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Submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry

I am writing this submission in my name, Juergen Klein, and my wife's name, Sharon Joy Langford. We are both citizens of the Commonwealth of Australia. We reside in [REDACTED]

During the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic we were both among the “Stranded Australians”, stranded in Europe due the closure of Australia's international borders for *all* arrivals. This prolonged rejection of our return to Australia caused us a lot of stress, both mentally (which also affected physical health) and financially!

In this submission I would like to list several points, which should have all been addressed in various ways by the **Federal Government**. But first of all, allow me to stress how disgusted we still are by the actions of our government, which in these difficult times was *the **only** “civilised” nation in the world to lock out its own citizens – with no support!*

The following points are at the centre of my complaints about the handling of the pandemic by authorities in respect to citizens, who at the time were outside the country:

- no repatriation efforts for affected citizens in foreign countries
- the opposite was the case: citizens and residents were blocked from returning home
- no clear communication, guiding support, or deadlines (actually NO communication!)
- government (in-)actions **forced some of us to break international visa laws!**
- **no financial or consular support**
- internal Australian rules and guidelines were not adjusted to reflect changed circumstances

*This affected us directly; **we would have been eligible to receive the age pension**, but rules were never changed so that an application for age pension could have been lodged during absence.*

To the Points listed above

Let me elaborate some of the above points. If space permits I will add our personal story at the end, which is not necessarily part of the submission, only background.

Repatriation Flights:

Most countries rushed to repatriate its citizens from all corners of the world, once it became clear in early/mid March 2020 that international air traffic would be halted. We have Swiss friends, who were fortunate to be allowed (for FREE!) on a repatriation flight the German government had sent to Buenos Aires in Argentina.

Can you name any government-directed repatriation effort (other than “facilitating the departure” of some people from China in late February 2020)?

Communication

with Stranded Australians from the government was basically non-existent! Even when we

approached the Department of Foreign Affairs with concrete questions (how to use the Bi-lateral Visa Agreements with EU countries), we didn't receive any satisfactory reply.

It appears that nobody ever bothered to analyse the details of all Australians, who were desperate to return home; to order registrations by time, urgency, numbers per region, and then sort a database by people and location to allocate a clear and reliable return date. All was left to the "powers of the free market" (willingness of commercial airlines to fly passengers for exorbitant fares), mismatched with sparse, chaotic space availability in limited 'quarantine facilities'.

The hypocrisy of government inaction is evident from the public statement made by the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs, on the 20th of March 2020:

<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/australians-abroad-during-covid-19>

We certainly never noticed any outcomes from [quote] [REDACTED]

Forced (indirectly by our government) to break laws of the host country

To be left unsupported for an undefined period of time in an overseas country, meant for many Stranded Australians that they were put into a situation where **they had to break the visa regulations** in the country they were left in, abandoned by our government!

In our case we were as tourists in the European Schengen Visa Region, which only permits 90 days in a period of 180 days; *we were left stranded there for a full year!* Many professional expats were on visas that were completely dependant on their ongoing employment in the country they were in (professional airline pilots are a good example, who mostly were retrenched after air traffic had stopped). With most country borders being closed, it was also near impossible to leave for a different country during the height of the pandemic.

Everyone in parliament will probably be aware, how harshly our own country reacts if anybody disrespects our tough immigration and visa rules, how drastic the penalties can be. Yet, at the same time our Federal Government had no qualms putting many of us into a situation, where we had no choice but overstay our welcome in foreign nations because we were not allowed to return home...

Financial support and adjustment of local Australian regulations

I'm not aware of a single case, where a Stranded Australian was given any financial support. The opposite: at one time there was a mother with her young child forced to live at the airport in London, because in the very last minute she had been bumped off a booked flight (for which she had spent her last money) due to a sudden reduction in quarantine spaces at her arrival city in Australia. She was told by DFAT "to go to local charities to seek help"!

In our case, we would have been much less stressed had we been able to receive age pension payments during the unplanned stay in Europe. We had budgeted towards receiving these from their due-date in late November. But **regulations governing overseas payments of age pension or any other Centrelink benefits were never temporarily adjusted** to reflect the fact that possible recipients were unable to be in the country because the government had decided so. This also affected many people, who had thought to be briefly overseas to attend urgent family matters and then found that they were unable to return. We were the "forgotten people", in many respects!

Conclusion:

Let us all hope, that our government(s) never again think or decide that closing borders is a good idea! It's extremely disruptive and puts individuals into unbelievable situations of hardship.

One really has to wonder if government decisions and regulations are thought through to the last possible consequence. This is evident by the fact that on one hand people *in Australia* were showered with additional benefits, whilst on the other those *outside Australia*, who financially rely on government benefits from Centrelink, were left totally unsupported because nobody spent a single thought on adjusting the regulations that govern payments to them.

