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COVID-19 GOVERNANCE, LEGITIMACY, AND SUSTAINABILITY: LESSONS FROM THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

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During 2020, Australia managed the global and systemic COVID-19 crisis successfully as measured by health and economic indicators. It marshalled the government's delivery capacity to control the health crisis and put in place measures to offset the induced economic and social costs. At the same time, the crisis revealed long-standing structural weaknesses in a small, democratic, wealthy, and economically successful country that raised questions about post-COVID resilience and sustainability. This paper examines that experience by applying a "co-production" governance model that sees success in "crisis management" as the striking of a balance between government capacity and its legitimacy in the eyes of its people. Lessons are drawn in terms of Australia's ability to tackle the ongoing transition out of COVID and future crises, by building systemic resilience and sustainability.

Keywords: COVID-19, Australia, Corporate Governance, Governance, Neoliberalism, Legitimacy, Sustainability

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1. INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, the global count of COVID-19 cases across 219 countries topped 103 million, total deaths exceeded 2.2 million and countries began to struggle with emerging more virulent mutations and vaccine rollouts (Worldometers, 2021). Australia ranked 8 among nearly 100 countries that performed best in the handling of the pandemic (Lang & Lemahieu, 2021) with total cases 28,823 and total deaths of 909 (Australian Department of Health, 2021).

In contrast, at the time of writing, the COVID-19 tragedy unfolded in the USA with 27 million total cases, the highest number in the world. Its total deaths of over 454,000 (Worldometers, 2021) have exceeded that country's

total deaths during the Second World War¹. America's daily death rate has peaked at 3,253 exceeding the terrorist toll of 2,996 from 9-11 and expected to continue at that rate over in early 2021, notwithstanding the commencement of its vaccine distribution (Heavey, 2020). A series of early mistakes in a rapidly evolving situation, political struggles at many levels, rejection of expert advice, and lack of national leadership, and denialism were all contributing factors (Wright, 2021).

Across the Atlantic, in the UK, total cases were just short of 4 million and the official COVID-19 death toll in Britain is over 112,000 (Worldometers, 2021). It remains to be seen whether its toll will rise

¹ Total American military and civilian deaths were 418,500 deaths. See the US National World War Two Museum at <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>

to match its 125,000 losses in the Battle of the Somme during the First World War. A Briton is nearly 40 times more likely than the average Australian to die of COVID-19.

In terms of the response by the latter two Anglo-American countries, the question that can be asked is: “Why did so many have to die?” (Ball, Clark, & Hinsliff, 2021).

Australia’s response, tentative at the start of January 2020, saw a states-based approach and attack that demonstrated the strength of its federal system in the absence of Commonwealth leadership. In the state of Victoria, which saw its second wave result in a disproportionate amount of deaths in Commonwealth-funded aged care, its lockdown was severe and enduring: “Australia has exited its first recession in almost three decades, with the economy growing by a better than expected 3.3% in the September quarter, reflecting authorities’ adept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Smyth, 2020).

As the fog lifts from the pandemic, it is becoming clear that the socioeconomic pain of lockdown reaped a pandemic economic equilibrium by the end of 2020.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a crisis management framework. Section 3 provides an overview of the Australian context. Section 4 provides the Australian health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 5 summarises the Australian government’s economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 6 discusses the governance capacity of the Australian government’s response. Section 7 reviews the governance legitimacy and trust deficit in the Australian political culture and its elites. Section 8 discusses the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on sustainability in Australia. Finally, the conclusion section (Section 9) summarises our main arguments.

2. CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

This paper considers Australia’s successful COVID-19 response during 2020 from the point of view of public governance capacity, legitimacy, and sustainability. It examines the relationship between governance capacity to deliver and governance legitimacy for public acceptance as a joint process of co-production. The governance dimensions of this relationship of “mutual trust” are discussed in terms of leadership, social cohesion, transparency, expert advice, communication, and outcomes. Successful “crisis management” and sustainability in a pluralistic democracy are seen to rely upon these dimensions of governance.

“Crisis management is most successful when it is able to combine government capacity with democratic legitimacy” (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). Adopting this framework this paper explores the Australian experience in successful COVID management as the joint product or co-production of the relationship between government and the community (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016). Administrative competence alone cannot deliver results without the acceptance and compliance of the community; a relationship built upon mutual respect and trust.

There is a complex tradeoff between these two dimensions of effective crisis management; the relationship is also dynamic and can change over

the course of the crisis. The pandemic challenges institutions and values, while major decisions need to be taken under deep uncertainty and public measures have an experimental quality of trial and error as new data and knowledge unfolds at a rapid pace.

3. AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The Commonwealth of Australia has a multicultural, immigrant population of 26 million people and is a rich, stable, liberal democratic nation. It has a Westminster-style representative government, a federal constitution, an egalitarian culture of opportunity tempered with individuality. It is among the most highly urbanised countries but also sparsely occupies a dry continent the size of the contiguous states of the USA. Australia was established as a British colony in 1788 dispossessing the continent’s first nations indigenous aboriginal peoples and their continuous culture of over 60,000 years.

