



# SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

# the Beacon

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EDITORIAL

Of all the services stolen from the people due to privatisation, public housing is perhaps the most notable, given that housing is the most fundamental of human rights. Affordable housing is essential in a genuine democracy. Public housing was never meant to be for 'families with difficulties' but for all families whose income prohibits them from purchasing or renting in the private-for-profit industry. Successive governments since the slum clearances of 1938 have introduced policies to divert people from public housing rental to private ownership. Their arguments were, as usual, based on their commitment to 'anything private is better than public'. It was a deliberate attempt by conservative interests to turn tenants into property owners or, as was said at the time, 'into little capitalists'. Vince Gair, a former Queensland premier, stated: 'Home ownership develops a sense of responsibility in the individual and is an antidote to any of the "isms" that may exist here'.

No government of any hue has invested responsibly in public housing since the Whitlam government. Indeed, public housing has been denigrated, downgraded and vilified by successive state and federal governments since then. The concept of social housing has been a trojan horse in the provision of housing for the people. Under this nonsensical label, private 'not-for-profit' services have been allocated the resources once provided for public housing, and the result has seen massive profits for developers, a loss of public land and property and a burgeoning privatisation of our housing in not-for-profit hands. In other words, we have been conned!

However, public housing is not the only service stolen from the people via privatisation. Privatisation has seen the decimation of all the wonderful services built up by our forebears sold off to mainly foreign capital, resulting in higher prices, poorer delivery and a destruction of the skills we once had to provide for ourselves. Privatisation

of housing, healthcare, energy, banks, indeed privatisation of most of our former services has been a disaster for the people and a windfall for private enterprise.

The pandemic has done one positive thing for the world: it has exposed the failure of the global capitalist system to provide for the growing needs of the majority. It has exposed the nature of neoliberalism and the imposition of 'austerity', the excuse required for those in power to place the burden of any economic crisis on the backs of those least able to afford it.

The pandemic has exposed the urgent need for Australia to become more self-reliant and to rebuild our destroyed manufacturing industry. It has exposed the failure of our privatised health system. It has sharply exposed the need for a whole new look at how we want our society rebuilt post virus.

If we don't take the initiative in demands for change, if we don't recognise that those in power are already planning how to cut back the social program post virus, we will once again have imposed on us burgeoning poverty, increased homelessness and a critical housing crisis, and the continued privatisation of our important infrastructure.

There must be restored in the Australian psyche the understanding that 'public' means pride in our achievements and 'privatisation' is simply theft of our precious resources by wealthy pirates who are simply interested in gouging the maximum profit from our property. Governments don't own our public facilities – we do – and we haven't authorised their sale to the highest bidder. Post pandemic will be the time for all Australians to stand up and demand a new deal.





# Aeroplanes and COVID-19:

## Another contradiction of global capitalism

The outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002 illustrates how air transportation can rapidly transmit infectious disease.

While a growing number of critical scholars acknowledge that global capitalism constitutes the overarching driver of anthropogenic climate change, one of the smaller elephants in the room has been the aviation industry.

The number of aeroplane flights worldwide has been growing – at least until COVID-19 forced reluctant governments around the world to temporarily greatly restrict the number of flights. Air travel has played a key role in turning a localised epidemic in the Wuhan district of China into a global pandemic.

Prior to this unfortunate event, aircraft flights were contributing 5–6% of greenhouse gas emissions, not only in the form of carbon dioxide, but also nitrous oxide, methane and ozone.

Despite repeated claims by the airline companies that they were gradually turning to more fuel and aerodynamically efficient aircraft, this efficiency was offset by a rise of 5% in aeroplane flights per annum (in keeping with the Jevons Paradox, or rebound effect, where the economical use of fuel results, not in diminished consumption, but in an overall increase).

This rise was even higher for affluent people in China, India and other developing countries, who started to emulate the habits of their counterparts in developed capitalist countries.

The 2016 documentary series *City in the Sky* asserted that 'every day, 100,000 flights criss-cross the globe with more than 1 million people in the air at any time'.

Aeroplanes of many sorts (commercial, military and private) have become an integral component of modern cultural and social life, and a source of tremendous profit-making: they are an integral component of the capitalist world system.

