

Pandemic Inquiry Wars: Australia, the United States and the Coronavirus Investigation

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The Australian press and a chorus of the country's politicians painted a misguided, blotched picture: the Scott Morrison government had achieved its goal of convincing members of the World Health Assembly that an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 was a move worth taking. "More than 100 countries, including Australia," [observed the ABC](#), "had already co-signed the motion for the probe into the global outbreak." The same network also noted that Australia "was the first nation after the US to call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19."

Prior to Tuesday's vote at the World Health Assembly, government MPs were cheerful. Australia had been noticed. The European Union had also joined the party with its resolution seeking an "impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation" of the "international health response to COVID-19." **Senator Matt Canavan** [was in a celebratory mood](#), despite the cautious wording of the EU draft. "I don't think it's a bad day at the office when we have tens of other countries, major countries, joining us in the cause." The Morrison government had been "massively vindicated" by an "outpouring from other countries in the world."

Australian minister for agriculture **David Littleproud** [forgot](#) the diminutive qualification in his family name, and had his own outpouring session. "We should be damn proud as a nation that we have led the world, not only in understanding what the WHO has done, but understanding that wildlife wet markets' role is in these pandemics."

Even prior to the vote, it was clear that celebration in Australia was not only misplaced but premature and provincial. The draft motion had avoided reference to China, or to Wuhan, where the outbreak is said to have originated. It also left the World Health Organization as the primary agent behind the investigation, provided it link arms with the World Organization for Animal Health. The effort, according to the draft resolution, would involve "scientific and collaborative field missions" to "identify the zoonotic source of the virus and the route of introduction to the human population, including the possible role of intermediate hosts."

Roughing up the WHO has been a pastime of late for those in Canberra. In April, Australian foreign minister **Marise Payne** [was curt](#) about the organisation and what role it should perform in the investigative process. "We need to know the sorts of details that an independent review would identify for us about the genesis of the virus, about the approaches in dealing with it, and addressing the openness with which information was shared." To charge the WHO with what it would otherwise be doing – inquiring into the origins of COVID-19 – was unwise. "I'm not sure that you can have the health organisation

which has been responsible for disseminating much of the international communications material, and doing much of the early engagement and investigative work, also as the review mechanism.” Should an organisation that had so bungled, and so compromised its remit, be “a bit poacher and gamekeeper”?

Payne’s colleague, Australian health minister **Greg Hunt** [was similarly](#) bolshie in his comments, making a point of WHO laxity in the whole business. “We do know there was very considerable criticism when we imposed on February 1 the China ban from some officials and the WHO in Geneva.” Australia had done well to cope with the virus *despite* WHO efforts. The stage was set.

On Tuesday, the draft motion passed. No Australian draft measure had surfaced to challenge it. Fingers pointing in China’s direction had been withdrawn. Even the PRC had added their agreement, and scoffed at Australia’s peacocked confidence. “The claim that the WHA’s resolution (is) a vindication of Australia’s call,” an emailed [statement](#) from the Chinese embassy in Australia noted, “is nothing but a joke.”

The news was also digested with varying degrees of thoroughness in Australia. “The Morrison government has won unanimous support for its bid to set up an independent probe into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic,” [wrote](#) Hans van Leeuwen of the *Australian Financial Review*, “but the victory was marred by equivocation from key players including the US and China.” That Australia should have also been blushing was put aside, though Labor’s foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong was quizzical about the volte-face. “The government needs to explain why it changed its mind and now things the WHO is best placed to investigate the origins of the coronavirus.”

More broadly speaking, Australia’s misrepresented victory failed in achieving the inroads for its unquestioned, and most bullying of allies. The Trump administration [had wished](#) for an “immediate investigation” into the coronavirus and to restore Taiwan’s observer status at the WHO. It failed on both counts. **President Donald Trump’s** threats, made in a petulant [letter](#) to the WHO **Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** on Monday, had failed to have its desired impact. “It is clear that the repeated missteps by you and your organization in responding to the pandemic have been extremely costly for the world.” The body had 30 days to “commit to major substantive improvements”; otherwise, the president would make the “temporary freeze in United States funding to the World Health Organization permanent and reconsider our membership.”

Trump’s critique of WHO tardiness, a position that had been initially accepted by Morrison without demur, is recapitulated in the letter. According to the President, the health organisation “consistently ignored credible reports of the virus spreading in Wuhan in early December 2019 or even earlier, including reports from the Lancet medical journal.” Reports that directly conflicted with the official Chinese narrative were not investigated, “even those that came from sources within Wuhan itself.”

The [swift response](#) from *The Lancet* was dismissively cool, throwing ice at Trump’s fire. “This statement is factually incorrect.” No report was published in December 2019 referring to the outbreak in Wuhan. The first reports were published on January 24, 2020, describing the first 41 patients from Wuhan suffering from COVID-19 and the first instanced case of confirmed “person-to-person transmission of the new virus” was also published that day. Trump’s allegations outlined in the letter were “serious and damaging to efforts to strengthen international cooperation to control this pandemic.”

What matters now is the form the investigation will take. It risks being mangled. The WHO has been a victim of manipulation before, not least by the United States, and risks doing so again. On the other side will be China. The public relations crews will be busy; rivalries will again be replayed.

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