The Coalition Liberal National Country Party Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, sees himself as an “ordinary bloke”, loves his “footie”, identifies with “tradies” and adroitly manages his image as “Scotty from marketing” befitting his previous background as a marketing executive. His critics portray him as strong on announcements and poor on delivery (Feik, 2020). While there are elements of the ‘populist’ politician in his political appeal and rhetoric, his economic policies have tended to maintain a broadly moderate neoliberal, market-facing, small government stance with broadly conservative social values.

The government is under the sway of climate deniers and vested commercial and fossil fuel interests that continue among other things, to politicise and paralyse any commitments to an effective and timely commitment to transition to a carbon-free economy (Hodder, 2009). Morrison iconically walked into Parliament carrying a lump of black coal touting fossil fuels but he has kept Australia within the Paris Climate Accords. His government has managed to weather a rolling series of “scandals” and despite strong public support, has stonewalled attempts to legislate a federal anti-corruption body (Bennett, 2020; Feik, 2021).

To date, Australia has avoided the worst of the “populist” and “nationalist” reactions to neoliberalism that have characterised the rise of Trump and Johnson (Lester & dela Rama, 2018). Under Morrison, Australia’s successful response to the COVID-19 crisis has displayed political and economic resilience and adaptability displaying a pragmatism not found in America and the UK as they continue to be overwhelmed health-wise and economically by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of broad structural reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, the Australian economy has enjoyed three decades of continuous economic growth. In the decade prior to COVID-19 economic reform had lost any real momentum and structural problems continued to amass unaddressed (Pascoe, 2020).

Unemployment was increasing, wages growth was flat, inequality was increasing, productivity improvement was anaemic, infrastructure investment was lagging, the education and skills training sectors were underperforming, housing

affordability declined, social housing was grossly undersupplied, poverty was on the rise, and certain sectors such as aged care, energy, and climate change policies have been long-disputed and politicised resulting in long-standing disarray (Irvine, 2019). Monetary policy was exhausted with interest rates that had been driven to all-time lows. There was pressure pre-COVID-19 on a reluctant government committed to surplus budgets and reduced debt for fiscal policies necessary to stimulate the economy. Structural reforms were long overdue. There was a little political appetite for reform.

4. AUSTRALIA'S HEALTH RESPONSE

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia arrived with a passenger from Wuhan on 25th January 2020 (Hunt, 2020) signalling the start of the pandemic crisis in the country. The pandemic immediately came hot on the heels of a prolonged drought (Day, 2019) and unprecedented bushfires (Australian Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2020) that created national crises and emergency management responses that were generally found wanting in terms of both preparedness and coordination of services delivery.

Morrison struggled to realize a leadership role in a federal system where emergency response services capabilities lie with state governments. He was perceived as aloof from the 2019 bushfire national emergency whilst on holiday in Hawaii (Reimekis, 2019).

In response to COVID, Morrison exercised personal leadership, stepped before the media and the public accompanied by his Health Minister, fronted by the government's Chief Medical Adviser. The action was evidence and expert-based and communicated daily, in detail, and extensively. In daily public and media briefings, chief medical officers explained and described the details of the measures being taken and the science behind them (Manning, 2020). Dr. Brendan Murphy, Chief Medical Officer, convened the Australian Health Protection Principle Committee (AHPCC) to inform State and Territory Authorities and to coordinate further action nationally.

Working closely with State Governments, the PM for the first time constituted in mid-March a novel, collaborative National Cabinet of federal and state governments to tackle the crisis in a nationally co-ordinated, inter-governmental decision-making forum (Burton, 2020). Under Australia's federated system of government, the six sovereign State governments (along with two federal territories) are constitutionally responsible for a range of public services, including disaster management, transport, police, education, environment, and particularly for health and the management of the public health and hospital delivery system. This represented a political choice for co-operation over confrontation.

A range of strong measures was put in place variously during the year, including, effective restrictions and closures of public gatherings, business activities, schools and universities, social distancing, city-wide lockdowns, international and state border closures and travel restrictions, quarantine measures, personal hygiene and "stay safe" protocols, contact testing, tracing and tracking

systems. The health-based restrictions were designed to "flatten the first wave" and subsequent waves of infection spread by limiting transmission: the aim of this suppression was to avoid overwhelming the capacity of the public health and hospital systems. Elimination strategies were variously adopted in cities, regions, and states. They were broadly successful.

In taking this range of highly restrictive health-based measures the federal and state governments invoked the authority under their legislated emergency powers, primarily in the hands of state governments (McLean & Huf, 2020). The effective exercise and acceptance of these powers involve striking a delicate balance with prevailing norms of the democratic process. Clear, consistent, and transparent communication based on credible, expert scientific advice was an important part of delivering public acceptance of the measures and 'flattening the curve' of daily cases.

