

We need to change our thinking about risk

For all of 2020, Australia was the envy of the world – one of the few countries that managed to keep Covid-19 numbers down, while also meeting the challenge of economic management.

The Committee spoke constantly about the [incredible opportunity this success provided for Australia](#) to position itself on the world stage – to attract top talent, to grow its market share of international students, to secure in-bound investment – all enabled by the world seeing Australia as a country that is sensible and well managed and therefore a less risky place to be.

That opportunity is slipping away. The rest of the world is reopening, but Australia remains closed. People with family in other countries are not able to see them. The [US and the UK are now taking market share](#) of international students away from Australia. [The narrative about Australia is changing](#).

We don't want to second-guess the vaccine procurement strategy, and we remain hopeful the vaccine availability challenges will be solved, and Australia will catch up.

But what is more concerning is the apparent intent by some in Government to keep the country closed – even when there are ways to bring more people in through expanded quarantine programs, even [some say](#) after vaccines have been administered.

Covid-19 is not going away. This fact needs to sink in. Given the vast global population, and the continuing evolution of the virus itself, it will not be eradicated, but will instead become an endemic disease in the human population.

Some people will refuse to be vaccinated or have immune conditions that do not allow them to be. Some people will get sick and, sadly, will die every year – just as they do from other infectious diseases.

Australia's strategy of keeping the virus under control was precisely the right one last year. But success in the previous phases of the pandemic does not automatically mean success at later phases. It's time to begin moving to the next phase, and that includes changing our approach to risk.

Here are three key moves:

1. Open more quarantine pathways.

In the short run, Australia should establish new quarantine pathways for skilled migrants and international students.

Skilled migrants doesn't just mean software developers, it means chefs to support the hospitality industry, engineers to help build infrastructure projects, and many other professions that would help power Australia's economy.

Educating international students is [Australia's largest service export](#), while subsidising university for Australians and paying for a big part of the country's research. Just [360 international students arrived in Australia in January](#), compared with 96,420 in the previous January. Continued border closures are going to take [\\$18 billion of income per year](#) out of this part of the economy.

Government seems to be saying [no to skilled migrants until the middle of 2022](#). A better approach would be to create separate quarantine programs, funded by industry.

The federal budget includes plans to allow a [small number](#) of international students back into the country with special quarantine arrangements to kickstart the struggling university sector. [NSW has committed to pushing ahead](#), as well as putting a proposal to the federal government, which should be immediately approved and supported.

2. Change the narrative.

In a country where a single case can shut down a state's borders, the alarmist messaging on Covid-19 needs to give way to a more sophisticated approach, particularly with the rollout of the vaccine.

What we're seeing is a scientific miracle. In record time, the world's medical research community has delivered multiple effective vaccines.

Here we need some help from the media, not just the Government: instead of reporting primarily on cases of Covid-19, we should broaden our perspective to report on hospitalised / ICU cases and deaths, where they occur — and most of all, the growing rate of vaccinations. It's time to replace the dashboards we've been using. This is a position recently advocated by [NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian](#) and one that is strongly supported by the Committee.

The fears about the pandemic are understandable and real. We have watched the tragedy of Covid unfold across the world as it has taken the lives of millions of people. But with the rollout of the vaccine, now we need to change the approach.

We also need to change the narrative on taking the vaccine itself. Complacency isn't only a risk from an economic perspective — it is also a risk from a health standpoint. As it stands, many people believe there is more chance of getting a blood clot from a vaccine than there is to get Covid-19 itself. This thinking has led to Australia turning from an island of security, to an island of vulnerability. We need to remind the community that so long as

the number of vaccinated people remains low, we are one major outbreak away from disaster.

3. Make a reopening plan tied to rates of vaccination.

The priority of course is getting vaccines in arms as fast possible. But at the same time, we need a plan for reopening the country to international travel, tied to the rate of vaccination. As the most vulnerable people in Australia are vaccinated, it should be possible for people who have themselves been vaccinated in other countries to enter Australia. As more and more of the population here is vaccinated, the country should reopen further. As of now, there is no clarity on when or how this will happen.

We need a [phased plan](#) to reopen to the world, which involves:

- Establishing “immunity passport” protocols so that we can allow people into the country who have been vaccinated
- Rapid testing of arrivals into Australia
- Transparency and clarity that when everyone in Australia has been offered the chance to be vaccinated, the country will reopen to the world

Many people from many different quarters have started to say something along these lines:

- Read Treasurer Perrotet’s comments on the need for an earlier reopening date [here](#).
- Read the Business Council of Australia’s proposal for a phased reopening plan [here](#).
- Read the Sydney Policy Lab’s “roadmap to reopening” [here](#).

It means something to be a nation of immigrants, and it means something to be globally connected: it means we have an obligation to care about Australians who are stranded overseas, just as we have an obligation to care about Australian’s who have family abroad. It may be politically expedient to remain closed after the tragedy we all witnessed this year, but it’s time to change the approach.

It’s time to “get out from under the doona.”

A year after the PM said he wanted us to “get out from under the doona”, we’re still there. While the politics of keeping borders closed may be working for Government for the time being, serious long-term damage is being done to the country. This is not something to be complacent about.

Australia cannot remain the [hermit kingdom](#). It’s time to think differently about risk and make plans to reengage with the world.