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**Vaccination at the ‘Homebush Corral’ – what can we learn from a pandemic?**

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**Abstract**

Along with a backgrounding summary of certain key events referencing critical media analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic through Sydney 2020/2021, this essay muses on the unanticipated appeal of the NSW Health, Sydney Vaccination Hub, Olympic Park, Homebush, Sydney. Lived experience can change minds, encourage articulation of observation made extensive and shared culturally rather than insight resigned to quiescent, solitary intuition. Valuable lessons can be learnt from our Australian response to the current pandemic crisis. Observing the Olympic site hub in action, its smooth, good-humoured public service efficiency, altruistic organisational skills and the uniquely Australian brilliance of a special multicultural blend of sufficient qualified staff servicing a multicultural diaspora is uplifting, optimistic and positive.

## **Essay**

Vaccinated at the 'Homebush Corral', the Olympic site COVID-19 vaccination 'hub'. And, not feeling smug on receipt of the second jab, rather more heartened by what became an unanticipated, interesting 'tying up loose threads' of an experience.



Photo credit: David Cubby, NSW 2021 ©

## First base

The queue, an imaginary theatre of reminiscence to make most anyone from everywhere awaiting or recovering from a faint prick and dribble of medicinal sorcery, feel some compensation in symptomatic withdrawal of international travel. Situated within a tidy, well-lit, airy venue overflowing with socially-distanced people amassed in huge orderly queues.

Australians, typically originating from here, there and elsewhere around the world, compelled to repeatedly check documents and muse in horror where they had mislaid forgotten wallets and ghost luggage only to shudder-wake and realise they weren't at an airport to nowhere, other than familiar day streams in the mind, waiting to take or briefly recover from their responsibility for social health whilst 'staying safe' each unto themselves.

Otherwise, it was such a pleasing, well organised program that compared favourably against all other Australian public events remembered over past decades, most certainly since 2000 and the Sydney Olympic Games at the same site in Homebush. Once again, there appeared oodles of guides and medical staff, qualified and well briefed in whatever was needed, cheerful and politely delivering, in any required language, full service and guidance along with the goods.

Personal surety afforded by vaccination and the sense of fulfilment of one's social responsibility is a relief. However, of prime value, the lived experience of Australia's particularly vibrant, multicultural mob lends witness to the truly harmonic blend of art, science, intelligence and goodwill it takes to successfully generate and eventually, hopefully, manage post-dystopian renaissance. At its heart, now, Australia needs to express that and heal.

## Second base

The bushfire crisis from January 2020, shed a withered bloom, a gift of the Morrison government for *leadership-in-absentia*, charred overnight with a top-down, shunting over of responsibility to regional management, preferably those under a Labor administration.

As a matter of patronage, hope had been expressed by leading commercial media *in lieu* of the oncoming pandemic, that Morrison may have learnt from his mis-management of the 2020 bushfires. Public opinion for and against remained largely unimpressed with inexcusable prime ministerial 'shot-in-the-foot' statements such as: '... the PM suggested his role was one of support, not action: 'I don't hold a hose, mate, and I don't sit in a control room,' he said, speaking to 2GB's John Stanley from Hawaii. 'But I know that Australians would want me back at this time ... of these fatalities. So, I'll happily come back and do that' (Rigby, 2020).

Scotty-from-marketing's capacity for spin over action shifted centre-stage of 'drame pandémique' whilst the set fell hard upon him dodging the spotlight ... heading at shuffle-pace towards a particularly Australian burden, and opportunity, that of 'distance', and being a huge island continent tacked onto the backside of the planet, spectacular 'social distance'.

Australia tramped forward to the past with the culturally inherited enthusiasm of a convict having no realistic option for escape but to turn inwards beneath a 'Howardly' security blanket – insularity – at a time of global threat ... stop the boats, shut the borders, and weld your own mask!

It became apparent from early 2020 media notifications of COVID-19, that the virus was a 'serious issue', requiring a communal global response from an ill-prepared, politically charged and fractious world of nation states suffering the third law of thermodynamics. Right from the start, one factor surfaced fast, clear and mind-bogglingly obvious: development, manufacture and delivery of potent vaccine(s) on a rapid industrial scale rollout, promised the most effective means of containing the virus.

