

I would like to submit that the Inquiry should examine, in detail, the evidence basis and decision-making process by which the international and state/territory border closures were implemented in 2020 and 2021, with questions such as the following being addressed:

1. Why did the Commonwealth Pandemic Plan not recommend border closures, and why was the decision then made to implement them despite mainstream public health opinion indicating they would both cause harm and ultimately not be effective?
2. Was the decision to close borders purely a result of global panic and media/political pressure rather than actual sound health advice?
3. Why were no criteria ever formally announced for reopening borders, and why did the statements about when they might re-open constantly change?
4. How can the Australian Government reconcile the policy of border closures with Australia's status as a highly multicultural, globally connected society with vast international networks in all facets of our national life?
5. Why were the harms of the closures never really communicated to the public to help them understand that closing borders was not a purely positive policy?
6. What can be done in future to ensure, if border closures are implemented again, Australians can leave the country if they wish, and that those trapped overseas can either be supported appropriately or find a way home.
7. Should the Commonwealth have increased powers over interstate movement, with decisions on interstate border restrictions being made centrally in the national interest rather than left to individual state and territory health bureaucrats?

The Commonwealth's Pandemic Plan, as at early 2020, provided little to no support for border closures as implemented by the Australian Government, nor for the constant cycle of on-again/off-again interstate border closures. The decision to close borders, first to China, then Iran, Italy and finally all countries, appears to have been made more as a panicked response rather than being based on any robust, longer-term plan to manage Covid, and certainly not in accordance with the Pandemic Plan or mainstream epidemiological advice to that point.

At no time was there any serious communication about how and when the international border would be re-opened, and the statements from Government about this changed regularly depending on public mood and politics, rather than science. Messaging about the border re-opening being tied to vaccination also changed regularly and was inconsistent.

Even worse was the utter failure of the Australian Government to exercise any authority over the many interstate border closures. While not the direct responsibility of the Commonwealth, these closures split the nation into numerous quasi-national regions, each with its own border regime, for almost two years. During that time, it appeared that states led the Commonwealth on all key policy measures, with "Australia" being little more than a vague concept and a source of funding and resources to support whatever each state or territory decided to do at any given moment.

The concept of 'Australian' as a unified nation, with people in all states and territories having responsibilities to each of the others disappeared. For millions of Australians, the core Covid years, 2020 and 2021, were the worst and most isolating of their lives, even as many millions of others seemed to enjoy being sealed off from other Australians and from the world in a state of what was always going to be temporary security from a single respiratory virus.

People were driven to, or had exacerbated, mental illness caused by loneliness and despair. Tens of thousands were isolated from family and normal social contact, partners were separated, families were kept apart. People were trapped in poverty overseas, people slept in cars for weeks waiting to cross state borders in their own

country. People lost businesses, friendships, meaning in life, hope. Many were driven to anxiety disorders that continue to this day, medical treatment was postponed or cancelled. A horrible precedent for state control of every detail of our lives was set.

We have heard a lot from state and federal health bureaucrats and health academics about how 'successful' Australia's measures were. There has been absolutely no recognition whatsoever of the moral catastrophe these measures inflicted on millions of Australians, and what's worse, many Australians think it was all a good thing and would probably support doing it all again.

The stories of so many people who suffered absurd cruelty from a nation we thought was fair, reasonable and humane need to be told. Almost four years since it all began, Australia may have done better than many parts of the world in terms of Covid-related fatalities so far, although it is increasingly apparent that many societies like Norway, Denmark and Finland did not do significantly worse, and those societies didn't totally destroy normal social functioning, nor did they torment tens of thousands of their own citizens who had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In light of that, I submit the following should be a key part of the Inquiry's focus:

### **The effects of the international border closure**

Australia is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society with ties to every country on earth. It was never feasible to close the world off indefinitely yet it seems the international border was closed in early 2020 with no clear plan for how it would ever be reopened. There must be a full assessment of the full spectrum of harms and benefits this extended border closure caused to all of us, in all aspects of our lives, including health, economic, social, cultural and personal. We need to know clearly what worked, what didn't and why, to ensure that this does not become a "safe", politically convenient reaction to all future diseases.

Even since the international border was re-opened there have been calls for border closures for Foot and Mouth Disease, for Covid (again and again) and for Legionella in Argentina. If we are ever going to take this immense step again, we need to know why, how it will be carried out, what we can and will achieve from it, and when it will end. We as a nation cannot afford the "plunge in and see what happens" approach we were subject to in 2020 and 2021.