The health and expert-driven responses flattened the first wave of infection spread and albeit a few bumps along the way including, cruise ship and hotel quarantine mismanagement, considered and targeted opening up measures were progressively implemented. In the early stages in March the country was on track with the USA and the UK who subsequently, however, hit disastrous numbers of cases and deaths, not abated even by the end of the year. Only one month later Australia had flattened the curve to below world best earlier and sharp responses in New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and China.

Perhaps a note of complacency crept in to be brought sharply to check as the unexpected and significant "second wave" hit during the Australian winter in the state of Victoria in July occasioning the most severe and prolonged lockdown (Mercer, 2020). A "state of emergency" was declared for a lockdown that lasted 112 days with 690 deaths (Tsirtsakis, 2019) largely occurring in privately-owned aged care. Nearly 75% of Australia's COVID deaths have occurred in residential aged care — the highest proportion by sector in the OECD (Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2020).

The Queensland Government subsequently locked down Brisbane for a shorter but equally effective period (Bennett, 2021). Political tensions increasingly emerged, including over the relative effectiveness and efficiency of state testing and tracing capacity, whether elimination or suppression was the appropriate success criterion, and the opening up of interstate and indeed overseas border restrictions.

With the successful suppression of the second wave in Victoria by November, and of the smaller second wave and lockdown in South Australia in November (Davey, 2020) the economy resumed opening up. The remaining politically controversial significant border closing by Queensland to New South Wales (NSW) was lifted in February 2021 (Lynch & Ward, 2021).

By the end of the year, cases and deaths were virtually eliminated, the economy was opening up and growth for the September quarter began recovering from the COVID-19 recession. The country moved towards full suppression by 2020 with a cautious semblance of normality for the holiday season and the New Year.

5. ECONOMIC RESPONSES

The impacts of the health-based measures in Australia on government, society, business, and the economy were also immediate, and with inevitably long-term consequences. They were also severe, not least the closedown of businesses, loss of jobs across the economy, and a huge fall in economic growth leading to the first recession since the early 1990s.

Within the first month of lockdown one million jobs were lost and subsequently rose to 1.6 million. These losses fell heavily on service sectors such as retail, hospitality, tourism, culture, and education. These hard-hit sectors were generally characterised by less secure, lower-paying jobs, and dominated by women and young people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a). Notwithstanding, the recovery from recession in the 2020 September quarter there were still a million unemployed largely disguised by continuing government wage subsidies.

Economic policies and programs were put in place to take up the slack in the economy driven by health measures, the deepest recession since The Great Depression of the 1930s. In particular, the government introduced unprecedented wage subsidy and unemployment benefits measures (known as JobKeeper), despite having previously been ideologically consistently opposed to lifting unemployment benefit levels, and to providing government wage subsidies to employers. Similar to other OECD countries (OECD, 2020a), measures were taken to approve virtual annual general meetings and ensure transparency through amending continuous disclosure provisions (Australian Budget, 2020) with varying degrees of success.

Taxes were cut and incentives were provided for businesses, particularly for housing and construction sectors "HomeBuilder", and consumers lifting consumer savings levels to all-time highs (Frydenberg, 2020) and lifting half a million people out of poverty (Davidson, Bradbury, Wong, & Hill, 2020). The compulsory superannuation savings pool of over \$1 trillion was opened up for early cash access withdrawals by wage earners with nearly \$3.5 million taking advantage (McKeown, 2020).

Nevertheless, as eventuated globally by the end of 2020 the levels of inequality within countries were exacerbated, including in Australia. The richest recovered quickly with unprecedented support from governments leaving a long slow haul to recovery for the less secure and wealthy (Khadem, 2021).

The net effect of the government economic interventions was to dramatically increase government expenditures while the tax revenue base was substantially reduced. Wage support and welfare expenditures soared by nearly \$60 billion while personal and company tax receipts collapsed by over \$20 billion. Effectively, the government deficit for 2019–2020 exploded to AUD\$86 billion as did the country's level of indebtedness (Worthington, 2020) at 11% of GDP. This was the highest since the end of the Second World War and exceeded the post-global financial crisis deficit. The promises made prior to the election were undone as any Morrison government surplus disappeared with the onset of the pandemic.

Federal and state budgets dropped significantly into deficit as a result of the pandemic. All states had deficits proportionate to their economies,

except WA which avoided one due primarily to surging iron ore prices (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b).

As a result, all are carrying debt levels not seen since the Second World War. Victoria, the worst-hit state, had net debt doubled to \$87 billion. NSW is expected to carry net debt of \$104 billion within 4 years. Commonwealth net debt is expected to dwarf the states to reach a record \$700 billion by 30th June 2021 and keep climbing. Total net debt across all governments is forecast to be \$1.4 trillion in 2023–2024.

The climb out of deficit is likely to be protracted with expectations that the economy will not get back to pre-pandemic levels until at least 2022. Extended low growth will mean relatively high unemployment. In real terms, inflation that is low, as are interest rates, will likely outstrip already low rates of wage growth. Australia is in the early state of COVID-19 recovery.

