

Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott: Episode 1 – Australia's Future

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 0399464307 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.

Daniel Wild:

Hello, Tony. And g'day to all of our listeners, it's wonderful to be with you all for our first episode of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. I'm Daniel Wild from the Institute of Public Affairs. And of course, as with every week, I'm here with Tony Abbott, the 28th Prime Minister of Australia, community leader, family man, and of course now a distinguished fellow in the Institute of Public Affairs. Tony, it's so good to be with you.

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, nice to be with you and our listeners, and I'm sure we will have a good talk.

Daniel Wild:

We'll have a very good talk, and there is a lot to talk about. We're facing a lot of challenges to our country at the moment. Tony, I thought we could start with some general reflections and assessments that you may have on what has happened in Australia over the past 18 months. Of course, you're formerly a health minister for four years under the Howard government, and you've had the opportunity recently to travel in your capacity as a trade envoy to India and an adviser to the United Kingdom on trade matters there. Let's start with what has happened to Australia over the past 18 months, what do you bring to that observation?

Tony Abbott:

I think it's been a very trying time for Australians. It's been a very trying time for people all over the world. The pandemic has been completely unprecedented in the lifetimes of any of us, and I think all governments have struggled with getting the balance right between keeping us safe and keeping life going. Now, obviously the Australian government collectively has been pretty good at keeping us safe. We've had far fewer deaths from COVID than just about any other country. But nevertheless, it has been at a very considerable cost to the way we've actually lived. And I guess the slightly frustrating thing for so many Australians right now is that just at a time when we are seeing other countries opening up, largely thanks to vaccines, we are locked in this pretty much interminable cycle of lockdowns.

Tony Abbott:

Now to his great credit, the Prime Minister has persuaded at the National Cabinet to substantially reopen when we get to 70% vaccination and to very substantially reopen when we get to 80% vaccination, but nevertheless, that's still probably five or six or more months away and the light is at the end of a very long tunnel. I know there's a sense of which we just have to grit our teeth and get on with it, but I'm certainly rather attracted to the idea of New South Wales, Premier Gladys Berejiklian, that we might be able to start to open up sooner when vaccination rates get up to about 50%.

Daniel Wild:

We are starting to see some positive signs moving away from getting rid of the virus to being able to live with the virus. In addition to what you've just said about the Berejiklian government, there was a news report today in The Age by David Crowe, who's the chief political correspondent with The Age, and he noted that some business leaders and Liberal MPs believe it was no longer possible to reduce case numbers to zero, one of whom was Liberal MP, Jason Falinski who represents Mackellar on Sydney's Northern beaches. And he said that the whole point, and this is what you've just said, Tony, the whole point of the vaccination program is not to get rid of COVID-19, but to live with COVID-19. How important is it, in your view, Tony, that we just have to accept that there's always going to be risk in life, and at some level we just have to get on with it.

Tony Abbott:

We run risks all the time. Every time we get in the car, we're running a risk. Every time we get on our bike, we're running a risk. Every time we go out for a surf, we're running a risk. And now, plainly, we don't want to run silly risks, and obviously government has a responsibility to try to ensure that systems are as safe as possible, but in the end we have to live life and we can't be so risk averse that we don't live life and live it to the full. And there have been many times over the last 18 months when I've wondered whether we have in fact got that balance right, safety first is sometimes a pretty dispiriting dictum.

Daniel Wild:

No, it's such an important point. The federal government has largely ruled out introducing any federal legislation to make vaccinations mandatory, both the Prime Minister and the Health Minister, Greg Hunt have made that reasonably clear, and what that basically means is this will end up being decided probably in the courts. So it appears that it's an unclear area as to whether or not employers could legally require staff to be vaccinated. Do you think this is something that should be resolved primarily in the court system? Should it be resolved by regulation or legislation? Or is it something that Australians should just be able to undertake as they see fit?

Tony Abbott:

To be honest, I think too much is decided in courts these days by unaccountable and unelected judges, I'd probably prefer to see more being decided in our parliaments, by people who are elected and are accountable and will face the judgment of the people every three or four years. So my instinct would be to have more clarity from government, and less that ends up in the hands of a disparate group of judges and officials.

Daniel Wild:

The issue of clarity and leadership, I think is very important because what we have seen over the past 18 months, I think it would be fair to say it's a constant shifting of the goalposts as to what constitutes

success and as to what constitutes a reasonable grounds to implement various health restrictions. We started off, of course, with the idea of shifting the curve or flattening the curve so as to secure adequate medical capacity, which I think was a fairly reasonable approach to take at the time, and then we moved to virus suppression and then virus elimination. And then it was about protecting the elderly, and then it was about waiting until we had a vaccine. And so the goalposts seem to be continually shifted based upon, we're told, the health advice or the advice of the medical experts, but so little of that advice is made transparent and public. And I think regardless of what one's views are on COVID or vaccinations and the restrictions, one thing that has frustrated Australians, I think, has been the lack of transparency and consistency over the past 18 months, would you share those views?

Tony Abbott:

Well, Daniel two points, first of all, let's not underestimate the difficulty of dealing with something which is completely unprecedented, and let's not underestimate the pressure that would have been on governments, decision-makers at every level back in early March last year. So I want to make that statement upfront, but then I want to say that it is important that at any one time you do know what you are trying to do and why you are trying to do it and you've got to take the public into your confidence. Government, in the end, is the trust between leaders and led, and I have personally found it a little irksome that so much that is so out of character has been asked of us on the basis of health advice, in inverted commas, that we are asked to take entirely on trust, which has almost never been published.

