

Poor decisions on the coronavirus makes tough problems worse

By Terry McCrann, *The Australian*, 25 April 2020

---

It is certainly instructive but also bracing and just a tad unsettling to discover that we are ruled by very stupid people.

The disturbingly operative word is “ruled”. Our elected leaders and accompanying self-defined “experts” have seized with relish and gusto the responsibility — more accurately, the opportunity — to release the inner authoritarian; to rule over us, effectively by fiat, like some medieval monarch surrounded by acolytes and activists.

The reference to stupidity is not pejorative, simply a statement of reality. I offer for consideration a few contemporary examples, starting with – who else? – our supreme leader.

During the week, the Prime Minister Scott Morrison demanded that the powers of the World Health Organisation (WHO) should be dramatically increased — for it to become the UN inspectors of health like those of weapons.

It is certainly in keeping with his authoritarian mood of the moment: an organisation already answerable to no one other than perhaps China, and certainly subject to no effective oversight, should be given the powers of global gauleiters, to storm into countries unasked.

It seems to have escaped our PM that UN weapons inspectors have a less than stellar record. Think, as he did not, North Korea and Iran, to say nothing of how they “helped” to create the context which led to the disastrous Iraq war.

But at its most basic and immediate, here we have a PM who wants to increase the powers of an organisation which has just revealed itself as a co-conspirator with China in unleashing the virus on the world.

And a co-conspirator, which as a matter of policy and practice simply refuses to recognise the country that has the single best record of success in fighting the virus, and is a democracy answerable to public opinion, fact and reason, unlike either the WHO or its co-conspirator China: Taiwan.

As of yesterday, Taiwan, population 24 million: a total of 428 cases and just six deaths. Not for the day, in total. It makes our effort — 6675 cases and 78 deaths — look a bit ordinary.

Why has Taiwan succeeded? Because, when WHO was co-conspiring with China to conceal the virus, Taiwan was taking active steps to protect itself from China and the WHO. They knew only too well what they were dealing with.

Rounding out the stupidity was the timing. The PM chose to make his inane statement right after President Trump announced the US would suspend its funding to WHO.

There was exquisite irony in the PM's deliberate move to take the exact opposite tack to the US President in the week of his predecessor's memoir.

For this is exactly what Malcolm Turnbull himself did in 2016, the day after Donald Trump won the presidential election.

Trump had promised to take the US out of the Fake Paris Climate Accord. Presented with the opportunity to join the US in returning to a world of sanity, Turnbull doubled-down on doing the exact opposite, by moving to formal ratification.

That sort of combined policy and political idiocy was to be expected from Turnbull. But for Morrison to construct an all-but exact replica in the very week that the predecessor's memoir lacerating him surfaced, was an impressive match.

Example two: the Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews and the state's chief health official Brett Sutton brandishing the undeniably hysterically over-the-top and just plain utterly wrong virus "modelling" on which the state's toughest lockdown was based.

The three central claims were that but for the lockdown, Victoria would — not "could", not even that this was a worst-case scenario, but from the Premier a completely unqualified "would" — have had 36,000 total deaths and peak days of 58,000 infections and 650 deaths.

These claims were utterly ridiculed by every piece of evidence from around the world, not least by the outcomes in Italy that Andrews promised we, again, would become but for the lockdown, and Sweden, which has had relatively light restrictions.

Andrews's world of "would" for Victoria was between seven and 83 times worse than Italy and between 3.5 and 80 times worse than Sweden.

The greater stupidity was not in having ever entertained this ludicrously garbage-in, even-more-garbage-out modelling; but that Andrews and Sutton were still projecting it as Victoria's future if there was the slightest easing of the lockdown.

Example three: the comprehensive failure to understand a very simple proposition and an equally simple execution of that proposition. This is the need for a statistically rigorous randomised sample of perhaps 2000 people — the number is a matter for a statistics expert — testing for the virus and also testing for antibodies.

That will tell us pretty accurately what percentage of the population currently has the virus and what percentage has had it. The knowledge of both is fundamental to

any sensible policy development — both for tackling the virus and in unshackling the economy.

Various antibody tests overseas have told us that anywhere between 20 per cent (New York) and 40 per cent (Germany) have antibodies. This goes crucially to both the issue of herd immunity and just how dangerous the virus actually is.

But none of our rulers and their associated experts seem to understand this. Instead they are pressing on with more and more self-selected tests only for the positive virus.

Yes, that was critically important in the early stages; to actually find the virus and trace it through populations. But the biggest risk on both the virus and the economic fronts is now to find the virus where carriers don't know or even suspect they have it, if indeed they do.

Finally, to finish in a very different place, example four: The ASIC/ASX-mandated selective placements rort, which the duo purported to moderate this week.

I would like to think that their utter failure to adopt the very easy steps to make it fair to retail investors is due to stupidity. It is comforting that the alternative explanation is unlikely.