

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

Introduction

I am making this submission because I saw the heart-breaking and long lasting effects of the Government's response to COVID-19 on my [REDACTED] and her family.

In January 2019, our [REDACTED] her [REDACTED] and their [REDACTED], then aged between [REDACTED] headed overseas for a trip of a lifetime, a working holiday, planning to return in 2021. When COVID struck they were living in a small village in rural France where the [REDACTED] attended school and my [REDACTED] was working in [REDACTED]. When Australia closed its borders in March 2020 they complied with the Government and Prime Minister's request to shelter in place, so as to not overwhelm quarantine facilities. As a consequence they were stranded in France, and abandoned by their country. In France, schools closed, workers worked from home, people could only leave the house one at a time with a signed form citing reasons for being away from home. The family were confined to a small 3 bedroom house with no garden for months on end, which also caused stresses. Government efforts to bring all citizens and permanent residents back to Australia were grossly inadequate. Our family eventually returned in late December 2022, at great expense, on a commercial flight. Our [REDACTED] is still severely traumatised by her experience and some of the [REDACTED] have ongoing difficulties because of the interruption to their schooling and socialisation.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

I wish to address the following Terms of Reference for this Inquiry:

- Governance
- Key health response measures
- Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19
- International policies to support Australians at home and abroad

1. Governance

Issues

- Even by July 2021, 17 months after Australia closed its borders, **there was no single agency or department coordinating quarantine**. Instead, it was a responsibility shared by the Departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Finance, Health and Border Force¹. This made for a cumbersome, inefficient process.
- **Lack of clarity as to who was responsible for quarantine places and caps** – the Commonwealth Government or the States. Quarantine is supposedly a Commonwealth responsibility but the Commonwealth appeared to not be in control of any quarantine facilities and was at the behest of the States and Territories, including the [REDACTED]. The States controlled how many people they would accept from overseas (arrival caps) whereas this would appear to be a Commonwealth responsibility under the Constitution.

How to address this problem

- It is critical that the **roles of the Commonwealth and States are defined** before any future pandemics, particularly in regard to Quarantine and arrival caps.
- If quarantine is required in the early stages of any future pandemic, then **an agency responsible for coordinating quarantine is vital**.

2. Key health response measures

Issues

Issues such as delays in ordering vaccines and insufficient variety of vaccines, shortages of personal protective equipment and public messaging have been adequately covered by medical experts and the Independent Review "Fault Lines".

¹ Hansard for Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, hearing on 30 July 2022, discussion between Ms Alison Frame of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Chair, Senator Katy Gallagher, pp2-3

The issue of quarantine facilities has also been covered by reviews including “Fault Lines” and the two reviews of quarantine conducted by Dr. [REDACTED]. The following points are highly relevant to the issue of Australians stranded overseas during the pandemic.

- **Border closures.** Australia was one of very few countries that closed its borders to its own citizens.
- Australia took a hardline approach to quarantine insisting upon **limiting quarantining options to hotels and [REDACTED] for most people.**
- There were **inequitable exceptions:**
 - Tennis players arriving for the Australian Open in 2021
 - English cricketers and their families
 - Pacific Islanders permitted to quarantine on farm, despite there often being no suitable medical facilities close by (one of the criteria for choosing quarantine places according to evidence given at the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.
 - Movie stars who were filming in Australia.
 - Business people who routinely exited and re-entered Australia multiple times
- The **longer term need for additional quarantine facilities was only recognised in the second quarter of 2021²**, according to Ms [REDACTED] evidence. This statement defies credibility.
- The lack of quarantine places, combined with the inability of ordinary people to quarantine at home, meant **arrival caps** were instituted and were determined by the States. The flow on effect was horrendous:
 - Airlines were flying with 20-50 passengers so commercial flights were expensive
 - Those who could afford higher business or first class fares were prioritised and other passengers “bumped”.
 - There was no queue for the limited quarantine places and Australians were competing against each other to secure a flight.
 - Arrival caps would be halved without notice, meaning that people who had booked and paid for flights suddenly had them cancelled, often resulting in them being homeless and jobless. Our daughter was scared to even try and book because how would the family cope in this scenario?