6. GOVERNANCE CAPACITY

We discuss Australia's successful response during 2020 to the pandemic crisis along the following dimensions of governance capacity: preparedness or analytical capacity; coordination; regulation; and implementation or delivery capacity to provide effective crisis management (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014).

6.1. Preparedness

The analytical dimension of crisis and transition management capacity is realized in the first instance to the state of preparedness to respond and a capacity to deliver required outcomes. Across a range of policy areas in Australia, there had been many warnings in inquiries, reports, reviews, and royal commissions, largely ignored over the years in Australia about the growing potential for crises and the need to reset policies and institutions. These ranged from the need for fundamental economic restructuring to federalism, national security, and to a range of emerging social crises around poverty, inequality, housing, aged care, indigenous rights, and importantly in regard to climate change, drought, and bushfires, and not least global pandemics (Boyle, 2021). The general approach had been belated, grudging, and piecemeal rather than systematic and holistic reform; at best a 'she will be right' pragmatism and complacency.

In the year before the pandemic, the global collective overall health security of 195 countries including to respond to epidemics and pandemics was assessed as "remaining very weak" at an average of 40/100 (Global Health Security Index, 2019). While Australia has an enviable public health system and ranked No. 3 (76/100) on its overall health security (behind the USA 84/100 and the UK 78/100) its specific preparedness for pandemic response ranking was No. 10 (66/100) against the USA No. 2 (79/100, the UK No. 1 92/100). Perhaps the latter is somewhat ironically given those two countries' significantly less effective response to COVID-19.

Internationally, over the past quarter-century, there were many and widespread expert warnings of potential global pandemics and the need for preparedness that had been ignored by successive governments and leaders (Graff, 2020). Lessons from the SARS outbreak from 2003–2004 (Heymann,

2004) did not produce a globally consistent, united, dynamic response required in 2020.

The attitude and response to the coming of COVID-19 from many leaders, in particular in the USA, was that this was an unexpected, out-of-left-field, unimaginable event, that came up suddenly and surprisingly. This was no “black swan” event but rather a “pink flamingo”, glaringly obvious but widely ignored, knowable and known.

In the case of the various pandemic preparedness plans in Australia effectiveness was assessed pre-COVID in the range of 20%-75% with many inconsistencies between plans. Health system related issues were better addressed than critical infrastructure and essential systems resilience. According to Ifzwerth, Moa, and MacIntyre (2018) “Pandemic response would be more effective if plans were standardized, clear, and were to include overlooked dimensions of pandemic’s impact as well as guidance for specific end users”.

Australia escaped the worst of recent global zoonotic pandemics such as SARS, mad cow disease, and H1N1 and appears not to have gained benefit from the experiences of its regional Asia Pacific neighbours, many of which, to their advantage, learned from the warnings and experience that informed their largely successful responses (Abuza, 2020). Despite earlier warnings about pandemics and the need to develop contingency plans and resources little had been put in place in Australia. Stockpiles of emergency medicines, infection control equipment, including PPE and ventilators, were quickly shown to be insufficient, and local suppliers and global supply chains were found wanting (Pournader, 2020).

Perhaps a measure of “pandemic fatigue” and complacency had crept in after these earlier pandemics had passed by relatively lightly in Australia. It had been a world leader in pandemic preparation in the 2000s and the work culminated in two large national training exercises in 2006 and the last in 2008 (Welch & Blucher, 2020).

On the other hand, Australia has a world-class public health system underpinned by internationally acknowledged medical research (Dixit & Sambasivan, 2018). The overall system is decentralized in the sense that while the Commonwealth Government funds a majority of health systems, responsibility and delivery lies with the states. There had been funding cutbacks and privatization over recent decades (Kerr & Hendrie, 2018). The importance of this capacity and its sensitivity was demonstrated in the respective differences in the initial test, track, and traceability between NSW and Victoria. The latter had cut back expenditure on public health in recent years and had a relatively centralised system, fared less well initially than did the former.

The weakest link in the health system was in the aged care sector. A Commonwealth rather than State government responsibility it had been largely privatised and, and was revealed to lack real pandemic operational plans despite the boast by a toothless aged care regulator that 99% of providers were prepared in March 2020: “It is very encouraging that 99% of services reported having an infection control outbreak management plan that covers the key areas for COVID-19 preparedness”².

The pandemic was the perfect storm that magnified the dysfunctional regulation of a sector that had woefully inadequate skilled staff, training, and equipment.

The health response by the Federal Government was the subject of the interim report of the Australian Senate COVID commission interim report. The Committee expressed its disappointment that:

“[...] rather than accept its mistakes in leading the health response and keeping aged care residents safe, the government has repeatedly sought to avoid taking responsibility and shift blame onto the states. The Prime Minister also created confusion and splintered federal cooperation by criticising state and territory decisions to close schools and impose domestic border restrictions” (Australian Senate Select Committee, 2020).

