

COVID Brain Fade at the Australian Elections. No Candidate Is Mentioning the “Troubling Issue of the COVID-19 Pandemic”

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Global Research, May 19, 2022

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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It’s the last week of an election between the uninspiring and the unspeakable. Australia’s conservative incumbents – the unspeakable ones – are even desperate enough to concede to a lack of popularity. Dislike us, but for heaven’s sake, vote us in. The times are wretched, the cost of living is rising, and we are going to look after you in the spiral. The opposition, in contrast, is being stingy on detail and sparing on scope. Memories of 2019 continue to traumatise the Australian Labor Party.

Scouring the election platforms, statements, and town hall debates, is a glaring absence of one particular field of policy. Virtually no candidate or major political party is mentioning that troubling issue of COVID-19 and the global pandemic. That was the dark past, and, like released jailbirds, voters find themselves preoccupied with other matters.

Sporadically, mention is made about the Morrison government’s tardy ordering and supply of COVID-19 vaccines – at least in the initial phase. At that time, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, rather infamously, dismissed the slow rollout. This wasn’t, he opined, a race.

In [his first campaign video](#), Morrison burnished his own credentials as a warrior against COVID-19, having been responsible for saving thousands of lives. (The States and Territories, all far more engaged in the matter than Morrison ever was, are ignored.) But the [primary message](#) was that of, “A choice between an economic recovery that is leading the world, and a Labor opposition that would weaken it, and risk it.”

Despite Australia’s enviable record, the emergence of the furiously transmissible Omicron variant and a death toll this year surpassing the combined figures of 2020 and 2021, have seen a departure from previous policy. As Raina MacIntyre of the Kirby Institute [remarked](#) in January, Australia “swung from one extreme in pandemic control to the other – having great control of COVID, to now having the world’s highest rise in daily cases.”

Scenes of chaos ensued. The vulnerable had to queue for hours as testing centres were overwhelmed. A number of such centres were also closed, often without good reason. The Commonwealth and State governments [tinkered with definitions](#) on eligibility regarding testing, all the time refusing to expand capacity. MacIntyre was distinctly unimpressed. “There was no planning for expedited third-dose boosters, expanded testing capacity, rapid antigen tests, hospital in the home, opening of schools or even guidance for people to protect their household when one person becomes infected.”

None of this has made a difference in the political platform, nor, it seems, in voter interest. The [COVID brain fade](#) has well and truly set in. According to [data generated](#) by the ABC’s Vote Compass, a mere 1 per cent of Australians consider COVID the most important issue in this election. Vulnerable members of society are being seen as [“collateral”](#) to the overall scheme. Living with the virus has also meant suffering and even perishing from it.

The only party making much of COVID-19, and not from the perspective of praising vaccines and sound pandemic management, is the United Australia Party. Bankrolled by the quixotic mining magnate Clive Palmer, millions have been spent on media campaigns that have seen no discernible shift in the polls.

By default, health officials and experts have become crying Cassandras and the concerned oracles. Virologist Stuart Turville has observed, with exasperation, that the federal election campaign [has been afflicted](#) by “a case of COVID Fight Club. Don’t talk about it.” Future policies on the subject are virtually absent. “What will happen if we don’t get our third or fourth dose?” wonders Turville. “Will we see the death rate creep up from 40, to 60, to 80 before we start to talk about this again?”

Another figure of some woe and worry is Burnet Institute director, Brendan Crabb, who [claims](#) that politicians and governments have resolutely kept their “heads in the sand”. There was a dangerous sense of “COVID now”. Continuing high rates of transmission was “bad for business”. The longer health impacts were also being neglected. “How many of the 350,000 plus active cases in Australia right now will have chronic impacts? Overseas data suggests 20 per cent of them.”

Epidemiologist Nancy Baxter, based at the University of Melbourne, is another who can always be relied upon to deter any emerging complacency. “We’re at a point,” she gravely [states](#), “where COVID is now one of the major killers of Australians, and probably by the end of the year is going to be one of the top three.” She adds further lashings of doom. “And with increasing case numbers, new sub-variants [will be] coming in. This may drive it even further, which would have a bigger impact.”

If the current mood prevails till May 21, we can expect little purchase from such attitudes at the ballot box. Fiscal responsibility, the consumer price index, climate change and the China bogeyman, are likely to feature ahead of the most disruptive pandemic in a century.

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Featured image: A woman walks her dogs in Fitzroy Gardens park as police and defence force officers patrol in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia [David Crosling/EPA]

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