

Double fault for Novak and common sense

By Steve Watson, The Australian, 15 January 2022

The mishandling of the Covid crisis by our politicians is at break point. Maybe Australia should have another yes/no question on the visa application: Are you a dickhead?

Perhaps the Djokovic ‘immigration farce will persuade a few more people to question the benefit of continuing these pointless prohibitions’.

There were cynics who doubted the clowns who run this country could maintain their high standards of idiocy into this third year of pandemonium, but here they come again, tripping over their giant shoes as they enter the ring. Buffoons of that pedigree were never going to let us down.

True to their vision, we’re trapped in a miasma of bumbling incompetence, leavened with spiteful, vindictive meddling in our private lives. Polka-dotted bowler hats off to them, I say.

What a wacky week these crazy kids have delivered us. But before we luxuriate in the comic masterpiece of the Australian Open and the government’s removal of reigning champion Novak Djokovic late on Friday, we should pause to applaud the latest jewel in the crown of our leaders’ stupidity: the screamingly funny \$1000 fine for not filing your positive rapid antigen test to the NSW government’s gnomes.

The early promise and backbone shown by the NSW Premier suggested he’d fluffed his lines, but normal nonsense programming was restored at the prompting of his Health Ministry halfwits and a couple of Sydney talkback windbags. Their barrage of uneducated blustering and bullying, echoed by the shrieking flock of Chicken Littles that nest in our print media, saw the Premier’s resolve evaporate like the morning mist.

Given his government has no idea who among its subjects has the RAT kits – (I bought a couple of packets a month ago – or did I?) – nor how many they have, or whether they’ve been used, correctly or otherwise, or by whom, or what result they gave, it seems unlikely that any fines will be collected. So, an unenforceable law to deal with an undetectable offence with a mighty but undeliverable penalty. If there’s a more amusing way of inviting contempt for the rules and their creators, I look forward to it.

You can see the appeal, though: at a grand a pop they only need to catch 11 million recalcitrants and – bingo! – that’s paid for the 58 million PCR tests we’ve conducted so far.

Besides, self-reporting has marvellous potential. In some US cities there have been calls to defund the police, but our jokers have gone one better and outsourced the role to the citizens. A simple command to report oneself on pain of punishment – why did no one think of that before?

“Hello, NSW police? I drove home on New Year’s Eve and used a breath-test machine to discover to my horror that I was marginally over the limit. Please suspend my licence for three months – oh, and there’s a cheque for \$1500 in the post.”

Meanwhile, infections continue to climb, hundreds of thousands a day, boosted by the eager self-testers who uploaded their results to the health services website. So after nearly two years of kicking it, here's where the can has ended up.

We should rejoice that the Omigod! variant is less deadly than Delta Force, apparently by 20 per cent, or 10 per cent, or 48 times less virulent, or 97 per cent weaker (I fear I've been reading too widely). I have no idea what these figures mean, or how they can possibly be calculated; and their vast range tells me nobody else does either. They're no more trustworthy than the daily case numbers regurgitated by our media, whose very precision makes them suspect.

Does anyone with the tiniest shred of intelligence really believe we are tracking every infection? I know a dozen people who've had positive RAT results but have no intention of throwing themselves into the maw of a health bureaucracy that will order them into isolation. And if my experience is not unique, then there must be hundreds of thousands more live cases out there, many with mild or no symptoms, which means the latest instalment of Covid is even less deadly than we are told.

If so, we are now recording and overreacting to a disease no more dangerous than seasonal flu. The reborn urge to track contacts, to order isolation and quarantine, to mandate daily tests (impossible to source) in order to validate exemptions for critical services, is causing more chaos than at any time since the madness took possession of us.

Helpful messages pop up on phones after a visit to the pub, informing you that when you checked in, someone with Covid was there "around the same time". Then you are advised to "monitor for symptoms". Good Lord, now you mention it I do have extreme pain and fever, a sore throat and a blinding headache, plus I've lost my sense of smell. Thanks for the tip, NSW Health, I might never have noticed. What a pity you have no advice on how to treat it.