### PROFIT-MAKING

Aeroplanes serve to transport both human actors and commodities to keep world systems functioning. However, they do so with dire environmental, climatic and health consequences.

The human actors who rely on air travel include: business people, politicians, diplomats, celebrities, the super-rich who own multiple homes in far-flung locations, sports teams, tourists, academics, international university students, other students studying abroad for short-term stints, and even United Nations climate change conference delegates, environmentalists and climate activists.

The list seems almost endless but, with some exceptions such as low-paid migrant workers, refugees and rank-and-file military personnel, it consists of relatively affluent people.

Furthermore, air cargo constitutes the underbelly of the airline industry. Its operations often occur at night and at secure inaccessible facilities, bonded

warehouses and multimodal logistics centres often located some distance from passenger terminals.

Corporate globalisation has resulted in a growing reliance on air cargo to quickly transport manufacturing components and products.

Last but not least, militarism is highly dependent on aircraft, whether it is in the form of propelling jet fighters, drones or transporting military cargo and personnel around the world to engage in imperialist ventures.

Historically, there has been a powerful nexus between the aviation industry – whether aircraft manufacturing, or the airlines – and airport construction. This nexus has been strong around the world because of the military significance of aviation, particularly for the United States, but also Britain, Germany, the former Soviet Union and Russia today, and most recently China.

Governments often subsidise aircraft manufacturing, be it military or commercial aeroplanes, as well as commercial airports and military air fields and even aircraft carriers.

While infectious diseases can be transmitted via ship and train travel, aeroplane flights have elevated the spread of diseases to a new level.

The internal environment of the aeroplane is an unhealthy one, with little oxygen, the germs carried by both crew and passengers, and low level electromagnetic radiation from flight equipment and X-rays encountered at high altitudes.

The outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in late November 2002 lasted until July 2003 and, according to the US Center for Disease Control, infected more than 8098 people and killed 774 people as it spread from China to at least 20 other countries.

It illustrates how air transportation can serve as a rapid transmitter of infectious disease.

Tragically, by comparison to SARS, the role of aeroplanes as well as cruise ships in spreading COVID-19 has been exponentially more profound, turning a local epidemic starting out in Wuhan into a global pandemic.

As of April 15, Johns Hopkins University reported nearly 2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, resulting in 126,761 deaths, with 493,658 people having fortunately recovered.

Other than China where COVID-19 started, thus far the disease has largely impacted on developed capitalist countries: at the time of writing there are 609,422 confirmed cases in the US, 174,060 in Spain, 162,488 in Italy, 132,210 in Germany and 131,362 in France.

While further study is needed, developed capitalist societies are the most reliant on air travel, both domestically and internationally. Only time will tell how COVID-19 will adversely impact the health of people in developing or peripheral capitalist countries such as India, Indonesia and those in sub-Saharan Africa.

In contrast to the developing capitalist countries, with their mixed quality of health infrastructures, the impact on the developed countries could be devastating in ways that are still difficult to ascertain.

Ironically, the coronavirus pandemic has forced governments around the world to ground the vast majority of international flights as well as many domestic flights.

## NATIONALISATION

The International Air Transport Association terms the pandemic as ‘apocalypse now’.

Virgin Airlines in Australia is seeking a bailout from the federal government. Qantas chief Alan Joyce, reportedly the highest paid Australian CEO, opposes the bailout unless his company receives one too, on the grounds that Virgin is mostly owned by government-supported foreign airlines.

A far preferable strategy would be to allow Virgin to collapse, nationalise Qantas (as it once was), sack Joyce, shift to a much-reduced national airline, and create a nationalised, solar-powered railway system that greatly improves on existing state rail systems.

But implementing such measures would require political will, which is missing in both the government and the Australian Labor Party.

It is far too early to say when humanity will return to some state of normalcy, or a post-COVID-19 world.

One possible scenario is that a consolidated airline industry may seek to rise like a phoenix, offering perhaps relatively inexpensive flights, particularly with a low oil price, at least in the short run. Such a scenario has occurred previously in a highly competitive industry.

While individuals may opt not to fly or to reduce their flying – an option some have pursued – work and career demands have made aero mobility central to global capitalism.

We need to move beyond aeroplanes as much as possible, but such an effort will have to be part of creating an alternative ecosocialist world system – one that is committed to social justice, real democracy, environmental sustainability, a safe climate and the preservation of human life and biodiversity.

