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Daniel Wild:

Hello, and welcome to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. I'm Daniel Wild from the Institute of Public Affairs. Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott is your voice. Each week, Tony and I discuss mainstream Australian values, the future of the Australian way of life, family, community, and Australian culture. More importantly, we want to hear from you. That is why we have the Tell Tony Abbott segment at the end of each show where you can ask Tony your questions on whatever topic you want. Phone in to the Australian Heartland Hotline on 03 9946 4307 to leave your question. You can also go to the website, australia.ipa.org.au, where you can join the Australian Heartland Community and sign up to receive this podcast sent to you each week, along with special analysis from the Institute of Public Affairs. Thank you for supporting the Australian way of life, and now to this week's episode.

Hello, Tony, and g'day to all of our listeners. It's wonderful to be back for another episode of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. There's so much to discuss. And finally, finally, we are at the beginning of the end of the lockdowns, the debate about lockdowns, and zero COVID elimination is finally shifting and there is a lot of good news to talk about. Tony, it's lovely to be with you again.

Tony Abbott:

Yes, Daniel, it's good to be with you too. I'm out of hotel quarantine, and as you say, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, finally. It's been a long, dark tunnel, but we do have light at the end with the Prime Minister's determination to ensure that the National Cabinet plan really is implemented and the states really do move right away from lockdowns once we get to 70% double vaccination, and once we get to 80% double vaccinations, there are no more border closures. So look, I feel encouraged. You can argue the toss about how necessarily lockdown ever were, certainly after the initial lockdown. I think you could make a case for saying they've been overused, but certainly we just have to grit our teeth now for the next few weeks, confident that at least in New South Wales, and I suspect elsewhere as well, once we get the 70%, we've seen the back of lockdowns.

Daniel Wild:

Indeed, it's very good news. And you mentioned the prime minister, Tony, and in a press conference delivered on Monday, Scott Morrison said this, and I quote, "These lockdowns, once we reach our goal, that is the vaccination goal, we know on the scientific, medical, and economic advice do more harm than good." We've also seen a big business groups and a number of epidemiologists over the last couple of days talk about the problems of lockdowns and that we need to move away from trying to eliminate the virus. Tony, I just want to get your reflections on why you think it may have taken so long for these groups and individuals to reach that conclusion?

Tony Abbott:

Early on there's absolutely no doubt, Daniel, there was a great deal of public anxiety about this virus. Excuse me. I think when people saw on their TV screens the problems with the Italian hospital system back in March of last year, there was a wave of fear and anxiety verging on panic. So I can very much understand that people wanted to be kept safe and they thought lockdowns were the best way of keeping them safe. I think it's been more and more clear as time has gone by that once the vulnerable have been protected, the risks to the rest of the community are relatively modest, and certainly once we've got vaccination levels up to 70% or thereabouts, the risks to the rest of the community are really quite low. It's pretty clear that the AstraZeneca and the Pfizer jabs reduce rates of hospitalisation by about 90%, and they perhaps reduce the risk of death even more. So we can be very, very confident that our community is as safe as it can be.

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Daniel Wild:

The public mood and sentiment has changed towards lockdowns, in part driven by a recognition of all the costs that they are imposing upon us. And amongst those costs that have been the most substantial have been on small business. And some research that we undertook recently at the Institute of Public Affairs estimated that about 540,000 jobs in small and medium enterprise had been destroyed in just 21 days from the end of June into early July, while big businesses added over 13,000 jobs, which I think is a very concerning development, given the important role that small businesses have to the Australian way of life. Tony, what does this decline to small business say about the future of Australia?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I'm always optimistic about Australia, Daniel. Apart from everything else there's no point being pessimistic because that just makes a bad situation worse. Keep calm and carry on. That's always got to be our motto, and if you can carry on with a smile, better still. But obviously it's incredibly sad, tragic even, when you think that those tens of thousands of small businesses that will never reopen, those hundreds of thousands of small businesses that have been closed down by government fiat, they represent hundreds of thousands of people's hopes and dreams, often their life savings. They've often put their homes on the line to get those businesses up and running. And those hopes and dreams will all have been crushed by this.