The country’s economic preparedness was fiscally sound having experienced nearly thirty years of sustained economic growth. Budget deficits were minimal and falling while debt was low by world standards. Notwithstanding many years of coalition government fiscal restraint and political rhetoric of the need for budget surpluses and lower debt levels, they were able to respond with a swath of strong economic measures to support businesses, people, and the economy.

6.2. Coordination capacity: Decision-making and collaboration

A relatively collaborative and consensual style was adopted by the federal government in working with the state governments, often of different political parties, under the aegis of a specially established National Cabinet. This met regularly and agreed with broad policy approaches that were in stark contrast to decades of bickering and haggling primarily over money in long-standing commonwealth state ministerial forum arrangements headed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that were widely acknowledged as in need of reform.

These developments represented heightened levels of government trust of expertise and between levels of government. They demonstrated political and ideological pragmatism and walking away from pre-COVID confrontational, partisan politics especially between the federal and state government on the one hand, and between the political parties on the other. At the national level, the Opposition party, minor parties, and independents largely went along with the strategies adopted restricting criticisms to shortcomings in delivery and advocating for the more vulnerable caught up in the crisis. Industry and business associations supported the strategies and policies and were generally compliant with regulations and restrictions imposed.

Important as the nationally coordinated strategy frameworks were particularly from an economic and fiscal perspective, it was state governments and their policies and activities that mattered most on the ground. Local governments that operate under state government authority complied without exception to their respective state government policies in respect of their local community regulatory and community service delivery responsibilities and made required adaptations to suit local conditions.

² See Aged Care Quality Bulletin No. 15, March 2020 at <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/news/newsletter/aged-care-quality-bulletin-15-march-2020>

These collaborative and decentralized arrangements allowed for the strategies to change and adapt as the crisis unfolded and in response to local conditions. Strategies involved a changing mix of flattening the curve, mitigation, through to test, track and trace, lockdown suppression to hotspot declarations, interstate border closures to the overall easing of restrictions, and opening up late in the year.

Overall, the government decision-making and implementation were first and foremost driven by the acceptance of expert scientific health advice in a timely and effective manner. Success was all the more impressive given the lack of pre-COVID preparedness, planning, and operational exercises, and the acceptance of such advice in the prevailing conditions of deep uncertainty (Ansell & Boin, 2019). The evidence-based knowledge emerged progressively and rapidly as the crisis unfolded during 2020 in response to learning from measures taken and subsequent relaxations. Effectiveness was the result of coordination and collaboration between the levels of government and state government's strong health services delivery capacity.

6.3 Delivery and regulatory capacity

The overall approach was led and coordinated nationally from the top down but the state and territory governments exercised considerable authority and discretion for regulation and delivery under their sovereign responsibilities and capacities, particularly with respect to health, education, transport, business regulation, and law enforcement.

Two significant areas of structural weakness were revealed in delivery and regulatory capacity and accountability that were papered over in the crisis but will require attention in the future. Aged care and quarantine arrangements are both constitutionally federal government responsibilities where quality control and capacity were stressed and where the federal government managed largely to avoid its responsibilities and accountability in part by shifting them to the states.

Overall, the strategy was implemented using a blend of advice, guidelines, and mandatory regulations. The mix varied over time and between the federal and state jurisdictions. Public compliance was underpinned by mutual trust between the public and the government. There was only limited pushback or shying away from the tough decisions and measures that shut down businesses, closed international and interstate borders, travel restrictions, imposed citywide and local area lockdowns, including curfews, social distancing, building isolations, and suspension of all sporting, arts and entertainment venues.

In summary, governance capacity was pragmatically and successfully demonstrated within a federal system in respect of delivery, regulation, and coordination notwithstanding shortcomings on pandemic management preparedness and lack of clarity of respective responsibilities under the constitution. The successful largely reactive and agile response of governance arrangements to the crisis serves to highlight the lack of sure-footedness in anticipating problems but leaves open the question of whether things might have been even better handled with a governance culture of preparedness and pro-activity (Barber, 2020).

7. GOVERNANCE LEGITIMACY

We discuss Australia's successful COVID-19 crisis management experience during 2020 from the point of view of governance legitimacy (Christensen, Laegreid, & Rykkja, 2016) which turns on issues such as transparency, accountability, support, expectations, and reputation that are required to maintain citizens' trust in government in handling the crisis.

7.1. Making sense of crisis: Appealing to solidarity

Appealing to a sense of social cohesion and personal sacrifice for the public health good was a constant government communications motif captured in the idea of "we are all in this together" coupled with the utilitarian response.

Given the need to make decisions amid a "fog of uncertainty" in knowledge and the need to modify measures as the pandemic unfolded and new data came to hand daily, it was important for credibility that government public briefings were frequent and detailed. The communications framework as well as being presented within the broader strategic framework agreed at regular working meetings of the National Cabinet was given added credibility and transparency by the presentations of the health and epidemiological experts.