### **Third base**

Towards mid-March 2020, the Morrison federal government *modus operandi* swung into characteristic inaction, dashing any prospect of a change in administrative approach facing the burgeoning global pandemic. And this despite its establishment of a 'National Cabinet' comprising the nation's state and territory leaders as the 'main forum' informed by '... specialised committees focusing on rural and regional Australia, skills, infrastructure, health, transport, population and migration, and energy' (Wikipedia, 2021).

Now, it's clear across multifarious reliable sources, the abovementioned and quite a bit more, that has been 'about it' from the Morrison government, before and since the first 'National Cabinet' meeting 13 March 2020. Basically, nothing was going to happen, and that's how it stands aside from regular abysmal theatrics of B-grade marketing spin, mumbled botched non-deals for vaccine, veiled attribution of responsibility to regional administration and expert advisory panels or individuals, duplicitous distraction that include importune treatment of refugees, political squabbling within the LNP coalition, increasingly blasé pork barrelling *in lieu* of re-election.

### **Fourth base**

What's behind the Morrison government's venal, adolescent ineptitude? Laura Tingle's *ABC News* online pre-pandemic analysis documents and opines LNP government follies as self-induced, driven by neoliberal ideology with a long history of short-term, tactical projects favouring extant and imaginary beguiled voters. Tingle questioned 'a figure at the very centre of

the Government ... Did this mean the Government might abandon some of its ideological warfare against institutions?', she asked. And the reply: 'Don't be ridiculous,' this person snorted. 'If anything, this government is more ideologically driven than Abbott. They want to win the culture wars they see in education, in the public service, in all of our institutions, and they'll come for the ABC too, of course. There will be a big cleanout at the top of the public service, but Morrison will wait for a while to do that' (Tingle, 2019).

Nonetheless, cynical hollowing out of Canberra's public service has resulted in a worrying, mutant resemblance to classic authoritarian administration (Wikipedia, 2021) immediately following Morrison's familiar media-patronised and surgically applied victory for a remarkably ill-equipped cast of overwhelmingly male characters bound for failure of a 'this-won't-end-well' kind. And, of late, that kind of manifest has seen the shocking resurgence of fascist, 'populist' and nationalist governance suffered by many as well as enjoyed in frightening numbers throughout the western world. Identify and name your own 'fatal attraction'.

And, yet, how we all do suffer the resultant paucity and wilful ignorance in the absence of administrative frontline expertise, objective (scientific) advice, displaced by ill-considered decisions made independently or via 'leak free' political cabal, advice couched in terms of whatever a particular politico prefers to hear, decisions made on the basis of brash ideology rather than public good:

Public servants are now supposed to be the facilitators of policy rather than its authors, but, in fact, particularly under Coalition governments, they have often become little more than post boxes for the outsourcing of contracts to the private sector (Tingle, 2019).

## **Fifth base**

Since the abysmal failure of the first target the Morrison government set regarding COVID-19 and Australian vaccination, neither that nor a single one since has been met.

When it comes to dealing with COVID19, Scott Morrison doesn't like setting deadlines ... He tells people he learnt his lesson earlier this year when a plan to have 4 million people went belly-up, due largely to events beyond his control ... Morrison's March pledge came with qualifications but when the pledge went unfulfilled, most of the media and the government's political foes ignored them ... So, there went the prospect of any more timelines – be it for vaccine rollouts, the opening of international borders or anything else (Coorey, 2021).

So, given our major natural advantage of geographical social distance we could perhaps recover to a sort of 'new normal' and kind of 'workable degree' that allows us to blithely 'carry on' adding to the ongoing and increasingly unread truth-to-*lie* documentation describing upper-central administrative inability to cope with this or any other kind of crisis. She'll be right, mate.

In that case, what has been learnt from this past couple of very difficult years? At this point and for the foreseeable future, it remains abundantly clear that the path to containing the coronavirus is effective vaccination of the highest percentage of the population of a designated area as soon as possible. Where are the necessary boxes of vials? The only other protections available are inherently imperfect permutations of lockdown of business and domestic life, border closure, social distancing, work from home, masks and handwashing, sufficient hospitalisation to cope with all the other seriously ill as well as those suffering COVID-19.