Now, because we're pretty resilient, and the sort of people who go into small business tend to be pretty tough, they're the people who are, more than most of us, prepared to have a go, most of them will come back, but not all of them will. And that's the tragedy of all this. Now, we know that almost no one has a magic carpet ride through life, and we have to accept that life will have its downs as well as its ups, but it is sad to see so much psychic pain and suffering, so much economic loss, as well as everything else, some of which, arguably, has been unnecessary and over the top actions by government.

Daniel Wild:

It has. And I just want to draw you out on that, a fraction, Tony, if I could, because your government pursued many ambitious reforms, whether it was to do with the budget, tax, agriculture, federation, and with any reform agenda for that to succeed, it requires support of the community at large, and big business and their associated lobby groups play a very important role in public debate. Now, many big business leaders have been in favor of lockdowns, or have at least been silent on opposing them. And I just wanted to get your insights into the role of big business in public policy in Australia, and how you think that has changed over, say, the last two or three decades.

Tony Abbott:

That's a good question, Daniel. I think there's no doubt that we've seen a lot of woke capitalism in recent times. There are all sorts of possible explanations for this, but I suspect a part of it, at least, is the fact that the union dominated super funds have such a significant influence over boardrooms these days, given that they form quite a large part of the shareholder base of most public companies in Australia. And when you've got, I guess, shareholders who are constantly wanting to know what you're doing for climate change, constantly wanting to know what you're doing for diversity and so on, that has an impact on the board, and it has an impact on the management.

Now, let me be the first to say that it is important that we are responsible stewards of the planet. It is important that we try to be fair to everyone and give everyone a fair go. Absolutely we've got to try to do those things. But whether television companies should be focused on reducing their emissions,

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whether energy companies should be focused on reducing their emissions at least as much as they are delivering affordable and reliable power, well, I think these very much are open questions.

Daniel Wild:

They are open questions, and you've, I think, identified a very, very significant issue, which is what I would refer to as the oligopolisation of the Australian economy and society, if you like, which is, it seems that there's a smaller number of bigger players in civil society, in business, and in government that are influencing the direction of debate. And we've had a hollowing out of the middle of our society, of civil society, of our churches, of our sporting communities, of, as I mentioned, small business. How do we turn that around? What can we do from a policy perspective, from a broader structural perspective, to ensure that middle Australia continues to have a voice over the future of our country?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, a tough question, no easy answers. Trying to ensure that the forgotten people, as Sir Robert Menzies called them, or the quiet Australians, as Scott Morrison has called them, have their voice and are not forgotten, it's a constant work in progress. And this is why it's so important that the Liberal Party, which from its very inception has tried to represent those people, does not get sidetracked by the demands of the boardroom, or indeed by the demands of the ACTU. I mean, in the forgotten people broadcast, Menzies was absolutely clear that the unions were there to represent organised labor. Big business, the money power, could always make itself felt. But the artisan, the small business person, the shopkeeper, the families of middle Australia, these are the people who the Liberal Party has historically represented, and we are always at our best and our strongest when we are close to them and we try, as faithfully as we can, to respond to their concerns. Now, we can't always just do what everyone wants, obviously, but we've got to respond faithfully and fearlessly to their concerns and do the right thing by them.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, as I mentioned, your government undertook many ambitious reform agendas and quite often were met with opposition in various sections of our society. And I believe it was in that context that you made this astute observation that I remember very clearly. You said that conservatives are often in government, but not in power. And I believe what you meant by that was simply winning government doesn't necessarily guarantee that you're going to be able to enact or implement even those policies and ideals that you took to an election. Are you able to share with us what you meant by that and whether you think that that is still the case in Australia?

