

Coronavirus: Why I won't be signing up to the PM's contact-tracing app

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 22 April 2020

*There are simply too many reasons to be dubious of plan A, as Scott Morrison calls it. Devising and debating plan B should start now, given that plan A is inherently flawed.*

I won't be signing up to the Morrison government's COVID-19 contact-tracing app. There are simply too many reasons to be dubious of the Prime Minister's plan A, as he called it last Friday.

Scott Morrison tweeted that the contact-tracing app is voluntary. But how voluntary is it when the federal government is essentially holding a gun to our heads, a gun marked "Plan A — unless at least 40 per cent of you sign up to the app, we won't consider releasing you from home detention in four weeks"?

Right now, my answer to the Prime Minister's heavy-handed request is: "No thanks. What's plan B?"

The biggest hurdle to the Prime Minister's plan A is that state and federal governments have shown they don't trust the Australian people, and so many Australians may not be inclined to trust the government about this. Where previously Australians were wrapped in endless, often nonsensical red tape, they are now wrapped in blue-and-white police tape too. Local councils trust us even less. Some outdoor spaces literally look like scenes from *Law & Order* where police mark off a location thought to be the killing grounds of a serial murderer. The ubiquitous blue-and-white tape in our lives today has nothing to do with anything so grisly; it is simply because local, state and federal governments don't trust us.

In some parts of Australia, we can't be trusted to sit on a park bench, or go for a swim in the ocean. Or play golf. Or go fishing. We can't be trusted to be outside our homes unless it is for one of four reasons nominated by state and federal governments.

Last Saturday, between 9pm and 11pm, Victorian police conducted 535 social distancing spot checks, many at home, because we can't be trusted. We can't be trusted to run small businesses using sensible social-distancing measures. Local, state and federal governments have made risk calculations based on a profound lack of trust in Australians, shutting down most of the country at economic, health, educational and social costs so enormous that no one can calculate them.

Given that trust is a two-way street, the federal government should lead by example: if they trust us more, we might trust the government about the COVID-19 contact-tracing app.

The second reason to question the Morrison government's plan A goes to feasibility. After being pressured into offering people some hope about the future and sharing their plan to reopen the country, the Coalition set down three criteria before the government will consider easing restrictions: expanded testing, extended hospital capacity and enhanced contact tracing.

The government says that enhanced tracing means at least 40 per cent of Australians must sign on to the COVID-19 contact-tracing app. This high bar raises an obvious question: if a

one party-state such as Singapore, where dissent is not on the political menu, has managed a take-up rate for its contact-tracing app of only 20-25 per cent, why would the Morrison government set up a metric that appears unachievable in a free country such as Australia? Is it to bunker down and buy time to work out a more realistic plan B to get the country back up and running? Despite the government's new threefold criteria, we are still in the dark, with goalposts that either keep moving or disappear entirely.

The third reason to be sceptical about the COVID-19 contact-tracing app is that governments don't always mean what they say when they collect our information. If the Morrison government could be trusted not to use the information from the app for anything else, and if the government could be trusted to delete all information gathered during this period, and if the government could guarantee the information won't be accessed by cyber hackers, then maybe more will sign up. But history offers little comfort.

In 2015, the Coalition government introduced new laws that required telco companies to retain customers' data for two years so 22 law enforcement agencies could use it to pursue people reasonably suspected of committing serious crimes such as terrorism. Critics warned this would be a serious infringement of privacy, and there would be mission creep. They were right. More than 80 different agencies, most with no role whatever in pursuing serious crime, have tried to gain access to our data, including a request from Fairfield City Council to use data to find and fine someone who dumped rubbish.

In 2016, the Queensland Crime and Corruption Commission revealed that public officials unlawfully accessed government databases. One police officer was guilty of 50 hacking offences. A dozen staff from the Australian Taxation Office were sacked in 2017 for unauthorised access of private tax records.

The other problem with the contact-tracing app is the minister in charge of it. Stuart Robert may be a good friend of the PM's whom he helped in the 2018 leadership ballot, but the Minister for Government Services doesn't have enough credibility to sell a policy that raises serious questions about liberty and privacy.

On the weekend, Robert gave his "absolute assurance ... that the app is simply a health app". On the eve of the national lockdown, Robert used the same language giving me an absolute assurance on that occasion that the welfare system was robust enough to manage the devastating demand on Monday from newly unemployed Australians. When the system crashed that day, Robert told desperate Australians it was due to a hack by cyber criminals. That was not true.

Australians will need someone more trustworthy to assure them about a contact-tracing app that will gather and store information about us.

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It is true that plenty of other platforms know where we go, gathering all kinds of information about us every day. But here we are dealing with the power of the state demanding that it gathers information from us if we are to be freed from a national lockdown. It was bad enough when NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard posted a photo on Twitter of himself smiling while signing NSW lockdown laws last month. Shouldn't we be concerned about the federal government doubling down, using more state power to hold citizens to ransom?

In the first instance, when restrictions needed to be imposed quickly, it was entirely understandable that state and federal governments did not have the political bandwidth to talk about exit strategies. But the time for exit plans is now long overdue.

The Prime Minister's 40 per cent take-up target is no reason for the media to stop asking about an exit strategy until his set criteria have been met. Over the past few weeks, the goalposts have changed from flattening the curve and ensuring hospital capacity to this new one of 40 per cent of Australians signing on to a government tracing app. What is next?

In Britain last week, the Johnson government's Undersecretary for Health, Nadine Dorries, tweeted that "journalists should stop asking about an 'exit strategy' ". Nadine must be dreamin'. Neither should the Morrison government imagine that, by setting an unrealistic target take-up rate of 40 per cent, it can avoid a robust discussion about how to extract the country from this shutdown.

Devising and debating plan B should start now, given that plan A is inherently flawed.

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