

Prime Minister Versus the Premiers: COVID and the Premiers' popularity

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Australia's status as a federal system of government is casually noted by many, but often taken for granted. Intuitively we understand that many services and infrastructure are delivered by state and territory governments, yet we look to the Commonwealth government for leadership. Many Australians who may be a little less engaged with day-to-day politics may assume that the prime minister is directly responsible for most of the policy and implementation which occurs across the nation.

COVID-19 provided a shock correction to these perceptions. In many cases, a national crisis, particularly one which is not of the Government's making, presents a clear opportunity for prime ministers to look statesman-like and demonstrate leadership. In such circumstances, the general public is more willing to accept flaws in policy responses, and get behind decisions, even if they are 'top-down' and less consultative. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, after a brief period of inertia, oversaw the enactment of strict social distancing policies, listened to relevant health advice, including the advice of the Chief Health Officer, and created a new political institution called the National Cabinet. The National Cabinet, designed as a much more agile, flexible and dynamic alternative to the former Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) approach, initially brought a sense of policy cohesion and unanimity of purpose to the national conversation around COVID-19, reassuring the public that all was in hand.

After the initial inertia, there were two policy areas where the Morrison government received broad accolades at the time, and which demonstrated considerable leadership. The first of these was JobKeeper, which entitled many businesses who faced laying off staff to a minimum salary for their workers, paid for by government. Announced in March 2020, the JobKeeper package was a massive financial commitment at the time, the largest single new initiative in post-war Australia. The policy did make a material difference to the economic conditions of the time, enabling businesses to keep staff they would otherwise have lost, and to continue to operate and deliver the products and services the economy relied on.

A related policy, which was not discussed as frequently, but likewise made a profound impact, was the doubling of the JobSeeker payment to the unemployed. This sudden and dramatic policy U-turn demonstrated that the government could afford to be more generous in looking after society's most disadvantaged if they actually wanted to. The massive queues outside Centrelink at the outset of the pandemic clearly convinced the government that a broader demographic was now being affected, including many swinging voters. The doubling of the JobSeeker payment made a material difference to those living on the margins, and it realised (for the time being at least) a long-held policy goal of many social justice advocates and their organisations, such as the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). There was a clear impact on the number of people who needed assistance from government and non-government organisations, and, by guaranteeing a degree of social security for many people not in the workforce, we may never know how many significant social challenges — even catastrophes — were averted at the time.

The second major policy initiative was the closing of the national borders. In mid-March 2020 the Morrison Government initiated a mandatory two-week quarantine period for all incoming travellers, regardless of their visa type, mode of entry, and duration of stay. This initiative had a shattering impact on the tourism industry but was broadly popular in a population which had seen the devastating early impact of COVID-19 in China, the US, the UK, Italy, Iran and Spain. The policy made many Australians feel more safe and secure.

It is worth pointing out, however, that neither of these policy settings were beyond reproach, with hindsight providing considerable scope for reflection on their impact. The JobKeeper program

was the most expensive single policy initiative in Australia's history, and while it clearly kept people in jobs and small businesses afloat, there were significant flaws in its design. The most egregious of these was the breadth of businesses who could apply, enabling numerous already-profitable companies to announce substantial profits whilst at the same time extracting money from the government. There were also arbitrary and, on the face of it, ideological decisions about who was eligible, with universities amongst the hardest hit and experiencing massive job losses yet ineligible for assistance. For its part, the JobSeeker benefit was wound back from the end of 2020, and, eventually, the new rate comprised only a small rise over the pre-pandemic level. In many respects, this represented an opportunity missed, given its clear ability to reduce demand on services, provide greater financial security for low-income people, and relieve abject poverty.

Likewise, the implementation of mandatory quarantine for incoming travellers had a traumatic impact for families who were separated for long periods of time. While the national borders were never completely closed, there were often very few (and very expensive) flights available in and out of Australia. Many Australians remained isolated from their loved ones for up to two years. The quarantine itself was mostly undertaken in hotels which were often not fit for purpose, and expensive. The prospect of spending two weeks in isolation was challenging for some people who exhibited mental health symptoms. The Commonwealth, despite stated intentions, never managed to build purpose-built facilities while the mandatory quarantine was in place, though several facilities opened in 2022 when the strictest measures had already passed. At its height, the Commonwealth completely barred all travel from India, causing distress amongst the ex-patriate community in Australia, and raising accusations of discrimination given that travel from other high-infection places had never completely ceased (apart from the initial ban on China in early 2020).