There was an enhanced level of both vertical hierarchical and horizontal transparency and accountability (Schillemans, 2018). Central to the responses were the health-based measures and restrictions that were presented by the politicians in an objective and measured public health terms. The term "an abundance of caution" was often used in the justification of precautionary measures. It was neither politicized nor dramatized beyond stressing the serious unprecedented nature of this pandemic threat to public safety and to the capacity of the public health system to continue to provide a high standard of health care, including the availability of hospital and intensive care unit (ICU) capacity, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessary medical supplies.

Mistakes in the pandemic response were often hindsight errors of judgement, while others reflected a basic difference in the weighting of public safety against economic costs, and undoubtedly included an element of political judgement and even ideology of weighing health as against economic objectives. Some revealed structural and systemic weaknesses that can only be tackled if at all, in the long term. It is fair to observe though, that despite these bumps along the road of crisis management and largely learning by experiment in the face of uncertainty, the thrust of often severe, health evidence-based responses was successfully maintained and accepted by governments and the public.

The few, isolated cases of civil disobedience, such as "Bunnings Karen" (Nally & staff, 2020) were widely publicized in the media and presented as anti-social aberrations. Conspiracy theories and disinformation did not proliferate as much as in other countries (Spring & Wendling, 2020). Fines were promptly issued by the police to individuals and businesses in breach of regulations typically of social distancing rules and border restrictions. A few large parties at homes, restaurants, or on the beaches were broken up by the authorities and

publicized in the media. Public protests and demonstrations were few and typically small in numbers, including a Black Lives Matters protest that went ahead despite lack of formal approval but in compliance with social distancing, hygiene, and masks wearing. A lone, high-profile businessman-cum-politician, Clive Palmer, challenged the Western Australian state government lockdown power unsuccessfully in the courts (High Court of Australia, 2020).

During the COVID crisis, governance capacity was effectively harnessed to governance legitimacy. Government action and services were seen to be competent, able to deliver, to matter, and to make a difference. Public trust even extended for example, to large-scale acceptance and use of the COVID tracing app developed at considerable cost but proven flawed from the outset and ineffective in the long term.

7.2. Trust in government

Pre-COVID, Australians' trust in politics, politicians, and the government had been on a long-term declining trend but lifted as the result of the successful pandemic management during 2020. The Prime Minister's personal popularity ratings soared. The role of an opponent during a pandemic emergency is a 'no-win' situation politically. Generally, the profile and approval ratings for the state and territory premiers and governments also rose, irrespective of the party in power. The usually pretty intense ideological and party political differences were seen to be set aside during the crisis management and for the most part, they were.

However, as the year unfolded political tensions also rose between federal and state, and between state governments on issues particularly on issues such as rates of loosening restrictions, border closures, and caps on international arrival numbers. Leadership was seen to be important in the eyes of the public and its acceptance of often very difficult public health-driven restrictions.

Confidence and trust among citizens were generally high and steady. However, confidence in the economy inevitably sagged with increasing restrictions, lockdowns, unemployment, and as the economy fell into recession. It recovered unexpectedly fast late in the year as measured by consumer confidence and spending due to effective pandemic control, rising employment, and savings in hand bolstered by government income support arrangements. Business confidence was more ambivalent, not least given continuing uncertainties about on-again, off-again local outbreaks and lockdowns, and despite considerable government tax and investment incentives to business. Businesses are clearly wary of making investments on the supply side if consumers do not feel COVID-safe and exhibit demand.

How sustainable this increase in trust of government proves to be is an open question. Other underlying measures of trust, particularly in regard to issues of political corruption, lobbying, political donations, and the vested interests of big business remained on their pre-COVID falling trend lines. The generally cooperative approach of governments, agencies, and leaders was a vote of confidence in the Australian democratic tradition and in the ability of government to deliver important services. This was notwithstanding the enhanced role of leaders

and experts noted in our discussion, unlike places like the USA and the UK where populism and authoritarianism failed disastrously to deliver even competent COVID crisis management. Authoritarian countries overall had no prolonged advantage in suppressing the virus and their initial successes converged over time with the generally laggard performance of democracies (Lang & Lemahieu, 2021).

But post-COVID there is an underlying and continuing deficit of distrust in the fundamentals of democratic transparency and accountability that will need to be addressed. Across the world, people are widely dissatisfied with democracy but more divided on whether the state is run for the benefit of all. Those who believe elected officials do not care about ordinary people are more dissatisfied with democracy: the gap in Australia between those who believe that public officials care (20%) and those who believe that they do not care (54%), is the second largest in the world (34%) (Connaughton, Kent, & Schumacher, 2020).

In summary, governance legitimacy in crisis management not only requires effective decision-making and implementation but must also be supported by sense-making and communication to tap into and enhance an environment of mutual trust between all stakeholders in government and the community. The pragmatic evidence-based and agile approach is taken in prevailing conditions of deep uncertainty, experimentation and learning by doing required nothing less for its success. In Australia, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020, leaders and governments elevated the meaning-making process and its communication to new heights of practice in transparency and frequency.