Perhaps in time solar-powered aeroplanes – beyond the small experimental ones that exist – will become a reality.

The global socioeconomic, ecological, climate and health crises that are the by-products of global capitalism require us to re-examine much of what we do in terms of work and leisure, what we eat and consume in general, what sort of dwellings we reside in and how we move about our planet.

A simpler way for the affluent would, at the very least, entail minimising the use of aeroplanes and motor vehicles. It would also ban cruise ships which, while not transporting nearly as many passengers as aeroplanes, are even more environmentally damaging and, so far in this pandemic, have led to devastating health consequences for passengers, crews and people onshore.

Hans Baer is the author of *Airplanes, the Environment, and the Human Condition* (Routledge, 2020).

'These are extraordinary times,  
whatever normal is it won't be  
what normal was' /STAN GRANT



# WHAT CAN WE EXPECT POST COVID-19?

The coronavirus pandemic has held up a mirror to our society. Those who believe that they hold power in their hands and that those around them are without significance may not yet be able to understand that millions of people have got it. The dominant 'free market as god' ideology of neoliberalism has failed.

Nesrine Malik explains the spectacular failure of both the UK and the USA to deal with the coronavirus pandemic: 'Anglo-American capitalism, pursued by both right and centre-left parties, rooted in small government and powered by exceptionalism, had dismantled the state [10 May 2020 *The Guardian*].

The market could not deal with the crisis. The despised and weakened state had to step in to save lives and the economy. The free and equal myth of democracy has been busted under the impact of virus deaths. The new aristocracy of wealth has been shown to be as parasitical and selfish as the aristocracy it replaced. The corruption of the political system has exacerbated inequality in the midst of the pandemic.

In 'The US response to Covid-19 has lavished wealth on the rich', Miles Kampf-Lassin lays it out. \$350 billion was allocated to the Small Business Paycheck Protection Program but it went mainly to corporations. 'As a result, only 5% of all small

businesses were able to access those funds, and over 30 million are still struggling to receive relief' [9 May 2020 *Common Dreams*].

We are witnessing the exposure and the desperation of the old order through its spokespeople, like Trump, Boris Johnson, Bolsonaro and our Australian equivalents in organisations like the IPA, the source of Liberal Party candidates, with its 'secret' donors like Gina Rinehart. The worship of the True God of the Free Market is ringing hollow. The immediate consequence of neoliberal policies can be seen in the distribution of the death rate. We are not all in it together at all.

## THE UK

In the UK, under Tory austerity, with a stripped-out NHS: 'The death rate among British black Africans and British Pakistanis from coronavirus in English hospitals is more than 2.5 times that of the white population, according to stark analysis by the Institute of Fiscal Studies' [1 May 2020 *The Guardian*].

Owen Jones pointed to the class nature of the pandemic. It targets those with pre-existing health conditions, which are more likely to be found among poorer Britons. It has largely spared those who can earn their keep from their living rooms using Zoom, quite unlike those whose working lives make human



contact an unavoidable necessity ... More than 200 construction workers had died by 20 April, and as one trade unionist puts it: 'How many of these died for that luxury flat, retail unit, football stadium or hotel?' [12 May 2020 *The Guardian*].

## THE USA

In the USA there has been a terrible cost in lives. 'American states which have now lost more than 200 people per million citizens to Covid-19 comprise New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Louisiana, Michigan, District of Columbia, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Illinois, Delaware and Indiana ... The developed countries outside Western Europe with which the USA should be comparable have all kept deaths per million below eight (8.0) [11 May 2020 Alan Austin *Daily Kos*].

A Yale epidemiologist, Gregg Gonsalves, co-director of Yale's Global Health Justice Partnership, suggested it is 'getting awfully close to genocide by default'.

'What is happening in the US is purposeful, considered negligence, omission, failure to act by our leaders ... Can they be held responsible under international law?' [7 May 2020 *Huffington Post*].

The pandemic has exposed the usually hidden racial contract that is a pillar of US society. 'The racial contract is a codicil rendered in invisible ink, one stating that the rules as written do not apply to nonwhite people in the same way ...'

'The terms of the Racial Contract,' Mills wrote, 'mean that nonwhite subpersonhood is enshrined simultaneously with white personhood.'

