

Accounting for accountability

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Daniel Andrews, the Victorian Premier, has repeatedly tried to make the distinction between those in the community who are doing the wrong thing, who should be held to account, and those who are doing the right thing, who should be showered with congratulations. It is a distinction which may be applied more broadly to political leaders and even to public servants, corporations, the media and others who are prominent during this pandemic.



Many in the community are crying out for such accountability. The idea is appealing because it sounds like a simple framework, but in practice it is extremely difficult to apply. One aspect of the difficulty lies in establishing the elusive facts, and various public and internal inquiries have been set in place to establish what happened. But they take time to reach conclusions. Investigative journalism may offer more immediate answers.

But even once the facts have been established it remains difficult for accountability to follow because the concept is fraught with complications and moral questions.

Various helpful distinctions can be made. One is between political and personal responsibility. In the political sphere accountability must lie with ministers, especially chief ministers like premiers and prime ministers, including Andrews himself, rather than with those in more direct charge of operations like senior public servants and medical officers.

Ministers should protect their public servants and take responsibility upon themselves in public and in the parliament. Protecting public servants and being loyal to them comes at the cost of less transparency when the public is seeking to make those in charge accountable. This lack of transparency is a necessary trade off.

Political accountability in federal systems of government like Australia is also complicated by division of powers between federal and state governments. This is perfectly illustrated in the health and aged care sectors. Who can tell where accountability lies? The media is awash with various state and federal ministers for health and ministers for aged care offering explanations of what is happening. Private aged care is a federal responsibility but there are also some state-run facilities. The operation of a federal Royal Commission into Aged Care adds to the confusion about accountability.

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Sometimes it points to the federal government, at other times to the state government. Who is helping whom in aged care is a moot point, but when Australian Defence Force personnel are walking Victorian streets to enforce lockdown it looks very much like federal government help regardless of the constitutional position.

The public-private divide further exacerbates the complexity even before we get to individual accountability. This has been illustrated by the centrality of private entities, such as aged care homes and security firms during the Victorian second wave. Should the blame lie with governments or with the private sector? Responsibility must be shared but how can citizens effectively hold either of them to account?

The same accountability dilemmas are found in the divide between systemic and personal responsibility. Questions of funding, training, prior preparation and government regulation are endlessly confused. Probing questions are often batted around between jurisdictions rather than answered.

The same confusion between systems and persons has accompanied the debate about individual personal responsibility for the community transmission of the virus. Individuals who have flouted quarantine in various ways must take some personal responsibility, but public debate quickly turned to systemic responsibility because many people, we don't know how many, were driven to break the rules by their dire personal financial situation. They were without paid sick leave because of their casual status and desperately need to work to support their families. Belatedly the federal government recognized the need and brought in paid pandemic leave.

Even when citizens are found to be criminally negligent or reckless by flouting quarantine or running borders the question of appropriate sanctions remains. Opinion is divided between the merits of heavy police enforcement versus more appropriate community education and engagement. Opinion is also divided between accountability through media naming and shaming versus maintaining the privacy of individual offenders while trying to understand their motivations.

Accountability, political and/or personal, is a slippery concept to apply in any sphere. Individuals, whether politicians or everyday citizens, live in extremely complex social, economic and political circumstances. Amid the horrors of the pandemic accountability should be applied with compassion and caution, but applied none the less.



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Main image: ([Darrian Traynor](#)/Getty Images)

Taken from Eureka Street.