Ideologies and politicization were set aside in the co-production between government and community stakeholders of a narrative of "public health and safety" in a spirit of social cohesion. The government succeeded by effectively connecting governance capacity and delivery with legitimacy and public acceptance in a co-production process (Moon, 2020). People accepted personal restrictions at personal costs in the interests of public health and safety. New levels of mutual trust were generated to deliver successful COVID crisis management.

8. IMPACT ON SUSTAINABILITY

COVID presented opportunities and challenges in Australia to embrace sustainability. The crisis provided a unique opportunity to analyse in real time the effects of a protracted "major landscape shock" on the trajectories of sustainability transitions (Kanda & Kivimaa, 2020). For governments, businesses and citizens the crisis has brought about the lived experience of immediate and major "disruptive" change (Foulis, 2020). Fundamental shifts from one kind of socio-economic and technical setting to another can occur over three interactive and dynamic levels: 1) niches for emerging radical innovations; 2) regimes of existing institutional structures characterised by lock-in; and 3) exogenous pressures influencing both other levels (Geels, 2002).

Sustainability transitions frequently occur and mature over decades but as Kanda and Kivimaa (2020) point out "the COVID-19 outbreak offers the possibility to question such assumptions by

showing vividly that some systemic and deeply structural changes in socio-economic systems can under certain circumstances occur quite rapidly". For the Morrison government, his party's reluctant embrace of Paris climate change targets may see change thrust upon their policy formulation rather than persist with the denialism that has dominated the policy agenda for the past decade. Any such shift is also likely to be heavily influenced by exogenous, international developments, pressures, from the new American Presidential administration, UK Prime Minister Johnson, and net-zero emission commitments of Australia's neighbouring, Asian trading partners.

Responses to the pandemic are likely to accelerate structural shifts facilitated by new technology and to encourage improvements in governance systems, including through better crisis preparedness, and enhanced public trust not only in carbon-heavy Australia but elsewhere. These developments would augur well not only for the more effective handling of further global pandemics but also for the climate and energy crises and transitions facing the world. Rising to the challenge of these new opportunities will require a willingness to move in the recovery beyond "business as usual" to a "new normal" (Kivimaa & Kern, 2016). It will also require a commitment to long-term goals and planning so far resisted by Australia. The OECD has called for governments to learn from the COVID experience by "building back better" for handling resilience to future shocks, enhancing wellbeing and inclusiveness, and transitioning to sustainability (OECD, 2020b).

The COVID-19 crisis has devastated many sectors but it has also 'turbo-charged the internet' foreshadowing big structural changes in the economy. The behaviour of workers, consumers, and businesses changed during the pandemic, not least in response to health-based restrictions and taking advantage of digital technologies. The case of GameStop in early 2021 symbolised the digital fight between largely small investors against hedge fund companies and demonstrated that casino capitalism during a pandemic is not as easily tolerated (Schroeder & Prentice, 2021). Changes in social behaviour are likely to endure into and beyond any longer-term recovery and reshape the economy.

9. CONCLUSION

The global experience with responses to COVID-19 during 2020 has shown how tendentious and politicized has been the debate in many countries, particularly in the USA, where it has been rooted in an implied trade-off between health and economic costs, and between individual freedom and social responsibility.

This paper has examined Australia's successful COVID-19 transformational crisis management as a "joint-production" of government capacity and its legitimacy and public acceptability and considers the lessons for post-pandemic governance sustainability in the face of future existential crises, including global climate change. Australia ranked among the best-performing countries in minimizing impacts on public health especially cases and death rates while at the same time minimizing economic impacts and underpinning a quick recovery.

The government was able to act decisively and effectively in responding to the pandemic during

2020 and the population accepted unprecedented restrictions and a degree of coerciveness on its personal and social freedoms. In a spirit of social solidarity and mutual responsibility, there was an only minor and isolated protest or dissent. This high level of public compliance and conformity was all the more remarkable an achievement given the political trust deficit that had been declining for many years and had reached unprecedented low levels of 20% trust in government immediately before COVID arrived. By the end of the year there was a strong and significant reversion in trust of institutions, politicians, and even the media however if the government does not communicate in a transparent and authentic way, then public support will not be sustainable.

Government capacity for crisis management was deployed in an efficient and effective manner in a way that earned and built public trust. Notwithstanding an arguable lack of preparedness, the administration of public services from health through economic measures demonstrated that the public sector and government have a role and can deliver when properly resourced.

Government capacity was also enhanced by pragmatic political leadership and cooperation that set aside previous political bickering and institutional tensions and conveyed a unified picture of leaders pulling together to act in the broader national and public interest. There was broad agreement on the common values that mattered, namely, public health and safety, support for "front line workers", and fiscal relief for those who lost business and employment. Ideology, politics, and confrontation were largely set aside.