'Once the disproportionate impact of the epidemic was revealed (on Afro-Americans and Hispanics) to the American political and financial elite, many began to regard the rising death toll less as a national emergency than as an inconvenience' [8 May 2020 Adam Serwer 'The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying' *The Atlantic*].

Diversion from responsibility for rocketing death rates and inability to deal with the crisis is becoming the main avenue of failing governments in their efforts to escape the consequences of their stupidity. This could bring about a dangerous if short-lived period of increased racism and conflict. Armed white supremacists have already invaded a state legislature in Michigan. China is being blamed in the USA, not Trump, Muslims are being blamed in India and African immigrants are being targeted in China.

## AUSTRALIA SUBSERVIENT ALLY OF THE USA

Although Australia, a long-term subservient 'ally' of the USA, may take longer to realise the need for fundamental transformation than more independent states, the Labor opposition is already calling for change. Labor leader Anthony Albanese has called for a new focus on fairness in the recovery from the coronavirus crisis, naming housing construction and local manufacturing as two priorities in his economic agenda. Dismissing talk of a 'snap back' in the economy, he endorsed the need for 'stronger government action to create permanent jobs and an industrial relations system to lift productivity and share the benefits'.

'We must revitalise high-value Australian manufacturing using our clean energy resources' [11 May 2020 *The Age*].

There are signs that support for such a revised approach is also emerging in the USA. Politicians from Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) to Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn) are opposing the market fundamentalism of the Republican Party and many Democrats. They are advocating wealth taxes, universal healthcare, plus 100% cover of pay cheques for the unemployed and monthly cash payments to all Americans during the pandemic.

'Such proposals may seem far-fetched. But then, think of the strategy currently being carried out by the federal government: sacrificing American lives in the service of accumulating capital. It's the status quo that's radical. If there was ever a time to upend it, it's now' [9 May 2020 'The US Response to COVID-19 Has Lavished Wealth on the Rich' *Common Dreams*].

There are indications that the prestige of the US has been severely damaged by its inability to handle the pandemic, and as Shaun Carney noted: 'We've learnt that we have less in common with America and Americans than we thought' [10 May 2020 *The Age*].

China's prestige has also been diminished.

Australia may be shifted, willingly or unwillingly, towards a greater emphasis upon national sovereignty and a more independent role in the world, under the impact of the coming changes. Economic transformation and a genuine attempt to redress the atrocities created by growing inequality go hand in hand and the intellectual struggle against the old order is well underway. As Stan Grant commented: 'These are extraordinary times, whatever normal is it won't be what normal was' [11 May 2020 *ABC*].



# WE ACKNOWLEDGE

Traditional owners of the Kulin Nation, past Warriors, Elders past and present.

# SUPPLICATION

Grant me:

strength in my weakness

faith in my doubt

patience in my anxiety

comfort in my distress

light as I walk in darkness

the right path when I lose my way

the courage to look at my weaknesses and failings

the will to do good and not to judge others

the respect and love for and goodwill towards my fellow beings

the compassion to reach out to others' sufferings

the humility in my every thought and deed

simplicity and contentment

understanding in my perplexities

the gift of saying the right things

the generosity to share my good fortune with others

the insight of not placing myself above others

the courage and tranquillity to face any adversity

the perspicacity of seeing things in their true light

the power to stand up against injustice, cruelty and inhumanity

the open heart to receive grace, love and beauty.

By **Peter Lim**, humanist for 40 years

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# COVID-19 LESSONS NOT YET LEARNT

*For weeks now COVID-19 has dominated the world's media. We've had endless facts, advice and commentary on the virus itself, the number of deaths and infections, the level of testing, the do's and don'ts of hygiene and social distancing, the flattening of the curve, and much else. But on the underlying significance of the pandemic remarkably little.*

Yet, the pandemic is itself the symptom of a deeper ailment which holds crucial lessons for the human future. Four lessons merit close attention.

## BE PREPARED

The global mayhem caused by COVID-19 in just a few short weeks – in excess of 3 million confirmed cases and well over 200,000 deaths – has exposed how ill prepared most countries are to deal with the threat. Yet the pandemic was foreseeable and foreseen.

