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New Strategy, New Voices

Time to Change Victoria's Crisis Approach?

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Summary

Key Points

This Policy Brief makes the following central points:

- (a) Daily appearances by a single political leader, with or without senior officials by that leader's side, may be viewed as serving one of the cardinal principles of crisis management. However, we might consider whether the Victorian Premier's strategy of appearing daily is working.
- (b) There is a risk that any head of government, who is always going to be understandably political, may not be able to sustain the unusually high levels of public faith – that we see at the beginning of many crises – for any extended period of time.
- (c) Ballooning COVID-19 cases raise issues about whether the Government is hearing internally from all the voices it should be heeding and whether other people need to be brought into the room.

Recommendations

This Policy Brief makes five recommendations:

- (a) **Broadening Daily Appearances:** A shift in communications strategy should be considered: for instance, having senior ministers more often accompanying the chief health officer might be preferable.
- (b) **Employing the Premier's Power Strategically:** Shifting the pressure from the Premier to appear daily would allow the Premier to weigh in selectively, preserve his authority, use it strategically, and reduce the risk of communication errors arising from exhaustion.
- (c) **Considering Personnel Changes:** Personnel changes, even during a crisis, are sometimes justified. Understandable government fears that personnel changes in the midst of a crisis might suggest some level of dysfunction and discredit the leadership are manageable.
- (d) **Taking the Long View:** Even where personnel changes are controversial and highly topical at the time they occur, events and public attention tend to move on swiftly.
- (e) **Having the Widest Range of Voices at the Table:** At a time of crisis governments need contestable advice. Governments and the public benefit from officials and advisors who are prepared to present ministers with comprehensive options that have been tested against counterpoints within departments, agencies and stakeholder groups.

New Strategy, New Voices

Time to Change Victoria's Crisis Approach?

1. Introduction

This Policy Brief addresses whether the Victorian government's communication strategy and crisis team needs a re-think in light of recent experience.

Fans of the cult TV series, *The West Wing*, will recall an episode where the Republican candidate for President, Arnold Vinick, played by Alan Alda, decides to front a marathon press conference when a catastrophic nuclear accident occurs in his home state of California. Rather than evade the issue, since Vinick supported the power plant's commissioning, he adopts a proactive strategy of answering questions until all journalists are too exhausted to ask further questions.

It's a famous scene that, I suspect, many draw upon for inspiration when confronted by formidable political challenges.

2. Communicating in a Crisis

I don't pretend that Premier Daniel Andrews, or any of his state and federal counterparts, has this scene in mind when giving his long daily press conferences. But as Victoria's COVID numbers have careened from deeply concerning to catastrophic in the space of only days, we might take the time to consider whether the Premier's strategy of appearing daily is working.

It's symptomatic of underlying problems that may be compromising the Government's management of Victoria's second outbreak.

To the Premier's credit, there are compelling reasons why you would front the media each day.

You can argue with some force that it demonstrates a willingness to face scrutiny for as long as journalists are prepared to ask questions.

One might also contend that daily appearances by a single political leader, with or without senior officials by that leader's side, might also serve one of the cardinal principles of crisis management. That principle dictates that there be in place a single source of truth where critical information is concerned. As exalted as this principle is, there is a risk that any head of government, who is always going to be understandably political, may not be able to sustain the unusually high levels of public faith – that we see at the beginning of many crises – for any extended period of time.

As the current COVID-19 pandemic has amply demonstrated, before too long the early urgency that subordinates typical political differences throughout much of the community, eventually yields to differences of opinion over management of the crisis, communications and personalities that inexorably emerge.

There is a risk that any head of government, who is always going to be understandably political, may not be able to sustain the unusually high levels of public faith – that we see at the beginning of many crises – for any extended period of time.

It's not fair to say that the daily appearance of the same head of government will cause this to happen. But equally, it can fairly be assumed that it will accelerate such a process.

This might best explain growing concerns that the Premier, as with any political leader, risks forfeiting the authority of his office to weigh in at key moments when his influence can be deployed to shift public sentiment when most needed or reinforce messages that no other person in government can emulate.

3. Re-thinking the Strategy

With Victorians suffering from mounting compliance fatigue, the Premier might better preserve his authority, use it strategically and avoid the mistakes that exhaustion exacts like his comments this week on aged care homes.

If this isn't being discussed in the Premier's private office, it should be. A strategy that sees senior ministers more often accompanying the chief health officer might be preferable to allow the Premier to weigh in selectively.

None of this, of course, deals with the many underlying causes of Victoria's outbreak. If the Premier's daily appearances symbolise similar *modus* internally, then this may explain the Government's halting capacity to manage COVID numbers. As the crisis has got away from the Government, it's increasingly evident that questions about personnel are growing louder.

More importantly than whether anybody should be removed at this point, ballooning numbers raise issues about whether the Government is hearing internally from all the voices it should be listening to and whether other people need to be brought into the room.

4. Changing Personnel Mid-Crisis?

Health Minister, Jenny Mikakos, no doubt has one of the hardest jobs in the country today. But more than one person has suggested to me in recent days that Jill Hennessy's return to the portfolio would be one option enthusiastically welcomed in some quarters. That won't happen, although it's worth remembering that even former US President Lincoln went through a number of generals before he landed upon Grant. Personnel changes, even during a crisis, are sometimes justified.

In any crisis, one of the great epic battles will often be between the mission and the message. It can reasonably be assumed that were you able to manage any crisis under "lab" conditions without the encumbrances and pitfalls of modern political discourse and highly pluralistic media platforms, both perfectly legitimate features of our democracy, you would adopt a very different approach.

