Former Australian PM Abbott weighs the cost of saving 40,000 lives and decides the price is too high

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In a prominently featured opinion piece for the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper last week, former Liberal-National Coalition prime minister Tony Abbott bluntly spelt out the deadly implications of the "herd immunity" pandemic policies that have been adopted by the entire Australian political establishment.

Abbott's article was framed as an extended lament over the cost of the limited mitigation measures put in place by Australian governments in the first two years of the pandemic.

He wrote: "[T]he case for any extensive lockdowns rests on the dubious assumption that life itself is more important than getting on with living; and that it's reasonable for governments to let fear of death justify massive restrictions on how we live."

Abbott stated: "Obviously, every death is sad; and no one should make light of a disease that can still kill the very old and the very vulnerable.

"Yet in contrast to the extreme anxiety that greeted every Covid death in 2020 and 2021, as a society we seem to have taken this year's Covid deaths pretty much in our stride given that the average age of the victims has been 82 and they've invariably had a range of other health conditions."

Abbott noted former prime minister Scott Morisson's claim that his government's COVID policies saved 40,000 lives in the first two years of the pandemic. Morrison's assertion was based on no firm scientific evidence, and covered up the fact that his government sought to undermine even limited safety measures at every turn. To the extent those policies did save lives, the Morrison government and its Labor Party successor have over the past year sought to catch up with the mass deaths witnessed around the world.

Nevertheless, Abbott placed the lives of those 40,000 people on the financial ledger, measuring them against the cost of COVID mitigation policies.

He wrote: "Given the federal government alone spent some $350bn on measures associated with Covid, this equates to roughly $10m per life saved, or about $2m per 'quality life year' gained, on the optimistic assumption that the average victim had five good years left."

The vast amount of that money was spent on business subsidies, which amounted to major cash handouts. Some of the largest corporations netted tens of millions from the federal JobKeeper wage subsidy, even as they continued to make substantial profits during the COVID crisis.

The implications of Abbott's statements are nonetheless chilling. Proponents of "herd immunity" hark back to the nostrums of eugenics, under which the lives of the elderly and the vulnerable are deemed to be of no great importance, and even to be a burden on society.

It should be noted, moreover, that the claim that only the very elderly have died of COVID is false. A study by the Australian National University earlier this year estimated that more than 1,500 children had lost at least one parent to the disease.

Abbott's statement spells out the homicidal response of the Australian ruling elite to the pandemic. In April 2020, Australia's governments rejected a scientifically-grounded elimination strategy, despite expert advice that it would save lives, on the grounds that it would be too costly.

The mitigation policy then introduced, including border restrictions, occasional school closures and some lockdowns, was only adopted by governments as a result of demands from key sections of the working class, such as teachers and health workers, as well as epidemiologists. The fear was that an open "let it rip" program in the opening stages of the pandemic would provoke mass opposition threatening the ruling elite's

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fragile and widely-despised political set-up.

The mitigation program always included a host of pro-business exemptions, including the designation of broad sections of the workforce as "essential." It nevertheless limited Australia's COVID deaths to fewer than 2,300 in the first two years of the pandemic.

That compares with more than 12,000 deaths this year, after all of the country's governments dispensed with the successful safety measures and "reopened the economy" last December.

Abbott's article bemoans not those mass deaths, but the restrictions that prevented them from occurring in 2020 and 2021. That is now a broad-based position, echoed by figures from both major parties, the Murdoch media and other official outlets.

In the first two years of the pandemic, similar positions were advanced by sections of the ruling elite, as they brayed against the limited lockdowns and safety measures governments had been compelled to implement. The major financial papers published "death calculuses," weighing the "cost" of saving lives.

In August, 2020, Abbott himself delivered a speech decrying a "climate of fear" which had made it "hard for governments to ask 'how much is a life worth?'"

But then, such positions were associated primarily with the extreme right. They were widely condemned as a blatant subordination of life to financial interests, including in the pages of the official press. At the time, Australian government leaders at the state, territory and federal levels continued to claim that their key priority was protecting the lives and health of the population.

Those assertions always contained major falsehoods, with the very same governments undermining safety measures at every turn.

What is most striking about Abbott's latest intervention, however, is that he is now articulating the positions of the entire political and media establishment. That a former prime minister would write about the excessive cost of saving tens of thousands of lives has passed without critical comment in official circles.

Above all, Abbott spelt out in blunt terms the policy being implemented by the federal Labor government. In the four months since it scraped into office on May 21, some 6848 deaths have been reported. That compared with 8,077 COVID fatalities in the 27 or so months prior to Labor's election.

The Labor government has built upon the criminal "reopening of the economy" that it facilitated while in opposition last December. Over recent weeks it has presided over the end of mask mandates on flights and public transportation, some of the last vestiges of infection control.

Labor also spearheaded the end of daily COVID reporting earlier this month, in a measure aimed at burying the pandemic altogether. It slashed the isolation time and federal payment for COVID-infected individuals from seven to five days. The next stage under consideration is the abolition of any isolation requirement, which would formalise the existing state of affairs where the virus is allowed to spread without hindrance.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese may not have made comments as blunt as those of Abbott, but all of his actions are along the same lines. He never mentions the hundreds of COVID deaths every week. His social media accounts are littered with maskless pictures celebrating super-spreader events such as football matches.

Labor ministers publicly took note of the fact that Long COVID is crippling a substantial proportion of the workforce, resulting in 31,000 workers calling in sick every day of June. Their sole concern was the impact on the economy, i.e., corporate profits, and their response was to accelerate the lifting of the handful of restrictions that remain.

The adoption of the "herd immunity" policies associated with the extreme right by the entire political establishment, shows that to defend their most basic rights, including to health and life, workers and young people must strike out on a new political road. That is a fight against the Labor government and the capitalist system that it defends.

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