In the last century the number of infectious diseases, like SARS, HIV and COVID-19, has increased almost fourfold. Contributing factors include the dramatic rise in the world's population, especially since 1950, the growth of densely populated cities, greatly expanded and faster modes of transport, and the unprecedented growth of the world's livestock population.

In a globally interconnected economy with long supply chains, the spread of infectious diseases and our ensuing vulnerability are entirely predictable. Several studies and reports over the past 15 years have viewed a global pandemic involving a new respiratory disease as virtually inevitable.

Yet, while many East Asian governments put their experience of the SARS epidemic to good use, the same cannot be said of the world's most advanced economies in Europe and North America. Here we have seen insufficient hospital beds and intensive care units, serious shortages of personal protective equipment endangering health workers, and inadequate COVID-19 testing capacity.

The chaotic response of many governments, notably in the US and UK, resulted in a wave of potentially preventable deaths. The lack of a well prepared, adequately resourced, flexible and widely accepted national plan greatly impeded a timely response.

In the absence of such plans, coupled with access to adequate and timely medical supplies, efficient testing facilities, and comprehensive training of health workers, history will almost certainly repeat itself.



## COLLABORATE OR PERISH

Effectively harnessing a nation's human and material resources is essential but not enough. A pandemic is a global phenomenon that calls for a global response.

Sadly, COVID-19 has exposed the flaws and fragility of our international institutions. Years of neglect, inadequate funding, rise of chauvinism and populist politics, great power rivalries, and the open hostility of US administrations have taken their toll.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has for years experienced immense financial stress. Its 2018–19 budget, supposedly servicing global health, was some \$6 billion, whereas the state of Victoria with a population of just over 6 million, had a health budget of close to \$20 billion.

To make matters worse, the WHO's response to COVID-19 has come under sustained criticism by a US administration more concerned to find scapegoats for its shortcomings than solutions to the pandemic crisis.

Compounding the problem has been the UN Security Council's eerie silence. US-China rivalry and futile point-scoring prevented it from even meeting for the first three months of the outbreak. Even now, it has yet to agree to any meaningful resolution.

Other international bodies have fared no better. The G20 have done little, other than to suspend debt repayment by the world's poorest countries for the next six months. As for the G7, its most recent meeting ended with the call for a review of the WHO's performance and a few glib words on the importance of international cooperation.

Especially disappointing has been the European Union's inability to develop a coordinated response to the pandemic. Worse still, it singularly failed to assist its two worst hit members, Italy and Spain, in their hour of greatest need. It remains to be seen whether the tardy apology offered by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the \$850 billion stimulus package for the worst affected member states will be enough to repair the EU's tarnished reputation.

The lesson is clear. Unless multilateral institutions are carefully nurtured, adequately resourced, and allowed to exercise an effective coordinating role, they will wither away, and so will our capacity to manage not just future pandemics but the many other international crises on the horizon.

## A MOMENTOUS SHIFT FROM WEST TO EAST IS UNDERWAY. WE MUST FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO LIVE WITH IT

The virus COVID-19 was first transmitted to a human in China, but its most horrific spread to date has been in Europe and the United States. How do we explain the contrasting response?

Western governments and media, especially in the English-speaking world, have vehemently condemned China's lack of transparency.

China's early handling of the COVID-19 outbreak is certainly not beyond reproach. Provincial authorities were at first reluctant to disclose the severity or scale of the outbreak. For its part, the central government was initially disinclined to contradict local assessments. But once the scientific evidence became clear, action was swift and decisive.

By mid-January, all movement in and out of Wuhan, the centre of the epidemic, and 15 other cities in Hubei province – home to more than 60 million people – was stopped. Soon after, strict quarantine measures were applied to a great many cities covering some 760 million people. Whether one accepts China's official figures or not, one thing is clear. Within a couple of months, the pandemic was brought under control.

But China is not alone. Authorities in other Asian countries, using diverse strategies and tools, have also proved highly effective. South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and Malaysia in particular, despite their proximity to and high levels of interaction with China, have significantly limited the number of deaths and infections.