Other factors could be drawn in to illustrate a tired, illiberal government's major failures regarding gender, ethnicity, economy, industry, trade, research, manufacture, education, welfare, diplomacy in terms of equality, sustainability, transparency, regulation, justice, resources, professional and humanitarian values. Add to the list, tell your own story. My vaccination mentioned earlier is just about done, and no side effects yet of any note.

## **Sixth base**

What remains impressive, and obvious to most everyone who attended 1 Figtree Street, Olympic Park, Sydney, is a NSW government decision, announced in early April 2021, to fund and establish the major vaccination hub, properly installed, managed and staffed with qualified expertise, medically and serviced in terms of accurate documentation, general safety and security by NSW Health after finally gaining agreement with the Federal government for the go ahead. Even so, it did come with a warning from the state government:

While the national vaccination rollout is behind schedule, Ms Berejiklian said the state was on track to reach the halfway point of its 300,000-vaccine target for October by the end of this week ... However, the NSW plan to accelerate its vaccination program was entirely contingent on the Morrison government being able to provide enough doses ... 'Our ability to do 60,000 vaccinations a week depends on us getting the supply of the vaccine from the Commonwealth,' Ms Berejiklian said. 'At the end of the day, the Commonwealth is responsible for getting the vaccine to the states ... What we're saying to the Commonwealth is once you get those doses available to us, we're ready to administer them in a safe way (*ABC News*, 2021).

Valuable lessons can be learnt from our Australian response to this pandemic. Observing the Olympic site hub in action, its smooth public service efficiency, altruistic organisational skills and the uniquely Australian brilliance of a multicultural blend of sufficient qualified staff servicing a multicultural diaspora, is uplifting, optimistic and positive. Maybe that's why there was a leading reluctance to go down a contrary path to neoliberal dogma. Witnessing, firsthand, the hub in action, reminds participants of the critical need of our capacity for a special, civilised, and sophisticated approach, primed for the next and the next crisis of whatever kind in prospect.

Preparation for what's coming is currently held in abeyance, distracted by our obsession with COVID-19. If only we'd already done it better. As Australian global citizens we have a responsibility to attend to climate change in synchronicity with serious world opinion and action. It would be great to see education as per pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary invested through taxation to function liberally, properly, fully staffed and resourced across science, humanities and the arts. Our hope is to work towards a greater inclusive culture because ignorance and willful neglect of democracy, public media, social welfare, global peace and sustainable ecologies/economies, poses just as dangerous a complex of threat as any pandemic.

The world-renowned Australian archeologist Vere Gordon Childe in his essay *War and Culture*, published in Edinburgh 1937 during the tense international lead up to the second world war, contested pro-war urgings. Childe:

... began by using reason and evidence in order to pull away the biological underpinnings of pro-war arguments. The Darwinian concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest could not be applied to human beings. Then he moved to the counter argument. "It is intelligence and its use in converting experience into science and science into extra-corporeal organs (tools and machines) that has been the mainspring of human progress." Then the deduction: fitness in the human species was not an hereditary trait but an aspect of culture. And the political point: "cultures are not competitive but complementary". The survival of the fittest culture cannot be secured by war which can only destroy culture (Irving, 2020, p, 292).

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## About the author

**Dr David Cubby** is a photographer, artist, educator, writer and thinker, based in Sydney, publishing and exhibiting photographic art works over five decades. He has travelled and worked on photo-narratives, conceptual, staged and documentary as well as teaching and writing about photography art, design, communication and media inclusive of educational and international exchange projects across Europe, Australia, China, India, Thailand, Tibet, USA, Mexico, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Poland. Documentary means to reveal that which an audience may not encounter in the normal concourse of daily life, as a 'document', a photograph. Furthermore, being 'a photographer', means living the life of a constant migrant, full of stories seeking completion between this place and that, not operating as a voyeur but, a participant returning, speaking a universal language of a global citizen. David is a key researcher in the WSU Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture (ACIAC); sits on the advisory board of the *International Journal on the Image*; is Chair of the Australia-China Creative Culture Industry Ltd; and a member of the International Scientific Board of Convergences and *Journal of Research and Arts Education*.

Samples of David's work can be found at:

<https://www.lensculture.com/david-cubby>

[https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/iac/exhibitions2/wild\\_hearts\\_and\\_warm\\_spirits](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/iac/exhibitions2/wild_hearts_and_warm_spirits)

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