

Coronavirus: Charting a way out of this crippling Pollyanna world

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 12 April 2020

This week there were big black police cars marked Public Order and Riot Squad cruising around the quiet suburb where I live. It was 10.30 in the morning. There were barely any other cars on the road and no sign of any public disorder, let alone a riot.

There were seven rangers in my park the day before, more than the number of people exercising, or walking, or looking for a ray of sunshine. On the same day, a tiny bay — not a beach, and not far away from me — was locked up with 2m-high fencing so surfers couldn't find refuge in the waves. Like the riot squad, the rangers and the men putting up fencing were all just doing what they were told to do by superiors.

Which is the same as the Morrison government. They keep telling us they are doing what their superiors, a panel of scientists, are telling them to do. Closing down businesses, large gatherings, sport, church services, culling funerals and weddings, curbing gatherings to two people, unless you are with family or friends you live with.

Two people? It wasn't so long ago that governments were making room in their ministries for ministers for social isolation. Now, our governments are forcing the country into strict isolation, under threat of jail.

After only two weeks of this, many people are asking whether we are in a corner with no discernible way out. These sentiments are serious. They will get more serious in another week, two weeks, in another month. Talk of putting the country into "hibernation" for six months seems ridiculous. Can it really work?

We are told there is "no magic" to the highly hypothetical modelling released this week. It is guesswork then? If it is not guesswork, please entrust us with meaningful information that we can use to judge whether the cure is worse than the disease.

All we can see so far is an arms race of restrictions on how we live and work by state and federal governments. Let us award Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews first prize in this alarming competition for doing the most to close down an economy and constraining citizens. With that out of the way, it is time for the federal government, using real metrics rather than hypothetical modelling, to start planning how to reopen the country.

To be sure, listen to medical experts. And then add, weigh up and parse other information too. Information such as the economic costs of shutting down businesses, the long-term effects of unemployment, the costs of piling debt on to future generations, the ability of the country to deal with future crises from a position of economic weakness. Other information too, such as the costs of isolating millions of Australians, the mental health costs, the diseases that won't be treated properly during this pandemic. And share it with us, even the uncertainty.

From chief scientists to premiers to police commissioners and the Prime Minister, they have all talked about the journey we are on together. Journey together? Short of our political leaders mapping an eventual path to recovery for us, and sharing that with us, there is no journey, only confusion.

There is not going to be a “snap back” to normality — that is the stuff of dreams. It is more silly language that must stop. But please, Prime Minister, take us into your confidence, trust us by telling us what you are watching to plan for recovery, so we can watch for the same metrics. There is a need for some meaningful light and hope for a country swathed in darkness, uncertainty and fear.

Trust is a two-way street. If you trust us with a way out, we might trust you. We will also have some hope, some light at the end of this tunnel. Not trusting us is surely the road to civil disobedience. It’s only been two weeks and people are getting tetchy, itchy, restless. Has the government factored this in? Have they worked out what might be the tipping point for when we disobey and hop over fences?

There are powerful forces working against a meaningful exit strategy. The first one is human nature, always planning for the worst, avoiding all risk instead of managing it sensibly. That is killing our economy right now. It is leading people to despair. The second equation is that no politician is going to be held responsible for the future suicide of an unemployed young man who has lost hope. But they imagine they will be held responsible for the immediate death of a 94-year old from, or with, COVID-19.

No wonder many feel we are heading on a path more dangerous than a virus. Alas, if we want the government to come clean with us, it is time for us to come clean with ourselves. There is no easy option here. We can’t build walls around the country indefinitely. We can’t keep 25 million people in lockdown without dreadful, deadly consequences. We can’t keep praying for a vaccine. What if there is not a vaccine for a year, two years, five years, ever?

Even building up immunity may not work. What if there is another virus just like this one next year, or the year after? The economy in ruins, how do we support another six million who would be thrown out of the workplace by shutdowns. The shocking truth is we may have to learn to live with a killer virus just as we live, and some die, from other killer, albeit non-contagious, diseases.

Before this pandemic is over, we are all going to have to address some tough ethical questions. Questions of life and death, questions about rationing scarce resources, and questions about who gets priority when there is only one parachute but two aircraft passengers. A virus that disproportionately kills old people raises awful, but unavoidable, questions.

But in today’s society, Pollyannas will claim that all lives are of equal value, and that everyone has an equal claim to our limited resources. It is heartwarming. It is also wrong.

How do you answer an 83-year woman who says her life is every bit as valuable as that of a teenager? If there is only one ventilator in the COVID-19 intensive care unit, someone has to choose between giving it to the old woman who may have many health problems and only a few more years to live, or to an otherwise healthy 19-year-old. Do we make them toss a coin? How do we decide, if not by judging which life has more value?

Steve Waterson’s sobering piece last weekend had one particular line that has stuck. Life is precious, but it is not priceless. That is a confronting reality. All sorts of dreadful decisions are frequently made that will save some lives and cause others to die. Who gets the liver transplant, an old man or a young woman? Why aren’t all very expensive lifesaving drugs

offered free of charge? Because we do not have infinite resources, so we choose some which we will offer for low or no cost.

Maybe one benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic is that Pollyanna thinking will be put to bed. We can surely never again pretend that hard choices, about life and death, need not be made.

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