How to address this problem

- **Use quarantine facilities as an option of last resort.**
- **Prioritise returning Australians over other categories.**
- **Allow returning Australian residents and citizens to quarantine at home**, just as those resident in Australia were trusted to stay at home if they were COVID positive.
- If quarantine facilities are required, **utilise a booking system** similar to the one instituted in New Zealand so there is an equitable approach.

3. Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19

Issues

The mental health of individuals stranded overseas, trying to return to Australia, was greatly impacted by their treatment by the Australian government. Our [REDACTED] is still severely traumatised two years after returning home as are many other Australians who were stranded overseas. Read this article from an Australian in America who outlines the key issues https://www.christinadayphotography.com/blog/empathy-or-lack-thereof-strandedaussies-abandoned-part-4?fbclid=IwAR0SkC5MrrOCE8Pv7vNZXN-AX1SUFwI2DVWI_Xgf30OKr-2ytwKjIDe09OA

After telling expats to “shelter in place”, the rhetoric from the government of the day changed to one where expats were blamed for not coming home earlier. The sentiment of Australians also changed. A poll run by the Guardian found 71% of respondents believed the border should stay shut until the COVID-19 crisis was past.

² Hansard for Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, hearing on 30 July 2022, discussion between Ms Alison Frame of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Senator Watt

Australians stranded overseas by Government policies and actions were unable to access mental health support services in Australia.

In an effort to help our daughter return home, I wrote to all members of National Cabinet, including the Prime Minister; to the Foreign Minister; to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 and to the ABC, usually without response or acknowledgement. I invested a lot of money, time, energy and emotion in trying to get my family home. I found the whole process extremely stressful but my experience was nothing compared with that of our [REDACTED] who had the responsibility of ensuring her [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were kept safe and not exposed to the risk of travelling on commercial flights which were getting cancelled or people bumped because arrival caps were limiting the numbers of people who could return.

4. International policies to support Australians at home and abroad

Issues

There were **no effective policies to support Australians abroad**. DFAT was missing in action during this crisis:

- **DFAT and their minister were unresponsive to requests for assistance** to get repatriation flights.
- **People needed to register with DFAT.**
 - Our [REDACTED] registered in October 2020 and only received two offers both with 5 days notice. **Many people did not register because they saw no point.**
 - The **registration portal initially prevented people registering** unless they were wanting to return home in the next quarter.
 - For these reasons, **DFAT had no idea of the true number of Australians wanting to come home**. Only 38,000 had registered but airlines calculated demand at about 100,000.
- **The management of access to commercially facilitated flights aka repatriation flights was disgraceful.**
 - **Short notice of flights.** People were given 5-10 days notice of an upcoming flight, had to register online and by the time a large family tried to register all seats had been allocated.
 - **Flights were limited to select hubs;** for our [REDACTED] this was [REDACTED] and involved trying to travel there when travel was restricted.
 - There was **no orderly queue in the allocation of flights**. The fastest keyboard warrior won the seats.
 - **No differentiation of different needs to return and therefore different risks.** Some wanted to return home to resume life and some just wanted to return to see family. The first group needed to pack up to move permanently and were at risk if flights were cancelled, whilst the second still had home and belongings to return to if their travel plans were interrupted.
- **Long delays in getting passports renewed.** The applicant had to personally attend the Consulate or Embassy, the Consulate in Paris did not respond to phone calls or emails, and there were lengthy delays to get an appointment. In our [REDACTED] case, Paris was a 4 hour train ride from home.

How to address this problem

- **Use the RAAF** to bring people home.
- Design and implement a **better registration system** to assist with:
 - **Understanding the demand** for assistance to return home.
 - **Prioritising places** on flights
- **Allow video conferencing technology for passport applications and renewals** in lieu of physical meetings.