

The Coronavirus Seal: Victoria's Borders Close

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The state of Victoria is being sealed off from the rest of Australia. On Tuesday, at 11.59pm, the border with New South Wales will be shut with publicised resoluteness. It is happening at the insistence of politicians across the country with a panicked urge. On the way are reminders about the miracle that was federation in 1901. That a Commonwealth was ever formed from the Britannic nuts and bolts of an invasive penal settlement was remarkable, given the otherwise innate hostilities, not to mention competitiveness, the states had shown to each other.

The last time this happened was a touch over a century ago, when the borders were sealed in a response to the ravages of pneumonic influenza, inaccurately named Spanish flu. The venture is going to be heavily policed. Human personnel, drones and surveillance equipment will be deployed. 55 ground crossings including four major highways, 33 bridges, two waterways, various numbers of train stations and airports will be subjects of interest. Even with this, there is scepticism. Viruses will find their carriers and unwitting accomplices, however impressive the policing effort.

The closure, [according](#) to Victorian **Premier Daniel Andrews**, will be “enforced on the New South Wales side, so as not to be a drain on resources that are very focused on fighting the virus right now across our state.” Residents in border towns must apply for permits for movement between the states. As the ABC describes it, “Only permit holders, emergency services workers, freight drivers and returning travellers will be able to cross into New South Wales from Victoria.” The penalties for breaching such rules are severe: \$11,000 in fines or six months in jail. Businesses on the border face ruin and considerable opacity in terms of regulations.

While that is happening, 3,000 residents in Flemington and North Melbourne continue their quarantine in the public housing towers that have been designated as COVID-19 hotspots. Promises of assistance made by Andrews have yet to materialise in any meaningful way. Mental health practitioners and social workers seem few and far between. The government food supplies remain spectral. That said, FareShare, despite being a charity, [claims to have provided](#), at the prompting of the Department of Health and Human Services, Sunday roasts, vegetarian casseroles and family pies, supplemented by 3,500 quiches and 1,600 sausage rolls. The charity has set up, according to *The Advocate*, “an emergency cool room packed with thousands of nutritious, cooked meals” in North Melbourne, though it is hard to see how these “cater to a range of cultural and dietary preferences”.

The feeling that “prison food” is being supplied to “inmates” is unmistakable, though even that has been in short supply. As Nine News [reported](#) with much fanfare, “A daughter and her elderly mother trapped in Melbourne’s public housing lockdown have broken down in

tears, detailing how they have only been given four sausage rolls to eat in more than 48 hours.” But no matter: this has provided charities such as FareShare with [a few good publicity snaps](#). The show of false remedies must go on.

While this is taking place, the premier [remains convinced](#) that food and toys are making their way to the residents.

“This is a massive task and the message to everybody in the towers... (is)those staff – thousands of them – are doing the very, very best they can and they will continue to do everything they can to support those who are impacted by this lockdown.”

One thing is distinctly not in short supply. The police, some 500 of them, are out in force on all nine estates. These armed officers have been shown to be as ill-informed as the residents. Communal spaces continue being used; movement through the buildings is permitted. The prospects of mass infection through the tenements seems likely. Even the healthy stand condemned.

Residents are mouldering in desperation. Papers with the pleas of “Treat us as Humans: Not Caged Animals” have been [pasted against windows](#). Malevolent attitudes, many traditionally prejudiced against public housing residents, have been given a good airing. To that have come good dollops of racial presumption. It all looks fitting for such critics: the darkies, the ill, the derelict, being fenced by police, monitored less for their safety than the greater good of society. The diseased, as with epidemics in history, will be walled up.

One of Australia’s most conspicuous reactionaries, One Nation leader and Senator Pauline Hanson, spoke approvingly of such measures. Never one to shy away from the race card and its impurities, she suggested that the residents in the nine towers were “drug addicts” and “alcoholics”, which was not helped by the fact that they could not speak English. Even this was a bit much for the good people of Channel Nine’s Today Show. “The Today Show has advised Pauline Hanson,” [came a statement](#) from Nine’s Director of News and Current Affairs Darren Wick, “that she will no longer be appearing on our programme as a regular contributor.” Perhaps hypocrisy is less palatable in the morning.

The spectacles unfolding in North Melbourne, Flemington and parts of the city convey an ugliness that has become normalised in certain countries. Public health is not merely a matter for doctors and health practitioners but truncheons. Another sentiment is also detectable: a certain delight at Victoria being made whipping boy and pariah of the states. All this shows the power a virus can wield. To coronavirus go the spoils.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: Police guard access to housing commission apartments under lockdown in Melbourne | AP

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Kampmark](#)

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