise these dynamics, it must be emphasised, is not to celebrate them or their effects. It has been a feature of this utilitarian approach to government that it is poorly equipped to protect the marginalised and vulnerable. The most powerful generally do very well in such a system, and a large majority do well enough to be satisfied. The physically strong benefited from the relaxation of restrictions with minimal risk to their welfare; the ill, frail, poor and old have been much more exposed. ‘Consensus’ tends to rest on that foundation of inequality. But the vulnerable struggle to have their voices heard, or to exercise agency, in a system that seems so well calibrated towards finding a middle way. Australians sometimes celebrate the capacity of their system to achieve this kind of equilibrium. They are less inclined to reflect on those who lose in this scenario. And they certainly do not wish to pause for too long over those who lose their lives.

In such ways, the Australian response to the COVID-19 pandemic reached back into the country’s settler history and deep into its cultural roots. The late historian John Hirst liked to tell newly arrived overseas students at his university that Australians are an obedient people, despite their self-image as anti-authoritarian larrikins. As he explained: ‘The Australian people despise politicians, but the politicians can extract an amazing degree of obedience from the people, while the people themselves believe they are anti-authority’ (Hirst, 2004, para. 7). ‘Australians’, he considered, ‘are suspicious of persons in authority, but towards impersonal authority they are very obedient’ (para. 66).

Hirst's use of the term 'obedient' slightly blurs the reality here of a people whose obedience is never blind but considered, negotiated and conditional. But his analysis has much to offer, and certainly much more than both local and overseas observers who saw some deep deficiency in the country's people and democracy in their willingness to accept stringent regulation of their lives. It is certainly superior to the claim made by critics of the severe and extended Victorian lockdowns that its people were suffering from Stockholm syndrome – the tendency of hostages to form emotional bonds with their captors. Nor did ignorant United States-based analysis of the decline of Australian democracy cut much ice, even if you ignore the deep crisis in that country's own electoral democracy that finds barely even faint echoes in Australia's robust version (Friedersdorf, 2021; Lee, 2021).

What COVID-19 exposed was not the absence of democracy in Australia, or even its weakness, but something of its distinctive character. And, for all its flaws, that system proved itself well adapted to the challenges of the greatest crisis in the country's history since World War II, and the greatest health crisis for a century.

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