

Australia: Victorian Hotel Quarantine Inquiry finds “failure of governance”

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The Board of Inquiry into Victoria’s disastrous Hotel Quarantine Program delivered its final report on December 21. Genomic testing has revealed that the state’s second wave of COVID-19, which resulted in 801 deaths and more than 18,000 infections, almost certainly originated in two of the hotels used to quarantine returned travellers.

Predictably, the report is a whitewash. Justice Jennifer Coate’s recommendations call for little more than further investigation “as to the lines of accountability and responsibility between Departmental heads and Ministers.”

Premier Daniel Andrews, former Health Minister Jenny Mikakos, Police Minister Lisa Neville, and Jobs Minister Martin Pakula all gave evidence that they were not involved in the decision to engage private contractors, rather than police or military personnel, to provide security at the hotels.

Coate described this lack of accountability as a “failure of governance,” finding that it was “at odds with any normal application of the principles of the Westminster system.”

Andrews has insisted he will not step down despite the “systemic governmental failings” revealed in the report, claiming that to do so would be an act of “cowardice.”

Instead, Andrews suggested that the report vindicated the sudden resignations of Mikakos, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) boss Kym Peake, and Department of Premier and Cabinet Secretary Chris Eccles during the course of the inquiry.

Coate drew attention to the complete lack of preparation, at state and federal level, which led to the hotel quarantine program being developed in an entirely ad hoc fashion over just a couple of days.

Coate made reference to a 2011 report, prepared following the global outbreak of swine flu in 2009, which identified voluntary quarantine as a problem and recommended that quarantine and isolation policies be clarified.

Despite the recommendation, “none of the existing Commonwealth or State pandemic plans contained plans for mandatory, mass quarantine.”

The failure of successive state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National, to address the issue in the nine

years between the report and the current pandemic demonstrates the futility of this type of investigation, which mainly serves to defuse public outrage.

In addition to the lack of long-term planning, nothing was prepared in the first months of this year, even as it became clear that COVID-19 posed a significant threat.

Australian governments, like their counterparts around the world, sought instead to play down the danger of the coronavirus in order to minimise any impact on the profits of big business.

Although Australia’s first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on January 25, and the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic on March 11, the discussion around establishing a mandatory quarantine program did not begin until after a public outcry following the debacle involving the cruise ship Ruby Princess.

New South Wales Health allowed the ship to discharge almost 2,700 passengers in Sydney on March 19 without medical screening, despite clear signs that infection was spreading on board. At least 900 COVID-19 infections and 28 deaths occurred as a result.

The bipartisan National Cabinet finally decided on March 27 that a mandatory hotel quarantine program was necessary. With no prior plan in place, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR) scrambled to establish the hotels by midnight the next day.

The DJPR contracted 29 hotels (20 of which were ultimately used), three private security companies and three cleaning companies to carry out the program.

One of the security companies, Unified Security Group, was used although it had been previously rejected from the State Purchase Contract panel of approved contractors.

The report could not explain why this was done, although Coate noted that “there was a preference within DJPR for Unified.” This preference was clearly expressed by the fact that the company was awarded 11 of the 20 hotel contracts despite having a smaller workforce and charging more than the other two firms.

Katrina Currie was tasked with hiring the security firms.

On March 31, a procurement specialist warned her that, “to have a non-approved firm providing security and effectively enforcing government regulation at quarantine sites off the back of some emails and phone calls presents significant risk to individuals involved.”

Currie’s response noted that her choice was based on the speedy response of Unified to her initial inquiry as well as the fact that, “Unified is an Aboriginal-owned and controlled organisation and has worked with DJPR on related social procurement initiatives.”

Currie later denied that the indigenous ownership of Unified was a factor in its selection, but her decision to devote almost one-third of her statement defending the contract by reference to the ethnicity of the company’s owners suggests otherwise.

The company continued to endear itself to the DJPR because of the “willingness by Unified to do the work asked of it, despite some of that work being outside the role it was engaged to perform.”

By contrast, one of the other security firms, Wilson Security, raised numerous safety concerns. Guards working for the company did not readily comply with requests to perform duties outside the original job description.

The role of private security was ill-defined from the beginning and guards hired did not receive appropriate training in infection control. The online training provided was “not based on advice specific to the risks at hotel quarantine sites” and therefore entirely inadequate.

In her report, Coate devoted few words to the number, training, or conditions of the health workers involved in the program, although several nurses gave evidence at the hearings.

Nurses were not selected for the program based on any particular level of experience or training in infection control. Complex responsibilities such as providing mental health care were assigned at random, and nurse-to-patient ratios of 1 to 100 were common.

Desperately understaffed and under-resourced, these health workers were forced to improvise procedures for record keeping and assessing the condition of new arrivals.

When nurses or security personnel raised concerns or made suggestions about how procedures could be improved, these were shrugged off by the bureaucracy. The workers were removed from the program or left of their own accord due to the unsafe conditions.

Like the security guards, the nurses were hired on a casual basis, meaning increased risk of virus transmission if they were also working shifts at other medical or aged care facilities.

Coate did draw attention to another aspect of the program that revealed the Victorian government’s irresponsible

attitude towards the public health crisis. The DJPR decided which hotels would be used without any specific guidance from the DHHS on whether they were “suitable from an infection control perspective.”

The DJPR engaged three professional cleaning companies to provide deep cleaning, but they were initially only contracted to clean the rooms of those guests who had tested positive for COVID-19. This was particularly problematic given that the testing of guests was not mandatory.

Most cleaning of the quarantine hotels was left up to hotel staff or subcontractors, who were not informed that they were potentially cleaning rooms recently occupied by infected guests.

Compounding all of these flaws in the hastily-developed scheme, the quarantine hotels were not placed under the control or supervision of infection prevention and control experts.

As Coate noted, “nothing short of constant reinforcement, supervision and oversight from those with the necessary expertise was what was required in such a highly infectious environment.”

This problem is certainly not limited to the hotel quarantine program.

Australian governments have repeatedly dismissed calls by prominent epidemiologists to mandate the use of masks and impose stricter lockdowns because they would interfere with the profit-driven demands of big business.

The Victorian Hotel Quarantine Program, catastrophic as it was, is merely one stark example of the refusal of the Australian ruling class to protect the population against the threat of COVID-19.



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