

Spiked Concerns: The Melbourne Coronavirus Lockdown

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It all looked like it was going so well for Australia and Victoria, in particular. They could point to the mishandling of the Ruby Princess, a cruise ship that docked in Sydney and whose passengers disembarked chocked with coronavirus, precipitating 700 cases and some 21 deaths across the country. It had, till now, been the single most contagious incident in the COVID-19 annals of the antipodes. Victorians could hold their heads hubristically high.

Then, the dreaded spike returned. Before journalists had time to file, or arm chair warriors time to muster their thoughts, the coronavirus beast had gotten away from an Australian state that had prided itself in reining in numbers and playing the game of suppression. Victoria's quarantine regime was seemingly in tatters; COVID-19 had found its way through the channels of community transmission.

Now, [nine public housing towers](#) in Flemington and North Melbourne with some 3,000 residents have gone into "complete lockdown". Residents are not permitted to leave their abodes for five days. The police are holding the fort.

The hindsight wizards are all coming out from under the covers, ignoring that old wisdom that pandemic policy is an unruly, fickle thing. The Andrews government has been accused of incompetence and hubris. Greg Sheridan of the Murdoch stable of reactionary politics [was jubilant](#) at the failings of the premier. "Daniel Andrews is now clearly the worst-performing, most unsuccessful premier or territory leader in Australia in managing the COVID-19 outbreak, despite being more authoritarian." Why, asked Fairfax press correspondent Peter Hartcher on Sunday, did Andrews not respect the plague lessons of old?

A host of problems have surfaced to pull the carpet from under the state government. Central and defective is the issue of the quarantine regime itself, one that seems to have fallen into a state of ruin. With a rise in COVID-19 infections in late June, Andrews found himself scratching his confused head. There were claims that the new outbreak might be traced to an errant cigarette lighter used by staff working in hotel quarantine. They had kept their distance, [claimed](#) the premier "but sharing a lighter between each other". There were also "carpooling arrangements between staff, which mean they were in closer contact than we would like." A terrible understatement.

It did not take long for the critics to train their interest in the very idea of having security guards supervising the entire program. Recruits with spotty levels of training, much of it

horrendously so, were used to supervise the quarantined guests. And it showed. Various transgressions and malpractices took place. Some security personnel had sexual congress with their guarded quarry, a point [that delighted](#) such outlets as the *Herald Sun*. The number of guards listed on duty at any one time was inflated as part of an effort to charge more for fewer services. Personal protective equipment was worn for extensive periods of time without change, and loose supervision meant that quarantined families could still visit each other for recreational pursuits. Such practices were replicated at various hotels, leading to a spurring on of the contagion.

There have also been increasing numbers of returning travellers and residents [who have refused to be tested](#) for coronavirus. In the rage that has followed, sinister motives and a good deal of malice have been imputed. Conspiracy theories were underlined. As Jane Williams and Bridget Haire [suggest](#) in *The Conversation*, such testing never yields “neutral” information. “People may refuse medical testing (if they have symptoms) or screening (if no symptoms) of any type because they want to avoid the consequences of a positive result.” Casual workers, for instance, face the perils of few if any sick days. Jobs can be lost during the course of quarantine.

The Andrews government now faces the coarsest of options, none of them palatable, few of them desirable. To send armed police to effectively detain a vulnerable population, many immigrants, many with a less than sympathetic disposition to the boys and girls in blue, may not be the most politic of moves. In this sense, the premier has his hands tied. Saddled with the moniker “Red Dan” and now having the spectre of the Wuhan experiment of bordering up buildings manifest itself in Melbourne, risk scuppering any credible efforts. In that most vulgar of terms, Andrews is wedged. Individuals like Sheridan howl about the “politburo” style of the Victorian premier but would equally object to firm measures if they were not taken.

The reaction from residents in the public housing towers is predictably rattled. Sudanese national Awatif Taha, who has been a resident in the Flemington public housing flats for 18 years with her husband, [paints a troubling scene](#) of crowded tenement spaces, insufficient government services and poor channels of information. Community leaders were not enlisted in the cause. “So how do I feel about what happened on Saturday, with us being told we would not be allowed to leave our units for at least five days? I feel really good, but it was a shock. I don’t know why they didn’t talk to us before Saturday.”

Sensitivity is being reiterated, but this is becoming a trope on a loop. Articulating it somehow makes it manifest, but there is no sense yet how each resident in these towers will be given the tender reassurance and compassionate hand when they are also being considered the problem. The premier has announced a scheme of hardship payments and around the clock support (food, medical and other services). But these are people being held against their will, for their own good, and they are also being tarnished in the endeavour. They are also being detained in facilities that are themselves conducive to infection. As acting Australian Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly [describes it](#), such buildings “are vertical cruise ships, in a way.” Pandemics, as with other destructive phenomena, fall unevenly upon populations.

There is also a fear that such selective approaches are merely delaying the inevitable, by which time the entire state will find itself returning to the severest of restrictions. The Victorian government has already designated lockdown restrictions for those in [“restricted postcodes”](#), but this has merely re-enforced perceptions of the suburban unwashed

misbehaving in the margins while teasing out fears of a more punitive approach. The “militarisation and policing crackdown,” [warns](#) advocacy coordinator of the Police Accountability Project Daniel Nguyen, “will disproportionately impact communities already weary of being targeted and exacerbate their sense of isolation during this lockdown.” The prevalent perception is harsh: Stay there, you nasty lot, in the Bantustans of Broadmeadows and Keilor Downs.

The opposition, resoundingly trounced at the last state election, is doing what any aggrieved loser does: find faults in the government with fanatical dedication. They have had much to play with of late. But the insistence on using private contractors to deal with public health problems is hardly unique to the current Andrews government. Unfortunately, and possibly perilously for the premier, the uniformed personnel were not there where they might have mattered most.

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