To those businesses that survived destructive and unnecessary lockdowns thanks to the fabulous largesse of our various JobKeeper programs, good luck getting through the pseudo (but every bit as harmful) lockdowns generated by the insane requirement for many healthy staff to stay at home – this time with no financial support.

In Victoria, the legal fun looks set to continue, featuring backflip after hilarious backflip. With their inept, confused and torturous mishandling of what looked, no matter what side you favour, to be a simple visa decision, the PM and his ministers have turned the modest success of his "Where the bloody hell are you?" campaign to attract overseas tourists into a triumphant "What the bloody hell are you doing here?" drive to dissuade them from coming.

News reports worldwide have focused on the battle to protect Australia from a Serbian tennis ace. I don't know if we're the laughing stock some critics say we are, but I doubt there are many potential visitors racing to their travel agents after viewing the fiasco we've created.

Lawyers say hard cases make bad laws; but bad laws also make hard cases. Some of us have clung from the start to the belief that an Australian passport holder should be allowed to enter Australia at any time, and that Australians should be allowed to move unchallenged around their nation. Many didn't want our international borders to be closed at all, although the hysteria that discarded the world's carefully prepared pandemic contingency plans put an end to that foolish dream.

So if those who have opposed the country's brutal border closure now adopt the PM's "rules are rules" platitude (as though the rules were dropped here from outer space, rather than born of his own unseemly and unending panic), we are valuing the internal coherence of a bad system over our desire to see a measured, reasonable response to an unvaccinated person seeking entry to a country where almost everyone is vaccinated.

Djokovic came here for our entertainment, and to enrich himself and his trophy cabinet, not to infect Australians with a disease he doesn't have or to spread his simple-minded anti-vax message. The "Gotcha!" reaction to a couple of trivial form-filling errors and the embarrassing interview process he was subjected to show how thoroughly Covid paranoia has penetrated our institutions.

It's not clear to me why anyone would fraudulently claim they hadn't been to Spain in the fortnight before heading to Australia. I don't believe such a visit is prohibited by our entry laws, which are designed to capture travel to more problematic places than the Costa del Sol.

Nor do I see why a multi-millionaire globetrotting celebrity, in a sport famous for mollicoddling its stars like newborn babies, would be filling out his own online visa application, doubtless one of dozens his minders arrange for him each year.

Trouble is, the principles of fair play are so much more difficult to defend when the super-entitled "victim", backed by a phalanx of clever lawyers, is such an absolute tosser, and not that lovely Roger Federer. Maybe we should have another yes/no question on the visa application: Are you a dickhead? But until we do, we should not have indulged the mob howling for the expulsion of the world's No.1 tennis player from what may be the only globally significant sporting event we will host this year. Anyone who believed Djokovic was more of a threat to public health than any of the thousands who would pay to watch him play is an idiot. He doesn't dive into Young & Jackson for a post-game beer during the tournament; and, more importantly, he doesn't have any Covid to transmit.

I imagine you have to be profoundly obsessive and self-centred to excel in any individual sport, although Djokovic does seem to wear an extra layer of charmlessness. His gloating Instagram post that he had secured a medical exemption to enter this hermit kingdom stung anyone impacted by our travel restrictions (and I speak as one of them, forbidden to visit my dying father or attend his funeral).

Nevertheless, Djokovic's obstinacy may have done some good. He deserves no credit for it, as his motives were primarily mercenary, but perhaps his immigration farce will persuade a few more people to question the benefit of continuing these pointless prohibitions, though I won't be holding my breath.

In a proper big top, the clowns appear between performers of genuine talent: tightrope walkers, lion tamers, trapeze artists, jugglers; but our cavalcade of stupidity looks set to go on and on, with no relief and no skills on display. If we've learned one thing from our politicians during the pandemic, it's that a circus composed of clowns and nothing else is no laughing matter.



How Johannes Leck saw the Djokovic saga this week.

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