About Us (only background information to above statements)

To put everything into context, a little information about us. We were travelling in Europe by road. We had our own motorhome, which was registered in the name of a good friend in Germany. Until the pandemic happened, we had been freely visiting numerous countries in and around Europe, always fully conscious of the time we were allowed in each country/region. When we reached our limit, or often earlier, we moved from the EU Schengen Zone either to the UK, Morocco, the Balkan countries, or last into Turkey.

we began to plan for our return to Australia, which at the time we saw as a temporary matter. We wanted to leave our vehicle in Greece [see attached screen capture, where I researched about possible storage for our vehicle] and fly home for half a year. My wife would have been able to receive her age pension starting with her birthday me in early . We were aware that the application had to be lodged in person in Australia, even though we use a financial adviser who prepared all records.

In we left Greece for Turkey, because a) our Schengen time was almost used up, b) Greece during winter is a bit wet and cold, and c) we had arranged to house-sit for a British couple . Whilst I had read about the outbreak of the "new virus" in China, I didn't see much additional information about it, because for the time we were in Turkey Google-News showed me more news concerning Turkish affairs.

Anyhow, we decided to leave Turkey earlier than planned, because at the time the Syrian refugee crisis on the Greek border gained a lot of attention (in Turkey) and we feared that the border might get temporarily closed for that reason. On the way to Greece we visited the famous Ephesus ruins – together with bus loads of Chinese cruise ship tourists. So much about Covid panic in Turkey at the time...

We entered Greece on the , on the 13th the country announced its first serious lockdown measures, on the 15th it suspended all international flights, on the 17th Greece closed all its land borders!

So we were stuck in Greece, but *from everything publicised at the time these should have only been temporary measures "to flatten the curve"*. So initially we didn't worry too much because our motorhome provided a place to live. Our Australian government advice at the time was "for travellers to return home, all others were told to stay where they were as long as they felt safe."

In the meantime we had to extend our Schengen Visa (which was possible in the exceptional circumstances) and we searched for a flight home, which we finally booked with Cathay Pacific for the . It was a little complicated route, because at the time many international routes weren't available; so we had a Lufthansa flight from Athens to Frankfurt, a direct flight from Frankfurt to Hong Kong, and then directly onwards to Sydney. Within a few weeks we unfortunately received a cancellation due to Australia's caps on entries.

Now we really started to get concerned. We couldn't spend endlessly in Europe. Borders and other rules, like PCR testing, were constantly in a fluctuating state between open and closed. We couldn't leave on short notice because we had the added responsibility for the motorhome (which on paper wasn't ours, so our dear friend would suffer possible consequences too), and we had budgeted towards receiving the pension from November onwards (the cancelled flight already had left bigger hole than expected, particularly since Lufthansa refused to refund the ticket).

I even contacted *Services Australia* about a possible exemption to the rules regarding our age pension application due to the unusual circumstances, but nobody seemed to be interested in helping us. We looked into options to stay somewhere for longer, not having to cross borders which might get closed on short notice, and in the process found out that Australia has “Bi-Lateral Visa Agreements” with a good number of EU nations.

Unfortunately there's very little precise information about these visas online and DFAT (as mentioned above) were of no help either. In the end we contacted the Consulate of Italy in Australia, who at least had enough knowledge that they told us “Yes, we could enter and add the 90 days under the bi-lateral agreement to the end of our stay.” But they had no idea if there were any specific rules on how/where to exit to!

So to this day we still don't know if we might be on some sort of Schengen “blacklist” for overstaying. This might be a stumbling block when I want to visit my numerous old friends I still have in Germany; I might not be let in!

Around the same time we also finally registered with DFAT as urgently wanting to get home. There was very little communication afterwards (I believe one email asking to fill in additional forms and a single phone call early after registering). Other than that we were struggling on our own.

And the longer it took, the more of a struggle it became. We can't count any longer the times we were sent away by police “because of Covid”. Although, in Italy, as soon as we mentioned that we were Australians, they usually eased off – such was the reputation of our government's inhumane handling of its own citizens.

In the end we made it to Germany, sold our vehicle, and finally secured two seats on a so-called “repatriation flight” on the [REDACTED] – **exactly one year after our initial booking**, which was cancelled by Cathay! The outrageous ticket prices from Qantas for a so-called repatriation added to our financial woes. We had, at the time after we had paid our initial booking to fly to Australia in 2020, just under [REDACTED] debt on our mortgage. Then we had fend for ourselves for a full year we hadn't planned for, pay exorbitant ticket prices PLUS a “quarantine fee” for being locked up in Darwin, plus all the expenses to get from Darwin to where we wanted to be – so now our debt is nearly 10-fold of what it used to be... As pensioners I don't see many options to reduce this debt significantly.

In Closing:

To this day my personal experiences with Australia's uncoordinated responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have seriously impacted my respect for all government “authority”.