Tony Abbott:

I think it is an issue. It's a big issue. I think it's absolutely true that being in power means being able to make change, but you can have a significant majority in the House of Representatives, but not be able to get your legislation through a Senate that's dominated by populist crossbenches. And then of course, there's the general difficulty of trying to ensure that all the other arms of government, the vast governmental apparatus, is operating in accordance with the will and preferences of the elected and the accountable government. And that's often far from clear.

I can remember, just to take one example from my time, the so-called Safe Schools program. Now this was effectively a social engineering program dressed up as an anti-bullying program. It was put in place and funded by the Gillard government, and yet it was actually formally announced by a very junior

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minister in the Abbott government because this particular person was told by the department that it was all ready to go and it was his job to announce it.

Now, the person who made the announcement did indicate at the time that this wasn't a program of the Abbott government, it was a program of the previous government. But I think it would also be fair to say that had any of us known just how culturally Marxist this program was, it would have been cut off at the pass, so to speak. But this is where the apparatus of government is now so vast, it's very difficult for ministers to be fully on top of all of these ramifications, particularly if they're only in their portfolios for a relatively short space of time.

Daniel Wild:

What does that say about the state of Australian democracy? To me, that sounds – and you may not be saying this – but to me, what I get from that is that essentially bureaucrats can wait out a minister that they know that in two or three years' time in all likelihood, the current minister in whatever portfolio it may be will likely be gone, and there'll be someone new in that position, and they can simply wait out a minister that they might not approve of. Do you think that that's a fair assessment, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

In my experience, the public servants that I dealt with as Prime Minister and as a minister in the Howard government all regarded themselves as professionals, and they all saw themselves as carrying out as best they could, the policy and the programs of the government of the day. That said, there is absolutely no doubt that some public servants privately are not at all necessarily sympathetic with the agenda of the government of the day, and I think there is a tendency on the part of some public servants to think, "Well, look, we're here forever. The minister isn't. So we'll humor the minister if needs be, but essentially we'll get on with doing what we think is best." Now, I think certainly the further to the top of the public service you get, the more determination there is to be impartial and professional in the classic Westminster tradition. But it's a very rare human being who can always resist the personal preference when faced with something which is not to your taste, is not to your liking.

Daniel Wild:

Is it the case now that if you're a conservative or somebody who's not happy with the direction of certain issues in our country, that it's simply not going to be enough just to vote every three or four years and expect that whatever your preferences are will automatically be enacted, but that perhaps we have to be willing to engage a bit more vigorously in public debate in order to be able to try and win on the issues that are facing the future of our country?

Tony Abbott:

There's a lot in that, Daniel. I've often observed that a majority that stays silent does not long remain a majority. And I think this is true. I think too many good people have been too silent for too long. And I think this is one of the reasons why there's been such an avalanche of change in the last few years. So I think it is very, very important for people not to think that their civic duty ends the moment they leave the ballot box every three or four years. I think we do have an obligation to speak out for the things we believe in politely, reasonably, moderately, rationally. I think we do have a duty to speak out for the things that we believe in within our own families, within our workplaces, in all the places we socialise.

And if we don't, those who feel more strongly, or at least to express themselves more forcefully are almost inevitably going to carry the day. I mean, just look at what's happening in Kabul at the moment. I

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don't believe that the Taliban have prevailed because they had better technology or better arguments than the West and our Afghan allies, they have prevailed, for the moment, at least, because they believed more strongly. They had a stronger will. They had a deeper faith. They were prepared to outlast their opposition. And there's a sense in which what that demonstrates is that it's the people who care the most, the people who do the most, who are going to prevail, and they're not necessarily always the best ones.

Daniel Wild:

Well Tony, you mentioned there Afghanistan, and if I could just stick with that topic. As Prime Minister you oversaw Australia's largest troop deployment against ISIS. Given your experience in that area and in foreign affairs more generally, and given what has already happened in Afghanistan, I'd be interested in getting your insights and an assessment of what is the best approach that the West can take going forward.