**The following statistics are highly revealing. As of 25 April 2020, the COVID-19 mortality rates (number of deaths per 100,000 people) for Taiwan, China, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Malaysia were all below 0.5. For Germany it was 6.95, while for the US, UK, France, Italy and Spain the mortality rate ranged between 16.95 and 48.21.**





## UNLESS CORRECTIVE ACTION IS TAKEN, THE UNPRECEDENTED GLOBAL LOCKDOWN, NECESSARY AS IT IS, WILL WIDEN THE SOCIOECONOMIC GAP WITHIN AND BETWEEN COUNTRIES.

The trendline is clear. The economically successful countries of Asia have done remarkably better than their counterparts in Europe and North America. Some have attributed their relative success to authoritarian enforcement of rules. But authoritarianism is hardly the defining feature of the political landscape in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan or even Malaysia. What distinguishes these societies are certain cultural mores and traditions that emphasise respect for authority, discipline, and a deep sense of collective responsibility.

The East Asian response to the pandemic is just one more sign of a wider shift from West to East. The West-centric world, in which first Europe and then the United States held sway, is slowly but steadily giving way to a new world in which other civilisational centres are emerging or re-emerging.

By virtue of its history and geography, Australia is uniquely placed to adapt to this historic transition. But whether the political class has the foresight and skills to oversee this cultural as much as political transition is another matter.

### EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED WITH EVERYTHING ELSE

Ours is a deeply interconnected world. Within a few weeks of the outbreak, the complex linkages between health and economy became all too apparent.

Quarantining and social distancing measures soon brought large swathes of economic activity to a standstill, and with it has come the accelerating loss of jobs.

However, all are not equally affected. Those living in poverty or on low incomes are more likely to catch the virus and to be hard hit by the ensuing economic shock. These are people who live in overcrowded accommodation, are obliged to travel to work, suffer from underlying health conditions, or lack affordable access to healthcare.

The impact is especially acute in poorer countries, which may have higher levels of health illiteracy, fragile health systems and weak social safety nets. Executive Director of the World Food Programme, David Beasley, has warned that 'more people could potentially die from the economic impact of COVID-19 than from the virus itself.'

Unless corrective action is taken, the unprecedented global lockdown, necessary as it is, will widen the socioeconomic gap within and between countries. Economic hardship will in turn heighten the potential for popular anger, and with it the likelihood of racism, stigma, hate speech, and political extremism.

The ecological implications are just as sobering. Though the precise origin of COVID-19 has yet to be established, much evidence suggests a link between pandemics and the money-driven trade in wild animals. By alienating them from their natural habitats and keeping them in highly stressful conditions these practices conform to a wider pattern of exploitation that ignores the ecological equilibrium upon which all life depends.

One other consequence of COVID-19 is worth noting. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres told a closed meeting of the Security Council on April 9, there is a real danger that the pandemic will hinder conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East and Africa, stall crucial peace processes, and worsen human rights violations in several countries. Significantly, his appeal for an immediate global ceasefire has yet to gain universal acceptance.

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought home to us with brutal clarity the reality of a world in profound transition – a world in which practices and policies long accepted as the norm are no longer working. A post-COVID-19 return to a US-led neoliberal order is simply not plausible.

In Australia, as elsewhere, the current emergency presents us with a rare opportunity to reinvigorate the national conversation and breathe new life into our institutions – not just political but economic, cultural and educational. We need an Australia that places equity and ecological balance at the heart of its economic policies; that is internationally minded but aware of the pitfalls of uncontrolled globalisation; and that can creatively navigate the East-West cultural divide, cementing old friendships while forging new ones.

A tall order no doubt! But what is the alternative? 

Joseph A Camilleri OAM is Emeritus Professor, La Trobe University and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

# CUBA – THE CONVERSATION

**Some countries seem to be weathering the coronavirus pandemic better than others. One country that moved rapidly to deal with the emerging threat was Cuba.**

Cuba has several advantages over many states, including free universal healthcare, the world's highest ratio of doctors to population, and positive health indicators, such as high life expectancy and low infant mortality. Many of its doctors have volunteered around the world, building up and supporting other countries' health systems while gaining experience in emergencies. A highly educated population and advanced medical research industry, including three laboratories equipped and staffed to run virus tests, are further strengths.

Also, with a centrally planned, state-controlled economy, Cuba's government can mobilise resources quickly. Its national emergency planning structure is connected with local organisations in every corner of the country. The disaster-preparedness system, with mandatory evacuations for vulnerable people such as the disabled and pregnant women, has previously resulted in a remarkably low loss of life from hurricanes.