The creation of a National Cabinet of Prime Minister and State Premiers was an important innovation communicating unity of purpose and coordination of capacity, much of which rested with the States and Territories. Inevitable day-to-day disagreements between the parties were more readily accepted by the public in this context. This governance style had not been on display during the immediately preceding national bushfires emergency at the expense of public trust.

Adding to this trust in governance arrangements was the acceptance of medical expert advice, the transparency, and effective public communication of that advice. This was particularly important in explaining and gaining acceptance for frequently changing measures on "learning by doing basis" and in the face of a "fog of uncertainty" in scientific knowledge about the coronavirus itself. In the "fog of uncertainty" surrounding the coronavirus and its fast-evolving behaviour, experimentation, and learning, there were inevitable mistakes, mismanagement, overreaction, lack of coordination, and poor communication along the way. Striking a day-to-day perfect balance between individual freedoms and public safety was never going to be easy. What was important to the success and legitimacy of governance was an effective practical deployment of governance capacity. Transparency and accountability were strengthened by daily briefings and prompt reviews of mistakes. There was public recognition and acceptance that in a time of crisis unified and coherent action by government and the state it is better to err on the side of precaution and risk aversion than not.

The question remains whether these lessons learned in the successful crisis management of

COVID-19 during 2020 will be taken forward in a sustainable governance model to tackle systemic, transformational challenges, including inequality, social justice, and global climate change. The early analysis and signs are not completely encouraging. Most of the measures taken both as health-based restrictions and as economic responses do break with prevailing government policies and ideologies, and with conventional governance practice. However, for the most part, the health-based restrictions invoked existing emergency powers legislation with clear sunset provisions. The economic measures of financial support that alleviated social injustice and inequality in poverty and housing are also of clearly specified and limited duration effect and will be phased out.

Overall, there is little evidence of any real, potentially long-lasting innovative, structural changes at the political level. The possible exception is the establishment of the National Cabinet that now replaces the defunct and ineffective Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as the primary forum for inter-governmental decision-making. The budgetary, economic recovery measures announced in October for the most part mark a reversion to pre-COVID-19 “business as usual” government policies with little evidence of grasping the opportunities of learning and reform to “build better” for a sustainable future. The crisis management lessons of preparedness, expert advice, cooperation, transparency, accountability, government service delivery capacity, common purpose, clear communication, and planning show little sign of impressing themselves on the Morrison government or being taken forward at this admittedly early stage of post-COVID recovery.

The considerably different lived experiences in day-to-day life during the pandemic, in social activity, work and business, are more likely to be sustained in the longer term. In particular, personal hygiene and distancing behaviour as well as technology-enabled activities of shopping, entertainment, access to health care and education, and working from home, reduced commuting and travel, lower energy use. These might be characterized as niche innovations but with some potential to develop into long-term sustainable changes with an accelerated move to an online economy.

Having closed the long-standing and growing institutional, political, and democratic “trust deficit” during the pandemic, will the Australian political classes and in particular, the Prime Minister and his government, take the opportunity created by the COVID crisis to build a new future? Or will they

revert to type, to their previous political practices and culture, politicised squabbling and ideology, advancing vested interests against the public good, lacking transparency and accountability, and dividing rather than unifying behind a common purpose of “public good”?

As Australia’s successful crisis-management response to COVID-19 has underlined, sustainable democratic governance requires the careful balancing of capacity with legitimacy built on common purpose and public trust. It is clear by comparison between Australia on the one hand and the USA and the UK on the other that capacity alone is necessary but not sufficient; it must be complemented by legitimacy, public trust, leadership, and social cohesion.

The necessary nature of the legitimacy dimensions determines the effectiveness with which capacity can be deployed. Furthermore, legitimacy appears to be importantly determined by the severity of restrictions proportional to capacity; more capacity should require less severe restrictions than lower levels of capacity.

The essentially cultural features of a society are fundamental in successful pandemic management. The stronger the social cohesion or social capital the more resilient and accepting of emergency restrictions tailored to health system capacity.

The Australian experience leaves us with an intriguing residual question: why did a conservative, small government PM feel able to make such a U-turn in his government’s ideological, governance, economic and social policy positions in the country’s successful response to COVID-19? He also delivered on COVID-19 even allowing for the primary service delivery responsibilities and roles exercised by state governments. The UK and the USA leaders did not and with tragic results. Could the difference lie in the relative strengths of cohesion and solidarity of the respective societies and the pressures that put on governments to act accordingly? Would Australians have politically accepted nothing less from their government, of whatever political allegiance? Was the change of allegiance vindicated by the accompanying surge in Morrison’s personal popularity and levels of trust in government?

Looking forward from the COVID-19 2020 crisis management experience, one thing that seems clear is that across the board there is no “going back to normal”. Disruption will accelerate, politics will become more turbulent, pandemic habits will persist, and crises will create opportunities. Effective and sustainable governance in confronting crises and emergencies is a matter of ethical and moral choices by a society.

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