

Ballarat 8, 22 June 2020: COVID 19

For much of this COVID 19 period we have been told by the traditional media that Australia's faith in its politicians has been, if not entirely renewed then at least enhanced. Our Prime Minister has recovered in the polls after his disastrous showing in the summer bushfires where he stepped through crises with all the delicacy of someone wearing football boots while performing in the corps de ballet. State premiers such as Daniel Andrews in Victoria and Gladys Berejiklian in New South Wales have been seen as strong, reliable figures. There are bubblings and quibbles about differences between the states over border restrictions and schools re-opening, but generally speaking, I think many people have seen our elected representatives and public officials less as froth and more as substance.

But in this time of COVID, challenges can come out of nowhere – just as COVID itself did at the start of the year. Take the case of Black Lives Matter (BLM). That did not come out of nowhere by any means in the United States. As has happened to previous administrations, the Trump presidency might have reasonably anticipated at least the possibility of civic disturbance following the death of George Floyd (and others), especially given its inept handling of racial politics since 2017. But, equally reasonably, Australia might be pardoned for not having placed the country on full alert that the BLM movement would raise problems here.

But it did, perhaps briefly. Here, I only wish to raise matters related to COVID 19 and, of course, JOTPY.

There was much huffing and puffing when the media discovered that BLM protests had been planned for locations around Australia. The threshold question was, of course, whether state authorities would permit such activities to proceed. In Victoria, as elsewhere, I suspect the Premier, Daniel Andrews, was caught between the devil and a hard place. On the one hand, there were his personal sympathies for the concerns of the BLM activists, and more broadly, there were the sympathies of his voting base. On the other hand, there were concerns about such gatherings being walking, talking petri dishes of infection, just as the number of new cases was falling to very few throughout Australia. BLM protests were approved. So, on Saturday 6 June, the Melbourne event took place, attended by approximately 10,000 people. The Premier solemnly warned us that the protest 'should not be a trigger for people to disregard measures to limit the spread of COVID-19'. [Melbourne Age, 10 June 2020]. Andrews, I imagine was happy to see this statement appear the day after Victoria recorded no

new cases for only the second time since March. This did not prevent a wiggling from a former opposition front-bencher on the same day in the same newspaper, that permitting the protest while closing down social gatherings had ‘destroyed public confidence in Victoria’s response to coronavirus’. That criticism at least came from the relatively rational right. By next day the not so rational right finally had something they thought could dent the reputation of the Premier for astute handling of the health crisis. One of the BLM protestors tested positive for COVID-19, so the not so rational right, in the person of Andrew Bolt at Newscorp’s *Herald Sun*, had this to say – ‘some lives don’t matter to race protestors’. [Melbourne *Herald Sun*, 11 June 2020]. The more upmarket Murdoch offering commented that ‘self-absorbed activists kill off commonsense’. [*Australian*, 11 June 2020]

Personally, I thought that a gathering of ten thousand people should never have been permitted on the grounds of potentially creating an infection hotspot. Social distancing in any realistic fashion would have been very difficult to police – to say the least. And there were other gatherings on the same day. By sheer dumb luck I happened to be travelling through Castlemaine on that same Saturday, enjoying the mild freedoms that good news on the COVID front had permitted. In the afternoon there was a BLM meet in the centre of town. It wasn’t actually a cheek to jowl football type crowd, and much smaller than the Melbourne event, but social distancing? Not observed, whatever local organisers have claimed.

As I write we have a spike in cases in Victoria, not huge perhaps, but sufficient for the government to backtrack on proposed derestrictions on such things as cafés, pubs, clubs etc. It does not appear at this stage that the BLM protests were a factor in this unwanted increase. The right wing commentariat will not be tempted, I think, to return to their previous line, that Andrews had deliberately exaggerated the threat of COVID-19 for his own nefarious political purposes. You can’t have it both ways – either the Premier is authoritarian or he is lax. No, following the social media, the Premier’s opponents CAN have it both ways. Andrews is being ‘contradictory’: a gathering on a beach might be out, but protestors are given the green light.

Who would want to be an elected official these days? Perhaps any day.

Richard Trembath, Ballarat

22 June 2020

