Rest assured, a great COVID-19 reckoning is coming

11:00PM OCTOBER 12, 2020

A craven Victorian Premier is allowing others to take the fall for his incompetent leadership. So far, former health minister Jenny Mikakos and Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet secretary [Chris Eccles have resigned](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/coronavirus-daniel-andrews-right-hand-man-chris-eccles-quits/news-story/a97204defb842c6f56c1b9a703fbefda). But not even the resignation of Daniel Andrews, or the defeat of the Victorian Labor government at the next state election, is enough. There needs to be a full and frank reckoning of government responses to COVID-19 in Victoria, and right across Australia.

Melbourne businessman Andrew Abercrombie is among many brave Australians willing to put plenty on the line to ensure this happens in the state hit hardest by government pandemic policies.

On Sunday, Abercrombie led more than 75 Victorian businesspeople to launch the Let’s Be Open campaign. They demand transparency from the Andrews government and the release of health data to justify a lockdown policy imposed after Labor bungled hotel quarantine, unleashing a second wave of COVID-19.

The reckoning of government responses to COVID-19, not just in Victoria, is critical: next time there is a virus like this — and there will be — we need a far more thoughtful, considered, proportionate approach from government.

We cannot repeat the Morrison government’s hysterical, fear-infused reaction last March that set in motion precedents for the states and territories to follow, adding their own bells and whistles, leading to the horrific situation in ­Victoria today.

On Sunday evening former radio host Steve Price tweeted this about Abercrombie and his call for transparency: “Great sentiment only problem he’s the bloke who came back from Aspen with covid.”

First, Price should have checked his facts. Abercrombie underwent a test for the virus the day he flew into Tullamarine airport on March 17. He tested negative. Second, even if he did contract the virus overseas, so what? The notion that we should not hear from a bloke because he is (a) rich and successful, (b) he went on holiday, and/or (c) contracted a virus in the US that originated in Wuhan is beyond stupid.

It is because people such as ­Abercrombie have the means and the courage to be the voice for others that there will be a thorough examination of responses to the virus.

This reckoning — critical to our democracy — won’t come from politicians. They will dodge and weave to avoid admissions of error, let alone a hint they overreacted. When was the last time an Australian political leader confessed to error about their poor policy?

Witness the dismal state of democracy in Victoria. Parliament suspended. Normal cabinet processes shut down. Not a single Labor MP has dared raise concerns publicly about any part of a lockdown that is longer and more extreme than anywhere else, including China,

In the UK, many Tory MPs continue to raise concerns about restrictions introduced by the Johnson government. But in Victoristan, there is not a whiff of public dissent among Labor MPs, not even over an omnibus bill empowering any “designated authorised officer” to arrest and detain a person suspected of breaking the law.

The reckoning won’t come from public health officials either. On the weekend, Victoria’s Chief Health Officer, Brett Sutton, was asked if Victoria will ever get to the planned threshold for opening the economy of five average cases a day. “Who knows?” said Sutton. And then he said it again.

Who knows? The lives and livelihoods of Victorians depend on a threshold set down by the Premier on advice from Sutton. And Sutton has no clue if that can be reached, meaning Victorians may remain in lockdown for months more. Sutton should spend less time in front of a camera and more time finding an answer to replace “who knows?”.

The dismal leadership in politics and public health means that the forensic examination of COVID-19 responses must come from elsewhere. Fortunately, ­Abercrombie is not the only one disturbed by the human cost of disproportionate measures that governments have imposed on free societies. Melbourne businessman Julian Gerner has lodged a writ in the High Court challenging the Andrews lockdown after the Premier extended Victoria’s state of disaster another four weeks and said it was unlikely he would ease restrictions, as anticipated, from October 19.

Gerner’s legal team, led by Bret Walker SC and Michael Wyles QC, will argue that the 5km rule and essential worker permits are disproportionate responses to the threat of coronavirus, and run foul of implied constitutional rights of freedom of movement.

In recent days, even voices within the World Health Organisation are becoming part of the reckoning. “We really do appeal to all world leaders: stop using lockdown as your primary control method. Develop better systems for doing it. Work together and learn from each other,” said WHO coronavirus special envoy David Nabarro.

Speaking to Andrew Neil on Spectator TV, Nabarro said that global poverty levels may double by next year, and there may be more than a doubling of child malnutrition. “Lockdowns have just one consequence that you must never, ever belittle — and that is making poor people an awful lot poorer.”

Martin Kulldorff, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, has added his name to the Great Barrington Declaration that calls for an end to lockdowns while devoting far greater resources to protecting the vulnerable.

He describes lockdowns as a “terrible experiment”. Speaking to Spiked Online last week, he said: “One of the basic principles of public health is that you do not just look at one disease — you have to look at health as a whole, including all kinds of diseases, over a long period. That is not what has been done with COVID-19.

“As a public health scientist, it is stunning to see how focused people are on this one disease and the short term. The collateral damage is tragic: cardiovascular disease outcomes are worse, cancer screenings are down and there are mental-health issues, for example. The current approach does not make sense. We sought to flatten the curve in the spring so as not to overload hospitals, and that succeeded in almost every country. But trying to suppress the disease with contact tracing, testing and isolation, together with severe lockdowns, is not going to solve the problem. It will just push things into the future.”

In Australia, courageous doctors have raised similar concerns. Lawyers have also joined forces, expressing their deep concerns about governments restricting fundamental human rights.

The reckoning is coming from outside politics, where sensible, curious and good people are raising their voices. They understand that, despite the Prime Minister and the Treasurer talking about the “COVID recession”, a virus did not cause the economic havoc and other public health calamities in Australia: government responses did that. A careful and thorough expose of mistaken responses is the only chance to stop mistakes being repeated the next time.