Nevertheless, many of these flaws did not receive full discussion in the public square until later, and Scott Morrison trumpeted them as major policy successes. But the tide was turning, and the first significant challenge to the Morrison Government came in the form of the vaccine rollout. As one of the wealthier countries, it was expected in 2021 that Australia would have early access to the vaccine once it was developed. In fact, Australia did have its own program in Queensland, but it was abandoned due to complications in the early trials which related to false positives. But as the vaccine duly rolled out in many comparable countries, such as the US and UK, there were very few doses available in Australia. It emerged that the orders made by the Commonwealth were not sufficient, especially when it came to Pfizer, a vaccine which was shown to be more effective amongst certain age groups. The Government ended up on the back foot, facing accusations that it had tried to save money by ordering fewer doses, and/or had relied too heavily on the AstraZeneca vaccine, and/or had not been swift enough in making its order. This was problematic for the Government since it had based its political narrative on an effective response to COVID-19. The slow vaccine rollout was compounded by a lack of other notable policy initiatives; the Morrison Government had not expected to be re-elected in 2019 and its policy agenda was minimal during 2020 and 2021.

In the meantime, a separate kind of problem was emerging for the prime minister – the premiers. The introduction of the National Cabinet had initially created a sense of political unity, but as the positions of the premiers started to differ, it became more evident that the prime minister was powerless, and the lack of authority he exhibited became more and more painfully obvious. It was the state and territory governments and their leaders in particular, who came to the fore. They implemented strong, decisive and often very popular measures, frequently defying public statements of the prime minister in the process. Australia's constitution, little known and even less understood, retains state governments' operational control over public health, law and order, education, and most emergency services. These were the weapons deployed to combat COVID-19, with declarations of state emergencies combined with a visible police presence and the hurried deployment of emergency health services to face the new threat.

Now the premiers were in charge, the public tuned in to their press conferences, hanging on every word, given that their announcements had a profound impact on people's daily lives. Morrison and his ministers, led by Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, took particular exception to the policy decisions of Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, criticising the harshness of his lockdowns. Calling for an easing of restrictions, the federal Coalition got little discernible traction amongst the broad population, with the opinion polling of the premiers, including Andrews, remaining relatively high, even whilst their people were experiencing the actual lockdowns. There was a vocal minority, extremely alienated by the public health measures, who took to the streets to protest. Such protests received thousands of participants at different times, but their leadership was diffuse, and their appeal was not to prove lasting. The propensity of various protestors

to make unpalatable remarks about politicians and public servants made it difficult for federal government ministers and backbench MPs to openly side with them (although some of them did).

Electoral Effect of Policy Decisions

This conflict between the prime minister and the premiers had a clear impact on subsequent federal, state and territory elections. The first two elections during the pandemic were held in the Northern Territory (August 2020) and Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (October 2020), both of which saw the incumbent Labor Governments returned. While the Opposition Country Liberal Party (CLP) in the Northern Territory picked up several seats, their share of the vote did not improve significantly; in the ACT the makeup of the legislative assembly remained unchanged.

By the time of the Queensland election in October 2020, the pandemic politics started to play out more clearly in the electorate. Queensland Premier Anastasia Palaszczuk drew regular criticism from the prime minister and his ministers for the border closures implemented by the state Labor Government. The border areas around the Tweed River, which is home to a sizable local population, experienced significant day-to-day disruption on account of this, and Liberal National Party (LNP) politicians on both sides of the border took the opportunity to give their concerns as much airing as possible. But there is little evidence that these critiques ever gained traction in Queensland. Queenslanders appeared happy with their state government's efforts to keep the virus out, and the Palaszczuk Government was re-elected comfortably in October 2020. Labor attracted a swing of 4% towards it and won an additional four seats, strengthening its parliamentary position significantly.

While Anastasia Palaszczuk locked horns at times with the federal government, probably the biggest and most consequential tussle which had an effect on the fortunes of the Morrison Government, was that between Scott Morrison and Mark McGowan, Premier of Western Australia. These two leaders appeared to enjoy jousting with one another publicly, with Morrison berating McGowan for the WA border closures, which were the most comprehensive and which remained in place for the vast majority of the period between March 2020 and March 2022, around two years. The WA border policy was not only remarkably effective in preventing transmission of the virus into that state, but it enjoyed extraordinary public support, delivering McGowan approval levels of around 90%, unheard of for any political leader in the Australian context. To Morrison, though, the border closures represented runaway parochialism, which restricted economic and social connectivity with the rest of the country, and paralysed a national approach to combatting the virus and getting the country going again economically.