Tony Abbott:

Yeah, it's a bit like the Irishman asked the way to Dublin, "I wouldn't start from here". Look, I think there's absolutely no doubt that the last few weeks have been a humiliation for the west, and in particular for the United States. There's no doubt that the West generally, and America in particular can come back from humiliation. The humiliation of Singapore was not the end of British power. The humiliation of Saigon certainly was not the end of the American century. But nevertheless, this is a humiliation, and the challenge for all of us who believe in liberal pluralist democracy is to ensure that we recover from this, that it doesn't become one of those humiliations that breeds a generation of defeatism. That's the challenge.

Now, I don't think this shows that there's anything wrong with Australia's American alliance. I think it just shows that we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that there is real steel in that alliance, real spine in that alliance, and that's going to mean in the months and years ahead, Australia being prepared to do more to demonstrate to our American partners that we are pulling our weight, we are doing our bit just to try to stand up for liberal pluralist democracy in our part of the world. I took the view with ISIS in Iraq, Daniel, that we would do a very great deal to try to protect the people of Iraq from the Islamist threat. And we would do a very great deal to try to ensure that that was the best country that it could be.

But in the end, our role was not to make Iraq a mirror image of Australia. It was to try to ensure that Iraq did not become a place that committed genocide against its own people or permitted terrorism against ours. That was really the height of my ambition for the Iraqi government, at least in the short and medium term. And we as Australians could never do more for the Iraqi people than they are prepared to do for themselves. So they were the two principles, if you like, that guided the Australian government's response to the Islamist threat in Iraq during my time.

Daniel Wild:

Well said, Tony, thank you for that. And with that, I'd like to turn now to our favorite segment, which is the Tell Tony Abbott segment, which is your chance, our listeners, to ask Tony your questions and to join in with us in the discussion about the future of Australia, and Tony, we have two very important and interesting questions today. On the topic of wokeness, I'm going to start with Patrick.

Patrick:

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Hi, this is Patrick from Ringwood. My question for Tony, it seems all of Australia's big businesses and institutions are becoming woke. My question is what can we do about it?

Tony Abbott:

As I think I alluded to earlier, I think part of the problem is the role of the union dominated super funds. Now I'm not saying that that's an issue that can easily be addressed. If it were me, we certainly wouldn't be lifting the compulsory superannuation contributions from 9.5% to 12%, because that's just going to put more money into the hands of the union fund managers and are going to see even larger shareholdings by them in Australian businesses. So I think the first rule of government is try not to make a bad situation worse. The political version of the Hippocratic oath. First do no harm. And I reckon that 9.5% is more than enough to be made to put into super, particularly when it's going to union dominated super funds by and large, and I'd just at the very least hold things there.

Daniel Wild:

Okay, and Tony onto our second question and a bit of a change of pace. This one is about nuclear power.

Maria:

Hi Tony, this is Maria from Queensland. My question is, isn't it time for Australia to start using nuclear power, giving it is affordable and reliable?

Tony Abbott:

Yes it is. Yes it is. And I note that the government, the Morrison government has been taking some tentative steps towards that. I do think that what's changed over the last few years is, first, we are more conscious of the fact that nuclear power generation is the one proven means of generating zero emissions baseload power, and second, given the rapidly deteriorating strategic situation, we're very much more conscious of how much better it might be for Australia if we had nuclear powered submarines rather than conventional powered ones. So I think the climate consciousness and awareness of our strategic situation, both are, I think, in their own way, diminishing the popular opposition to nuclear power that might've prevailed for a long time.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, and with that, thank you for answering our listeners' questions and thank you again for a very interesting and important discussion. It's been wonderful discussion and thank you very much again for joining us.

Tony Abbott:

Good on you, Daniel. Lovely to be with you and the IPA's friends and supporters.

Daniel Wild:

Thank you for listening to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott, and thank you for your support of the Australian way of life. This has been a production of the Institute of Public Affairs. To find out more and to become a member, head to ipa.org.au.