

## Reflections on and predictions for the Covid-19 Pandemic as 2020 gives way to 2021. Part 1

By [JOHN DWYER](#) | On [2 January 2021](#)

*At a meeting recently in Texas the chairman of the International Association for the Promotion of SARS viruses addressed an enthusiastic audience. Representatives of all strains of COVID-19 currently having their way with humans were present. "How much better is this than being confined to a dingy cave resting in a Bat", he laughed. "How smart we were to pick a host whose behaviour is helping us to multiply and see the world?"*

### Covid containment and personal freedoms

Tony Abbott has provided an essay on the Covid-19 epidemic for a forthcoming book (March) titled, *'Cancel Culture and the Left's Long March'* Here is the first line.

"Putting fear before freedom shows a lack of confidence".

The thrust of the piece emphasises that conservatives believe that there has been an exaggerated and unnecessary global response to Covid-19 that has seen the punishment being worse than the disease.

Left-wing politicians, he argues, have embraced authoritarianism and engendered an unwarranted fear that has populations accepting the loss of personal freedoms. It's typical Tony. Us would be health care reformists, could never get him interested in tackling the inequality developing in our health system during the Howard years.

I mention his opinion piece (recently published in the 'Oz'), because his views are shared by numerous conservative commentators around the world. The literally tragic results of the application of the conservative approach wherein personal freedom trumps (pun) evidence-based public health imperatives are on display in the United States – Twenty-million people infected, 340,000 deaths (one every ten minutes) overwhelmed hospitals and ICU's, 1000 plus health care workers caring for Covid patients killed for doing so, 250,000 plus new infections a day and worse to come. Many European countries and especially the UK are also struggling with an exploding third wave of infections.

In the US, encouraged by Trump's politicisation of the Covid epidemic, resistance to efforts to enforce periods of 'lock-down', mask-wearing, social distancing etc have been met with riots as citizens reject this imposition on personal freedoms. Some health officials, and even Governors, attempting to tame this disastrous epidemic, have received death threats.

Attempts in countries such as Sweden and Belgium to emphasise '*confidence*' (that Covid is no big deal and herd immunity would soon eliminate the virus) rather than '*fear*' (being afraid that unchecked Covid could kill and maim thousands) has resulted in so much avoidable death and suffering.

Could anyone really think that a US-like epidemic in Australia would be preferable to enduring the restrictions that have spared us such a scenario? Restricting *personal* freedoms has actually provided *personal* protection from infection.

Of course, our enviable situation has involved much personal suffering with many experiencing mental health issues, job losses and a painful sense of insecurity. We can recover from these current problems but we can't recover lives lost and, for many, the long term damage to health caused by a

Covid infection. Between 10% and 20% of adults who recover from the acute illness caused by the SARS-2 virus are left with seriously compromised health 12 months later.

Our economy has taken a \$300 billion hit. But our economists tell us that we can afford the loss and predict positive economic growth in the first quarter of 2021.

Tony Abbott, putting fear (in reality logical concerns) before freedom (denial of personal responsibilities in a public health crisis) has actually given us the confidence needed to tame this epidemic.

#### A year into the pandemic, do we know how it started?

After much research leading scientists agree that the SARS-Cov-2 virus evolved naturally in Bats, long known to be amicable hosts for Coronaviruses. This scenario is a repeat of the 2003 emergence of the SARS-Cov-1 virus which caused acute respiratory problems and spread through 29 countries before spontaneously subsiding.

This virus was dangerous but not as dangerous or infectious as the variant we are now dealing with. It is probable that the current SARS virus spread from bats to another animal and that it was human proximity to that animal that started the human pandemic.

It had become obvious that human behaviour in terms of land management has brought us increasingly into closer contact with animals of the wild who have long adapted to viruses we have never encountered. To ignore the danger inherent in this reality is to sentence ourselves to more Covid-19 like epidemics.

We are certain that the virus was not created by human manipulation in a laboratory and that it did not originate from the Wuhan virology laboratory. While the virus certainly spread readily among people frequenting the Wuhan 'wet market' earlier cases are now known to have occurred hundreds of kilometres from Wuhan.

The Chinese did not create the virus and by the time they recognised that a new SARS-like virus was spreading from human to human the virus was already causing infections in Europe. However, the Chinese government deserves criticism for denying the possibility of human to human transmission for about three weeks when they knew this was not so.

How much of a difference this delay has made to the size of the pandemic is impossible to say. It was nothing short of despicable for the Chinese communist party to jail a doctor who alerted the world to what was happening. He subsequently died of Covid-19 and was posthumously praised by the government! No change in this sort of behaviour followed however as is obvious from the jailing for 4 years this week of a journalist who published video evidence of overwhelmed hospitals early in the epidemic.

#### New strains of the virus

Viruses reproduce themselves so quickly that they often depart in small ways from the standard genetic 'blueprint' which, if followed faithfully would produce identical copies. Viruses have a mechanism for aborting progeny that drift too far from the original design but chance mutations that improve on the model are welcome.

Such changes often result from the battle an infecting virus has with the immune defences of the owners of the cell they wish to invade. If an improvement on the original model develops, perchance, that model will have survival advantages and soon become the predominant invader. So

it is not surprising that new strains are emerging that are even more infectious than the original model that started the pandemic a year ago.

These new strains seem to bind more efficiently to receptors on the cells lining our nose, eyes, mouth and respiratory tract. Fortunately, they have not altered the target structures for the antibodies vaccines will produce and infection with the new strains do not result in more serious disease.

Many countries are refusing entry to residents from countries where the new strains are circulating but this is unlikely to stop globalisation of the strains so rapid is the spread. A new variant has already been detected in a traveller who had arrived in Australia. The more important focus should be on improving compliance with public health measures that minimise one's chance of being infected by all strains.

The evidence to date strongly suggests that all the vaccines currently being used around the world, as well as others coming online, will be effective in preventing disease caused by these new strains.

Before discussing vaccines in part two of this discussion, it is important to realise that it will be many months before the vaccination of sufficient Australians will allow us to return to near normal pre-covid life. I say 'near-normal' for the certainty that new SARS-like viruses will emerge again, bringing with it a new 'normal' that hopefully has us better prepared for that eventuality.