In particular, I ask that the following matters be considered in detail:

- The requirement to apply to the Government for permission to leave Australia must never again be implemented. Everyone should have the right to exit a country, for any reason and at any time, regardless of their nationality, unless they are involved in a criminal proceeding. This was a fundamental breach of a basic right of every human being to leave a place they no longer wish to remain. I understand the reason was to a) reduce the demand on consular services abroad at a time of increased demand and reduced ability to provide those services, and b) reduce the pipeline of those who would then seek to return back into an already stretched quarantine program. However, once a state takes upon itself the power to grant the ability to exit as a privilege and not a right, it has ceased to be a genuine liberal democracy. If this is ever contemplated again, there must be an allowance for citizens to leave perhaps with a waiver on accessing consular services abroad related to the pandemic, or an acknowledgement of lower priority if they then seek to re-enter through a quarantine program.
- The racist ban on Australian citizens, mostly of Indian ancestry, returning home during 2021. Australian citizens must always, under all circumstances, have the right to return to their own country regardless of where they were when borders were closed, even if quarantine or other entry requirements are then applied. This ban was applied with little warning, well into a vaccine rollout when presumably the

most vulnerable had a degree of protection anyway, and in a way that was not applied when new strains of Covid arose in countries with more European populations such as the UK with the Alpha strain. The Delta strain which was the reason for this egregious cruelty got in and spread in Australia regardless. Will we ever reconcile with our fellow Australians of Indian ancestry for the harm we caused them for little or no reason? Will we reassure them we did this not because we hate them but simply because we panicked?

- The callous way in which Australians, many of whom have family, friends and businesses around the world, were essentially left to fend for themselves overseas after March 2020. Many commentators say there was 'plenty of time to come home', but listening to the stories of tens of thousands of those who did not have plenty of time, and the heartbreak and misery the closure caused, as well as the on/off promises of the government at the time on border re-opening, would be a sobering reality check for the millions of our fellow citizens who feel Australia "did well" during the time of border closure. We only did so off the misery of many of our fellow Australians and mostly we don't seem to care. This has diminished us as a nation.
- The moral hazard the closures have caused. No one, whether a tourist, migrant, family member or business person can ever be really comfortable any more that leaving Australia or coming here for any reason or any length of time is not going to end in being stranded without help and funds with little warning.
- The false sense of security peddled to Australians by politicians and health experts about the effectiveness and sustainability of the international border closure. We need trade, people are always going to come and go, and the border closures were always going to fail eventually. Even a reef pilot in QLD caught Covid from a freighter navigating through the Torres Strait and spread it in Cairns. People needed to be told that the "bliss" many described feeling at the time was transient and that reality would always break in eventually.
- The selfishness of Australia (and New Zealand) following a beggar-thy-neighbour closure policy, meaning other countries, many much less resourced than we are, had to conduct vaccine rollouts and assess their effectiveness under pressure, while we sat back in a bubble waiting to see what happened. In fact, no Covid-19 vaccine could actually have been trialed in Australia for this reason, meaning that our border closure/Covid Zero policy implied the misery involved in seeing whether the vaccines even worked or not was always going to be borne by others, with us then opening our borders once we felt safe. If the tables are ever turned one day, and we are suffering a disease that is not widely spread elsewhere, will we be left out in the cold the way we left other countries?

#### Interstate border closures

- Our country spiraled into madness in 2020 and 2021, with it being illegal for months to walk down the road from Tweed Heads to Coolangatta or Wodonga to Albury. Families and friends were ripped apart, denied being at the bedside of dying parents, children were denied medical treatment, careers were lost, and people lost hope. States and territories should be units of administrative convenience, not hard borders to split up families and loved ones in the same country. Apart from perhaps China, almost no other country on earth did that to its own citizens.
- The High Court failed to uphold freedom of interstate movement during this time, meaning none of us can ever again have any confidence when leaving our state (or even our region) that we will have the right to go home. I know many stories of heartbreak and misery, and downright absurdity and stupidity caused by these random, snap closures. We need to hear these stories, get them on the record, and require all Australians to understand what misery and suffering underpinned the "great results" we allegedly had during this time.
- We were all subject to border passes and other restrictions which were effectively equivalent to international travel for the best part of two years. This is reminiscent of North Korea, not a modern, progressive, compassionate society.

Thank you for considering these matters for the long-term benefit of everyone in our community.