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Submission to the Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade policy

The pandemic has had severe impact on global society and economy. Mitigating the threat of pandemics and other healthcare challenges requires global cooperation, including through multilateral institutions and forums such as the World Health Organisation (WHO). Australia along with other member states has a legitimate role in reviewing the actions of the WHO and providing appropriate criticism. This could include critiquing any decisions or structural problems (such as the influence of China in the organisation, or the exclusion of Taiwan) that hindered the pandemic response. Naturally, we want WHO to be the most effective and capable organisation that it could be. Given we have not faced a pandemic this severe since the Spanish Influenza in the 1920s, the people working for WHO are likely learning on the job much like the rest of us. I would not expect that they would implemented a perfect response all the way. The pandemic should be analysed carefully to learn as much as we can about how it spread and what the best response would be next time. Australia should continue to engage productively and constructively in WHO, rather than threatening to withdraw funding or membership (as the United States and Brazil are threatening to do). Such actions undermine much of the important work WHO does on the ground, including combatting diseases such as malaria. Australia did good work in arguing for and supporting a resolution in the WHO Assembly to examine the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have also seen global cooperation about the nature of the disease and working on a vaccine. Vaccine development should be for the benefit of the global community. Considering how many vaccine trials are in development with most of them likely to fail, whoever gets a successful vaccine may simply be lucky. It is in the interests of all that we agree to share the vaccine equitably to those who need it, regardless of which country gets there first. Thus, the vaccine development is based on cooperation rather than competition, which will lead to better healthcare outcomes in the end. We should be aware of our own national security and health interests. By being committed to working together, we can align our interests with the interests of the global community. Hopefully, our efforts in research and development can contribute to the global response, and we can benefit from the work of other countries.

We also need cooperation on responding to the healthcare crises, particularly in states that do not have strong healthcare systems. Australia benefits from having a stable, rules-based order. Australia has an important role in supporting nations of the Pacific region. They have underdeveloped health systems that could be overwhelmed by the pandemic. We also saw

natural disasters occurring that strained their system, exacerbated by the chaos caused by the pandemic.

Impact on Human Rights

There should be consideration of how the pandemic has impacted on human rights. Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." People have the right to support from the government to keep them healthy and secure. The Australian Government has acted well to keep Australians safe from the pandemic; ensure that we have a secure healthcare system (by flattening the curve); and provide security to those who have become unemployed during the pandemic (including financial stimulus and ban on evictions).

One concern in Australia has been the rise in racism and other abuse during the pandemic, particularly against Chinese members of our community. This is because the Chinese are blamed for their country being the origin of the virus, or people were afraid that Chinese people were bringing the virus into the country or spreading it. The virus can have a stigmatising effect. We need to resist these concerns and tensions that divide us, and ensure that we are confronting the issue as a united community. It has been good to see members of Parliament on both sides addressing this issue and speaking up for Chinese Australians.

There are human rights concerns or questions in other countries. The lockdown in Wuhan, China was an early example of a strong response, including with some people being confined to their own homes. Preventing the spread of the pandemic is a legitimate aim, and according to official numbers China was successful in stopping the spread. But we should be conscious and engaged with the human rights implications. Australia should be concerned about where pandemic response has negatively impacted on human rights, including in providing a precedent for strong government measures such as quarantine or lockdown. If there was a breach of human rights to respond to a pandemic, very likely those human rights could be abused again in another extreme situation. We should also be concerned where countries are not fulfilling their obligations to their citizens to adequately address the pandemic, such as Brazil, undermining their right to healthcare and support. We should encourage countries to take healthcare challenges like the pandemic seriously, but still respecting the human rights of their people. The response should be adequate but with proportionate restrictions.

Supply chain integrity / assurance to critical enablers of Australian security (such as health, economic and transport systems, and defence)

The pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerability of global supply chains, including on things

that Australia has relied on. Health equipment is a prominent example during the pandemic, with strong demand for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and ventilators. It is worth examining our supply chains and how they operated during the pandemic. Perhaps we should look at becoming more self-reliant, including more domestic manufacturing capability, so that we make things ourselves.

Policy and practical measures would be required to form an ongoing effective national framework to ensure the resilience required to underpin Australia's economic and strategic objectives

We need strong, long-term planning for a range of contingencies. I suspect the pandemic caught many people off guard. As a member of the public, I had not put much thought into pandemic happening in real life. Even when the COVID-19 disease was in the news, the thought of a pandemic situation with quarantine and lockdowns in Australia seemed surreal. Thankfully, a strong healthcare response was put in place early on that meant we got through relatively fine. But we know what could have happened without such a vigorous response, by looking at New York or Wuhan, China or Italy. Those are examples where the pandemic completely overwhelmed their systems. They were not prepared for an extreme scenario such as a pandemic. Even something that is low risk needs to be planned for. As an example of what *could* happen, what would we do if there was a big asteroid impact somewhere on Earth? Or, what we would do if there was a nuclear weapons exchange? These are not likely to happen, but if they did they could have severe effects that we should be prepared for. It could impact on food security, or migration, or our supply chains, or cause political destabilisation. There may not be a pandemic for some time, or there may be another one in 10 years. Either way, we need to prepare for it. And for all the other possible disaster scenarios that might happen, even ones that people are not thinking about.

Any Related Matters

The provision of foreign aid or Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is critical. It is important way for Australia to help build up resilience in the Pacific region and elsewhere, including their health systems, to respond to situations such as a pandemic. This pandemic has demonstrated we are affected by what happens elsewhere. As a wealthy and stable country, Australia should be engaged and generous with our neighbours. It is unfortunate that Australian foreign aid has been declining for some years, now comprising some 0.2% of GDP. Conversely, spending on defence has been rising to some 2% of GDP. To be clear, I support greater spending on Australian defence, including to support our peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. But I think we need a broader understanding of security. Our security relies on having a secure, healthy and prosperous region in the Asia-Pacific. That is not achieved simply through military measures, but by supporting foreign aid through healthcare, education and other development initiatives. Declining foreign aid, I believe, shows a misalignment of our objectives, the idea we can be secure despite disengaging from global issues. Australia has showed greater interest in the

Pacific region through the Pacific Step-Up program, with many good initiatives. But that has meant the cost of declining foreign aid has become from other regions, including Asia, the Middle East and East Africa, which are also in our broader region. I discussed human rights above. The sad thing is that not every country has the capacity to fully fulfil the human rights of their citizens. I am sure many leaders want to deliver good healthcare and security to their citizens, but do not have the resources to do so (particularly in an extreme situation such as a pandemic). Greater spending on foreign aid would not only be compassionate, but be beneficial for Australian interests as well. It would build up resilience in the region and good will toward Australia. With the challenges posed by the pandemic and other issues in our region (such as climate change), Australian foreign aid should be raised to the international best practice standard of 0.7% of GNI. Australian security would be best secured through fully funding both our defence force and foreign aid/ development initiatives.

There are also implications for climate change in the spread of disease and pandemic outbreaks. Climate change is likely to have an impact expanding the regions in which transmissible diseases can spread. Diseases that rely on a tropical or warm climate, for example, will have greater range in a warming world. This will place greater stress on healthcare systems that previously did not have to deal with a certain disease. Australia should be engaged in adaptation to these climate impacts, by putting resources into research and building up healthcare systems.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Cronshaw.

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