However, COVID-19 presents differences. Cuba's lack of resources, which hampers recovery from disasters, also contributes to a housing shortage that makes physical distancing difficult. And the island's poor infrastructure creates logistical challenges.

Also, the pandemic comes at a particularly difficult time, as tightened US sanctions have sharply cut earnings from tourism and other services, deterred foreign investment, hampered trade (including medical equipment imports) and obstructed access to international finance – including emergency funds.

Given these strengths and weaknesses, Cuba provides an interesting case study in responding to the current pandemic.

Cuba's reaction to the coronavirus threat was swift. A 'prevention and control' plan, prepared in January 2020, included training medical staff, preparing medical and quarantine facilities, and informing the public (including tourism workers) about symptoms and precautions. So, when the first three reported cases were confirmed on March 11, arrangements were in place to trace and isolate contacts, mobilise

medical students for nationwide door-to-door surveys to identify vulnerable people and check for symptoms, and roll out a testing program.

On March 20, with 21 confirmed cases reported, the government announced a ban on tourist arrivals, lockdown for vulnerable people, provision for home working, reassignment of workers to priority tasks, employment protection and social assistance.

As issues arose, the Cuban government adjusted its response. For example, when face masks and physical distancing proved insufficient to keep public transport safe, services were suspended and state and private vehicles and drivers were hired to transport patients and essential workers. And to reduce crowding in shops, the distribution system was reorganised and online shopping introduced. Physical distancing enforcement has also been stepped up in response to instances of non-compliance.

With 766 reported cases by April 15 (68 cases per million of population), Cuba is around the middle of the range for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The quality of data varies hugely between countries, with some governments substantially under-reporting cases. Cuba's reported cases are based on tests using WHO protocols. Two Caribbean neighbours, using similar methods, provide useful comparisons. The Dominican Republic, the most closely comparable in terms of population, income and tourism dependence, shows how the disease might have spread if measures had been less effective. In contrast, Jamaica seems to have succeeded in halting the spread of the disease.

Jamaica's initial response was similar to Cuba's, but fewer cases had slipped into the country undetected before tourism was halted. Having identified 16 outbreak clusters now, Cuban authorities are still struggling to prevent a take-off.

What happens next in Cuba will depend largely on the amount of testing. An indicator of commitment to this task is the ratio of tests to reported cases. According to available data, Cuba (with 18,825 tests done) leads the region with a ratio of 25:1, compared with 16:1 in Jamaica and 3:1 in the Dominican Republic (Vietnam and Taiwan have over 100:1, Germany 10:1, US 5:1 and UK 4:1). Around 40% of Cuba's recent positive results are from asymptomatic cases.

If Cuba's contact tracing and testing regime gets the disease under control, its experience might offer lessons for controlling the pandemic, and more of its doctors will be available to help with the effort to combat the pandemic abroad.

But tests are expensive, at around US\$50 each, so if its hard-fought battle against COVID-19 is prolonged, Cuba's lack of access to finance could prove fatal. 🕯

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According to 'Buzzfeed': The **GREAT FLU EPIDEMIC OF 1918** affected over **ONE THIRD** of the entire world population. Total number who died of the flu was between **50–100 MILLION**. Seventy per cent of these occurred in just over 10 weeks in 1918. In the US alone 675,000 died in one year. As World War I entered its fourth year (1918), the US government was intent on keeping up morale. So, there was a lot of pressure to stifle negative news, and that included news about the virus. Wilson made no statements about the virus, and the surgeon general told Americans there was 'no cause for alarm'. **NEARLY 13,000 PEOPLE DIED IN PHILADELPHIA** alone, largely because of the government's secrecy in an effort to keep up morale.

### CURRENT PANDEMIC WORLDWIDE (AT TIME OF WRITING)

CORONAVIRUS CASES:

**3,820,689**



DEATHS:

**265,094**



## from our readers



### DEAR BEACON EDITORS

Thank you – the editors, writers of *Beacon*. Your editorial 'For whom the bell tolls' is inspiring. So good if it could be widely read.

I can receive only print copy – but enclose subscription – for the future.

**M Pawley, Qld**

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With thanks

**T Collins & G Stubbs, Qld**

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