Morrison took the opportunity to intervene when mining billionaire and sometime political candidate Clive Palmer launched a High Court challenge to the borders. Morrison, in concert with Attorney-General Christian Porter (who hailed from WA), joined the challenge, and presented material in support of it. In doing so, Morrison drastically underestimated Western Australians' approval of the closed borders. WA local media was inundated with negative feedback and even local Liberal state and federal MP constituent offices endured an avalanche of complaints. Morrison recognised how unfavourable the reaction was and made a quick U-turn but the damage was done. Further related barbs about WA being like the "croods" (fictional movie characters who refused to come out of caves) hardly helped endear him to voters in the west. In March 2021 the McGowan Labor Government was re-elected with the largest landslide Australia has ever experienced; Labor received 60% of the primary vote and won 53 seats in a 59-seat chamber; the Liberals were reduced to just two representatives.

The one Australian jurisdiction where the Liberals fared well was Tasmania. Tasmanian Liberal premier Peter Gutwein kept the borders largely closed for much of the pandemic and the state experienced low COVID-19 numbers. His personal approval ratings were high and he was aided by a state Labor party in disarray, which went through a number of leaders. He was very comfortably re-elected in May 2021, attracting 48% of the primary vote; although the Labor party lost 4.4% of its vote, it succeeded in maintaining the same number of seats. While this victory might have appeared to provide respite for the Liberals, it was won off the back of the Liberal state government in Tasmania adopting similar policies to Labor premiers such as Palaszczuk and McGowan.

No further general elections took place until March 2022, when South Australia went to the polls. South Australia's (Liberal) Premier Steven Marshall had adopted similar policies to other premiers, but had not attracted the ire of his federal colleagues, due to tribal politics. In turn, Marshall did not develop a "war of words" with the federal government, so did not draw on the parochialism which McGowan and other Labor premiers deployed. His state avoided high COVID-19 numbers, but he nevertheless lost the 2022 election, a result which was largely attributed to the poor state of the health system. He was the first Australian political leader to lose government during the pandemic and his loss occurred on the eve of the federal election, which was due just two months later. This meant that the Labor-Coalition record since the onset of the pandemic was 5-1, which did not bode well for the federal government.

The Federal Election in 2022

The federal election of May 2022 was to prove disastrous for the Morrison Government; whilst on the surface the two-party preferred swing to Labor was only 3.7%, this masked the full extent of the wipe-out of Coalition MPs which took place in much of the Liberal Party's heartland. The Liberal-National Coalition lost 18 seats in total— to a combination of Labor, the Greens, and perhaps most significantly, to a series of "teal" independents in what were previously their safest seats. While it is evident that a range of issues played a role in this result, such as climate change policy and gender, there is considerable evidence that state-by-state the Morrison Government lost traction after taking on popular state premiers.

The most dramatic impact of the pandemic was felt in WA. This was the state which saw the most sustained conflict between prime minister and premier. The Liberal vote in WA collapsed at the federal election in a similar fashion to the state vote in 2021, with a swing of more than 10% away from its primary vote. This proved most decisive to the overall election outcome, delivering the seats of Pearce, Swan, Hasluck and most notably the very safe seat of Tangney, to Labor. Only when the results in WA became clear was it evident that Labor would form government. Even the blue-ribbon seat of Curtin, former home to Julie Bishop, fell to teal independent Kate Chaney. The especially poor Liberal result in WA was largely attributed to the popularity of Premier McGowan and the unpopularity of Scott Morrison in that state.

The Morrison Government fared poorly in Victoria, where they had taken on Premier Andrews, losing the seats of Chisholm and Higgins to Labor, while the seat of Goldstein, and most stunningly, Kooyong, the seat of the Treasurer and potential leader Josh Frydenberg, were lost to teal independents. The Coalition Government was gutted in central Melbourne, and as a result mostly confined to Victoria's outer metropolitan and regional areas.

