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# Lockdown lunacy is frying our minds



Victoria to Western Australia: hold my beer.

If you thought Perth's bizarre five-day lockdown over a single person, who wasn't sick and infected no one else, was strange, then Victoria's statewide third lockdown of 6.6 million people is so freakish it raises a worrying possibility.

The west, and Australia and New Zealand in particular, are suffering mass psychogenic illness, where only sociology, psychology and the perverse incentives of large welfare states, can explain the ongoing obsession with COVID-19 and our medieval responses to it after almost a year of improved treatments and new information.

For three German and Spanish economists, it's time to ask this question: have we forgotten the rationality that's meant to define

policymaking in advanced liberal democracies? Their new research paper, COVID-19 and the Political Economy of Mass Hysteria, lays out how our biological tendency to overreact coupled with a social and mass media that profit from panic, plus powerful welfare states, make mass psychosis likely, and hard to reverse.

"Governments have prohibited activities that reduce fear and anxiety, such as sports and socialising, thereby contributing to anxiety and psychological strain," one of the authors, Philipp Bagus, told *The Australian*.

"They have instilled fear in the general public to achieve political goals, exploiting the negativity bias of the human brain," he said, revealing how a leaked German government paper last year recommended scaring people to ensure compliance with health

advice. "Politicians have an incentive to overshoot the mark in their responses to a threat because they are largely exempt from the risk of possible wrong decisions and their costs, which they pass on to others," Bagus added.

Whether we've reached mass psychosis is debatable, but some seriously weird behaviours have emerged, quite beyond double-masking and the odd burst of toilet paper hoarding.

Australia and New Zealand have incurred costs equivalent to a world war — and more than any other nation has — fighting a pandemic that has killed not even 1000 people, with a median age in the mid-80s, between them. And this is widely seen as brilliant.

Having insisted early last year that lockdowns were necessary to "flatten the curve", rolling capital city "snap" lockdowns of millions of people have become the norm, at extraordinary economic, psychological and social cost, without a single person in ICU across either country.

The nation tuned into the Victorian Premier's 100-minute press conference on Monday to hear how the state was handling one new COVID case, while a few kilometres away tennis stars Nadal and Medvedev were about to square off to the sound of artificial clapping.

Two exhausted Auslan interpreters tag-teamed to convey the latest daily update from Daniel Andrews on Melbourne's "ring of steel", nebulisers, and the "highly infectious UK strain", which has barely infected a soul and killed no one in Australia or New Zealand. A day earlier more than 25,100 Victorians, on government orders, flocked to testing centres to see if they had COVID-19.

"I am proud," said Mr Andrews. Well, I'm embarrassed that so many people, the bulk of them healthy, waste hours and the \$100 it costs taxpayers for each of the 13.7 million tests carried out so far.

Across the Tasman, Auckland entered its own three-day lockdown (the science is a little different there) on Sunday. Valentine's Day diners fled restaurants mid-meal at 8.30pm, the media reported, as patrons' mobile phones, courtesy of government apps designed for earthquakes, lit up with the announcement of the city's third lockdown.

The venerable *Economist* magazine even wrote last week that 150 million people would die (three times the number killed by the Spanish flu) from COVID-19 without strong government action, a claim breathtaking in its absurdity. Globally, 2.4 million people have died from or with COVID-19, yet every year other communicable diseases kill more. A death is a death, whatever its cause, yet the world is not shut down. It's time our leaders started pouring cold water over an electorate that's worked itself into a

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lather. Welcome vaccines are not a silver bullet. Israel with a population of nine million, where more than 80 per cent of the population had been vaccinated by the end of January, is still recording about 40 deaths and 5000 new coronavirus cases a day.

The idea that all Australian adults — only 19 per cent of whom bothered to get a flu vaccine in 2009, a pandemic year — will voluntarily vaccinate themselves against COVID, a lesser threat for most, now and forever, is ridiculous. I'm not an anti-vaxxer but I've never had an influenza shot, given the minuscule risk to me.

Our leaders should level with voters that we can't remain an open liberal society without incurring further deaths and cases from COVID-19. Let vulnerable groups be vaccinated, and let everyone else get on with their life. The three authors, at universities in Spain and Chile, argue that hysteria dissipates more quickly in nations that respect civil liberties, where the minority who wish to behave rationally "can just ignore the collective panic and continue to live their normal lives", illustrating to the hysterical majority that they too can safely return to normal.

Unfortunately that's not an option in Australia or New Zealand, where the freedoms taken for granted before 2020 — to come and go, see whomever, and privacy — have been sacrificed to the god of "public health".

Pockets of sanity remain. Norway apologised to its people last June for a lockdown, promising never to do it again. Meanwhile Sweden, where deaths from all causes were no higher last year than in 2015, valiantly trudges on, letting Swedes live their lives relatively normally, as the pandemic rule book allows, notwithstanding the fact that every other nation has torn it up.

And in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. So thank god for NSW, where relative sanity has prevailed for now.