

Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Ms Vaughn Brandenburg

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YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Dear Committee,

I hesitate to write this as a public facing document, as I work in the emergency management sector and am conscious that my personal views may differ significantly from that of my colleagues and employers. However, the personal impacts of the extensive public health measures have left a deep and enduring scar on my family. My experience has left me feeling marginalized, socially isolated and, frankly, fearful of my government.

As you receive these submissions, I hope you can appreciate the difficulty in shaping appropriate wording around each person's experience. It is hard to know where to start, how to frame it all or how to clearly articulate the psychosocial impact this has had on each of us. It is almost too big to even talk about, and so many of us have neither the energy nor the personal time and space to grieve the last year and evaluate where we are now.

I will try to prioritise based on what is most important to me – my children, my family and their futures. I am a mother of two small children. My children have witnessed changes throughout this year that I would have never wished them to see in their lifetime. They have had to continually adapt to their environment rapidly closing in on them. The loss of school, daycare, playdates. The loss of community, which is generally such a strong presence around us. Most importantly, the foundation that we have been able to provide at home has been shaky at best, and destructive at the worst of times. We, like so many others, are experiencing the mental impacts of uncertainty and fear, and this ultimately falls on the shoulders of our children.

I often ask myself if this would be the case if we were in the United States, where I am originally from. If we lived in fear of a virus rather than fear of confinement, how would I be viewing Victoria's response differently. I am painfully aware of the reported COVID-19 numbers. The statistics in the US and worldwide (as we also have family in the UK and South America). I do not wish that on Australia, but I also do not believe that Victorian Government response has been appropriate or commensurate with the changing risks.

Victoria set a precedent early. A decision was made on the route we would take, based on the information at that time, and it did not seem to appropriately alter as further information became available. The manipulation of fear felt like a useful tool for control, and that sense is ever growing and all consuming. I implore you to question the stagnant nature of that path.

Why, after clear and extensive data was present identifying highly vulnerable cohorts, was a blanket approach taken to the response? What if the considerable resources that have been invested in lockdowns and recovery from lockdowns (financial, social, medical, etc.) had instead been immediately dedicated to protecting and supporting vulnerable groups? How would Victoria look now? How would those vulnerable groups been better protected? And, for those of us at low risk, how would we have been able to reasonably avoid the momentous, life altering impacts of these measures?

I spent months not telling people that I was struggling. I spent months not talking about the impacts within my home – on our finances, on our relationships, on our resilience. I spent months believing that I was selfish and lacking empathy for even questioning the lockdown measures. This is a direct result of the Victorian Government messaging, and to that, you can attribute so much of the increased anxiety, depression and isolation across Victorian communities. Even as the public housing towers were surrounded at night – creating unimaginable trauma for so many, and the hotel quarantine situation unravelled, Government told us that they knew best. Government told us that we were selfish for questioning the rules. Told us that we didn't know any better. Told us to fear our neighbours and turn against anyone in our community that didn't. Government told us to break down our social structures – not just physically distance, but trust and rely only on them.

We lost our community resilience, we lost our personal independence and resilience, and now we lose hope that we will ever regain those things. How can we ever rebuild and recover if we live in "COVID Normal"? How can our local small businesses reinvest their time and energy if there is the chance that Stage 4 is just a case or two away? What is the point anymore?

Government distracted us from the fact that there were consistent mismanagements and poor decision making. They pointed the finger at community as the ones to blame, rather than recognising and apologising for their own mistakes. Now we point the fingers at each other. My partner, who has a valid medical exemption from wearing a mask, gets abused in the street when he's with our children. I speak about my fear for a mandated vaccine to be enforced on our children and our lives, and I get labelled hateful things. I commend those who have stood up for the right to protest and peacefully gather, and I am outcasted for it.

This is what the measures have done. They have broken us and they have set the lives of our children back too far to even grasp at this stage. We need this to come to light. We need to see the full picture of these measures and Government's response. History cannot be one-sided, or it will repeat. The next Coronavirus, or other emergency as declared by government, and we will fall to the same pattern. There will be the same abuse of power, if not worse. Please, examine how this could have been done better. Please report on the full extent of consequences from Victorian Government's response. Please ensure that future events better protect those most at risk and better enable a holistic response.

Finally, I ask that you consider how Government can rebuild this lost trust. Throughout this year, we have continued to pay (financially and emotionally) into a system that has offered us little in return. We have had little voice in any matter and have been completely disempowered throughout the process. I ask that you push for a return to democracy.

Thank you,
Vaughn Brandenburg

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Signature:
Vaughn Brandenburg