You would plan for and execute strategies across the near, medium and longer term, having regard only to the very best advice from the experts - who are not up for re-election. Faced, however, with the realities of governing in the modern age, managing the message has assumed greater importance. That said, it need not be assumed that the mission and the message are inherently discordant.

Take the current crisis. In at least one key respect, the mission and the message are decidedly concordant. The success of stay-at-home restrictions depends heavily on public confidence in the premise and the willingness of citizens to obey public health orders that are foreign to anything they are likely to have experienced in their lifetimes.

As the crisis has got away from the Government, it's increasingly evident that questions about personnel are growing louder.

The obvious fear that any government might have with changes in personnel in the midst of a crisis is that it might suggest some level of dysfunction that tends to discredit the leadership involved. Depending on the circumstances, this could in fact be a sound judgment.

The more important question, however, is whether the substantive efforts to manage a crisis warrant such changes. And while the concern about perceived dysfunction shouldn't be blithely dismissed, it is not an immutable principle of crisis management.

Even where personnel changes are controversial and highly topical at the time they occur, events and public attention will tend to move on swiftly.

5. Having the Widest Range of Voices at the Table

Such changes are important at a time like this because governments need contestable advice. Governments and the public benefit from officials and advisors who are prepared to present ministers with comprehensive options that have been tested against counterpoints within departments, agencies and stakeholder groups. With no imputation against existing officials who are working strenuously, the Government may need to look seriously at bringing in extra firepower.

Interestingly, even before the advent of COVID-19 and all of its profound repercussions, an important

Ultimately, if the right capability is in place to best maximise efforts to overcome any great crisis, it's hard to conceive of a media strategy that would usurp that priority over all other competing options.

And even where there is no scandal, major changes in personnel don't necessarily unsettle public opinion and support. One of the most recognisable faces in the country during the early stages of the current crisis, was Professor, Brendan Murphy. As Australia's then Chief Medical Officer, he appeared almost every day over several months and then left to become the Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Health. I don't believe anyone would contend that his departure did anything to disrupt health strategy at the national level.

Ultimately, if the right capability is in place to best maximise efforts to overcome any great crisis, it's hard to conceive of a media strategy that would usurp that priority over all other competing options.

In fact, it's just as possible that personnel changes, even at ministerial level, might be the right decision to ensure the best capability is put in place, while at the same time being the very catalyst needed to galvanise public sentiment.

area of interstate cooperation in disaster management was already being explored. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements was established earlier this year.

It's worth noting that its terms of reference include looking into changes that are needed to Australia's legal framework for the involvement of the Commonwealth in responding to national emergencies, including in relation to the following:

- (i) thresholds for, and any obstacles to, State or Territory requests for Commonwealth assistance;
- (ii) whether the Commonwealth Government should have the power to declare a state of national emergency;
- (iii) how any such national declaration would interact with State and Territory emergency management frameworks;
- (iv) whether, in the circumstances of such a national declaration, the Commonwealth Government should have clearer authority to take action (including, but without limitation,

through the deployment of the Australian Defence Force) in the national interest.

Should Commonwealth responsibilities expand into the field of emergency management, including pandemics, the broad discretion of state governments over many matters could be affected accordingly. There is no reason to think this can't extend, even indirectly, into areas of human resources.

None of this is to say that all governments are not already committed to having the right people around the table. It's just that a broad choir is more likely than anything else to deliver the kind of harmony then public craves, and needs, at such times.

Consultations with trade unions at the Federal and state level have been effective and re-assuring. There can be no doubt that their involvement has assisted in support measures that have saved jobs and businesses from being lost right across the country in the tens of thousands.

This week, the head of the Victorian employer Chamber of Commerce and industry complemented consultation with the Victorian state government over measures to support business impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

We've seen at both the federal and state levels that momentous decisions are being made with the smallest windows of opportunity that often require corrections and adjustments.

Whilst it would be impossible to guard against error and misjudgement in such circumstances, and unfair to expect perfection, having stakeholder input and a strong interagency presence within government, will give emergency measures a much better prospect of success than those that have not had the benefit the coordination comment process within government, and broader stakeholder consultation throughout the community.

In no small irony, I noticed the appointment recently of former Chief Officer of the CFA, Joe Buffone, to the position of Executive Leader of the Victorian Aged Care Response Centre. Mr Buffone was one of the casualties of the CFA wars of recent years. It says something about Victoria's public service that good people were shown the door only to return in the State's hour of need.

6. Conclusion

There are no doubt many reasons for why Victoria's second outbreak is proving to be so bad. But the lesson for governments everywhere, who we should all want to see succeed in their work in suppressing this virus, should be making sure that they are hearing from a wide range of strong and informed voices.

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Fig 1 Communicating in a Crisis

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Governing During Crises Series

Governing During Crises is a research theme established by the School of Government at the University of Melbourne. The series seeks to develop our understanding of governing in the face of different types of crisis, at a time when Australia has recently faced the bushfire crisis, is currently addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and faces even larger and longer-term challenges including climate change.

This Policy Brief series aims to distil academic research into policy analysis and clear recommendations, drawing on the cutting-edge research taking place at the School of Government and the University of Melbourne more broadly, as well as the School of Government's extensive global networks. Selected briefs will be produced in collaboration with the COVID-DEM project (www.democratic-decay.org), which examines how the pandemic is affecting democracy in Australia and worldwide.



Author

John Pesutto is a Senior Fellow at the School of Government at Melbourne University, a panellist on ABC Melbourne's *The Party Line* and was Victoria's Shadow Attorney General from 2014 to 2018. An edited extract of this paper was published in *The Age* on 1 August 2020.

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