In Queensland, which had been the bulwark of the Coalition at federal elections for decades, its attack on the Palaszczuk Labor Government also proved ineffective; the Coalition lost 4% of its vote, and the seats of Brisbane and Ryan were lost to the Greens. In South Australia the Liberals lost 5% of their vote but this did not have a big impact, with just the one seat, Boothby, changing hands. Similarly, a poor performance in the Northern Territory did not cost them seats. In the ACT, their performance was so poor as to cost them their sole Senate seat, leaving them with no representation at all.

Once again the Coalition fared best in Tasmania but still suffered a swing against them of 1.7% (Labor did poorly there with a swing against them of over 6%), with independents and minor parties improving their vote. In the key marginal seats of Bass and Braddon they achieved swings towards them and they almost won the seat of Lyons from Labor. Even so, their state-wide primary vote of 32.9% was well below the Liberal primary vote of 48.7% at the state election in 2021. This demonstrated the gulf in popularity between the state and federal wings of the Liberal party, even in a state in which they did relatively well.

The remaining state was Australia's most populous state of NSW, where the Coalition had hoped to pick up seats, especially in outer-metropolitan areas, to potentially offset seats lost elsewhere. For much of this period, NSW was home to the most popular Liberal leader in the country in Premier Gladys Berejiklian. She had succeeded in keeping NSW out of lockdown for much of

the pandemic, arguing that NSW could manage COVID-19 at low levels. It is worth noting that the Berejiklian government did not attract criticism from the Federal Government when closing the NSW-Victorian border, despite the fact that the single most populous border community in Australia which experienced border disruption was Albury-Wodonga, (albeit for a shorter period). This community is highly integrated, with many shared services, especially in health. If anything, this demonstrated how partisan considerations still came first.

The strategy of the Berejiklian government worked for a while, until the arrival of the Delta variant, which was both more transmissible and more potent. COVID-19 quickly got out of control, with hospitalisations increasing rapidly. Against her natural instincts, Berejiklian locked down parts of Sydney, implementing different rules by local government boundaries. This approach itself drew criticism when low-SES suburbs were treated more harshly than the wealthier areas of Sydney. Despite the failure of her 'business-as-usual' strategy, Berejiklian still remained popular. Then the spectre of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) struck, in the form of an ongoing investigation into her former lover Darryl Maguire, who had been the Member for Wagga Wagga. The disclosure of their previously secret relationship, pursued whilst he was lobbying for various projects, shone a light on her decisions as treasurer and later as premier, and eventually forced her resignation. In her place the NSW Liberal party elected Dominic Perrottet, who was her treasurer. Berejiklian's departure and the circumstances of the lockdown and corruption inquiry, undermined any momentum that the Liberal party had enjoyed in that state, and ensured that the Coalition would find that state challenging also.

At the federal election, the Coalition was unable to make significant gains in NSW and in fact went backwards, losing 6% of their primary vote. Their efforts were hampered by messy factional politics which resulted in late (and at times poor) candidate selection, and this was as much a factor as their handling of the pandemic. Most worryingly for the Liberal Party, a wave of teal independents were elected in their heartland, especially across Sydney's northern and eastern suburbs. Winning back the seats of MacKellar, North Sydney, Warringah and Wentworth will prove a significant challenge in coming elections.

In conclusion, the net effect of how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled turned out to be fortuitous for Labor premiers and disastrous for the prime minister who took them on. The prime minister's authority was severely weakened, with the premiers taking control of their respective state response to the virus. This was demonstrated most clearly in WA, but was clearly evident in Victoria, Queensland and even in states held by the Coalition. Moreover, state leaders dominated the national narrative during the pandemic and used their operational control of key areas of government to ensure their relevance, and to position themselves as protectors of the public. Australian voters are used to seeing the federal government in control, and being accountable for major public policy decisions. The failure of Scott Morrison to assume control and take responsibility for major decisions (despite taking on multiple ministerial portfolios) was a key factor in his demise in 2022.

As a final footnote, the Andrews Government (the first state government targeted by Morrison and his ministers), went to the polls in Victoria in November 2022. Andrews was seeking a third term, and had been a particular target for anti-lockdown protestors. This election again produced a very strong result for an incumbent Labor premier, with Labor retaining 56 seats in the 87-seat Legislative Assembly. This suggests a continuation of the trend where those premiers who had taken on the Morrison government fare well at the polls, even as public concern over the pandemic has receded.

Author

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