

Victoria, Australia: “Nothing short of fascism”

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 6 September 2020

Zoe Buhler: one mum's desperate voice silenced by fascist behaviour

The state of Victoria is unfathomable. The duly elected leader, a Labor Premier, has armed police with brute powers to enter and search the Ballarat home of a young pregnant woman, her partner and children, arrest and handcuff her and seize all phones and laptops, regardless of who owns them.

Why? Here's the fascist part.

Twenty-eight-year-old Zoe Buhler posted about “Freedom Day Ballarat” on Facebook. She wrote this: “PEACEFUL PROTEST! All social distancing measures are to be followed so we don't get arrested please. Please wear a mask unless you have a medical reason not to. As some of you have seen, the government has gone to extreme measures and are using scare tactics through the media to prevent the Melbourne protests.

“Here in Ballarat we can be a voice for those in stage 4 lockdowns. We can be seen and heard and hopefully make a difference. We live in a ‘free’ country.”

She was right to put quotation marks around the word ‘free’ because, right now, freedom is up in the air.

When police stormed Buhler's home at suburban Miners Rest, in Ballarat, her four-year-old child ran and hid under a bed. Buhler told police she could take down the post, right there and then. The march had not taken place.

She pleaded with police to show some common sense.

“I didn't realise I was doing anything wrong,” she said to them. “I'm happy to delete the post. This is ridiculous. My two kids are here. I have an ultrasound appointment in an hour.”

Assistant Police Commissioner Luke Cornelius reckons the officers “stuffed” the optics — but they were right to arrest and handcuff the pregnant mother. Stuff the optics, indeed.

Pregnant anti-lockdown protester: 'I was scared I was being kidnapped' (Today)

Zoe Buhler has spoken to media about her controversial anti-lockdown protest arrest.

This is about the state of democracy in Victoria. It's not about turning the young Ballarat woman into a martyr or a hero.

For all we know, she might have plenty of views that chafe. Maybe she's into crystals? Maybe she's an anti-vaxxer? But police didn't come for Buhler because she might have views in common with rich hippies in Byron Bay.

Buhler is on bail, facing hefty fines and possible imprisonment, for posting about "Freedom Day in Ballarat" to protest against lockdown policies. Her brother set up a GoFundMe page to help his sister, only to delete it after receiving death threats.

This is Australia in 2020?

The young mum lost her job during the economic shutdown. She is worried about suicides. Many frontline medical experts are also concerned that Daniel Andrews and Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton are focused only on COVID-19, ignoring the devastation caused to lives by lockdown measures.

A group of thirteen senior medical specialists wrote to the Victorian Premier on Monday night. They want to do something, so they offered to meet with him.

"It is our professional opinion that the stage 4 lockdown policy has caused unprecedented negative economic and social outcomes in people," wrote the doctors.

"In particular, it has caused or exacerbated depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, as well as contributed to domestic violence, through an extreme and unjustified disruption to family, social and work life.

"Job losses, home-schooling, the isolation of the elderly and single people, and the restriction on the number of people who may attend funerals are but a few examples of how the government's current response is harming the health of the general population."

Australians should be concerned that governments have turned health bureaucrats into health dictators. That's what happens when governments choose a narrow bandwidth of advice.

The Victorian Premier is following the early lockdown model of the Morrison government, adding his own COVID-19 bells and whistles: a nightly curfew, one hour of exercise a day, no roaming beyond 5km of your home. None of this is based on science, only the advice of bureaucrats.

Australians should be troubled about early political calculations made by the Morrison government, copied by other state and territory leaders.

They reckoned that they would be held to account for every COVID-19 death but not for suicides or self-harm or depression or lives lost to cancer or another disease because treatment was cancelled, suspended or slowed down through fear of attending a hospital.

Why wouldn't Australians be concerned that Andrews chose a softly, softly approach to Black Lives Matter protesters in the middle of a lockdown, but has emboldened police to cuff and arrest a young woman for wanting to exercise her right to protest, in a COVID-safe way, against lockdown laws that are not grounded in science?

We have that right in Australia, a right to political freedom under the Constitution. We might hear more about that from Buhler's Melbourne lawyers, Stuart Wood QC and criminal lawyer Stephen Andrianakis, who stepped up to act for Buhler on Thursday. The high-profile and high-powered lawyers aren't just defending one young woman; they are defending our freedoms.

Apart from the Constitution, Buhler's lawyers might look at whether the whole damn scheme imposed by Andrews under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act is unlawful for empowering thousands of lowly bureaucrats and council workers with extreme and disproportionate powers.

A court might find that the Andrews government has applied the law unlawfully, or strike down the law for overreach.

If this was a migration matter, the Federal Court would look very dimly on a government using laws to impose tyranny by fiat.

And then there's the Victorian Charter of Human Rights. The Andrews government will need to craft something better than "Seriously, one more comment about human rights ...".

That's how the Premier, at a press conference in July, dissed our hard-fought freedoms.

Australians from all walks of life contact me daily, desperate to know what they can do to defend our way of life in the face of lockdown laws that are devastating their lives. For starters, watch the video of Buhler being handcuffed, the noise of her little children in the background, her pleading with police to see reason. It should send shivers down your spine.

What about the Prime Minister? What will he do? Will he talk about the importance of freedom now? Even if it doesn't create a single new job?

That has been Scott Morrison's excuse in the past when asked about incursions into our culture and our freedoms.

Millions of mainstream Australians will cheer a leader who understands that our way of life must be defended, that freedoms are fragile, that each generation must protect them, and hand a robust set of freedoms on to the next generation, explaining to them why they must do the same.

NSW Liberal backbencher Craig Kelly does most of the heavy lifting when it comes to defending basic freedoms for Australians — more than most Liberal MPs combined in the Morrison government. He contacted the family of the Ballarat woman, offering his support.

Does the Prime Minister want to be remembered for his managerialism, or as a national leader who fought to uphold basic freedoms?

Rather than be concerned about the protest against government policies that is scheduled for today, we should be far more troubled if all Australians simply sat in silence.

The second wave of COVID-19 was unleashed by an inept Andrews government who also withheld information from the public; heavy-handed restrictions remain "on the table" even

after the current state of emergency is due to end on September 13, as Sutton said on Wednesday. And worst of all, the Premier has encouraged brute police tactics to enfeeble citizens.

Andrews has done more to incite Australians to breach public health orders than a young pregnant Ballarat woman dressed in pink flannelette pyjamas who posted on Facebook about Freedom Day in Ballarat. Her arrest is nothing short of modern fascism. It will be a healthy sign if more Australians draw a line in the sand.

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