Tony Abbott:

And while as a former health minister I tend to put our medical experts on a bit of a pedestal, they're not infallible. And certainly over the course of this whole pandemic, the science, in inverted commas, has shifted from day to day, and it's been different from state to state, and that's why it would have been better for all of us, I think if there had been more transparency and if more of it had been published at the time. Now all of this is now in a sense dirty water under the bridge, it is what it is, we are where we are.

Tony Abbott:

And I do hope that at the end of this process, rather than just saying, well, thank God that's over, and just wanting to forget about it, there will be a serious inquiry, a Royal Commission if you like at the national level to look long and hard at what we did right and what we could have done better and compare the responses of different states and indeed the responses of different countries, because there will be another pandemic. It might be in a year, it might be in a decade, it might be in a century but there will be another pandemic and it's important that our successes have the benefit of our considered reflections on what's gone right and what's gone wrong in this one.

Daniel Wild:

To that I would just add, and I'd like to get your thoughts and reflections on this, Tony, before we move on to another topic, which is an issue that I know a lot of members of the Institute of Public Affairs have been very interested in and exercised about, which has been not just perhaps the, at times, opaque nature of the health advice, but the fact that many of those who are implementing lockdowns and recommending lockdowns are often not the same people that are incurring the costs of those policies. The politicians, bureaucrats, many of those in the media are in relatively safe jobs on pretty good wages. We know, for example, that over the past year wages and jobs in the public sector have increased,

whereas wages and jobs in the private sector have decreased and it's been primarily small business owners and the self employed that have incurred the most significant costs of the lockdowns.

Daniel Wild:

I think that that has created a sense that we're very divided as a nation. We had this concept, this trope that we're all in this together, when plainly, many of us were incurring costs at a much greater level than others. Do you think that that division in our society has reduced the trust that Australians have in the political class and in some of the commanding institutions of our society?

Tony Abbott:

Well, again, Daniel, I think it's important to try to understand the difficulties that the politicians are operating under. They have imperfect knowledge, they're under a great deal of pressure, and there's a sense in which they're damned if they do and they're damned if they don't. That said, I do think it grates sometimes when people who are absolutely manically busy tell everyone else to do absolutely nothing at all. And it does grate some times when people whose own jobs are entirely secure tell people in insecure jobs that for their own good that their jobs got to become even less secure. So this has been an extremely difficult time for everyone, but I've got to say that a lot of people have felt like they've been reduced to bit players in their own lives as a result of decisions being made by others who are not in the same boat that they're in.

Daniel Wild:

Of course, you've continued to be very active in your commentary, most recently in a significant story that was covered on the front page of The Australian on Monday of this week, relating to an article you had written about China, about India, about the future of the global order and how important India will be as a democracy and as a linchpin of the future of the free world in the West. You essentially argued that we need to be, strategically speaking, pivoting away from our alliance on China and India provides a very good opportunity for where we might re-pivot and refocus our economic, political, and cultural energies on. Do you want to explain why this is such a big issue for Australia at the moment?

Tony Abbott:

There are two great concerns that all of us have, and which governments have to be dealing with all the time, prosperity and security. Now, obviously, for several decades now, China has been an important part of Australia's prosperity because we have increased more and more our exports, and we've also been getting back a lot of high quality, relatively low cost imports from China. The difficulty is that China is still a party state, we were optimistic for years that greater economic freedom would eventually lead to at least a measure of political freedom and that the antagonism, if you like, the systemic antagonism between communism and liberal pluralism would ease as communism evolved more in our direction. What's become absolutely crystal clear in the last few years is that for the Beijing government, economic freedom was not a precursor to political freedom too, it was simply a means to strengthen the party state against its opponents.

Tony Abbott:

So we've now got a problem, so much of our prosperity has been based on trade with China, which is now subject to a whole lot of capricious and arbitrary restrictions, and so much about security has been based on assumptions of an increasingly benign region, which can no longer be taken for granted. So we need to diversify our trade, we need to find stronger friendships and alliances to ensure that the peace

is kept because when any one country becomes vastly stronger than the rest, the temptation obviously is to take more than it has any right to. So this is where India is extremely significant, when you think of it, we have in common with India a democracy, the rule of law, to some extent the English language and considerable elements of shared history. I think there's a potential for us to have almost a family relationship within India, which was probably never as likely with China.

Tony Abbott:

So let's do everything we can as quickly as possible to build on this. When I was Prime Minister, I was determined to conclude a swift and comprehensive trade deal with India. For all sorts of reasons the momentum stalled after I left office. Well, I know Scott Morrison and Dan Tehan are keen to get this up and running, and frankly, I was thrilled to be asked to go to India as an envoy to do what I could to make sure things were getting back on track. I know Dan Tehan has an excellent relationship with his Indian counterpart, Piyush Goyal. And I think the whole of the Indian system is very well disposed to Australia, so given this is potentially a golden moment, let's make the most of it.

Daniel Wild:

With that Tony, I thought that we could round out this, I think, very important and interesting discussion with my favorite segment, and I hope it will soon become your favorite segment, which is the Tell Tony Abbott Segment. Of course, this is the opportunity for all of our listeners to ring up and to talk with Tony, talk with myself, to have a discussion about the things that are on their minds, questions they might have, the future of the country, the Olympics, sport, whatever it might be, any question on any topic, nothing's off bars. And I will start with the first one, which comes from Margaret, who is from Western Sydney. Here is Margaret's question.

Margaret:

Hi, Tony. This is Margaret from Western Sydney. I'd be interested in your thoughts about why we have allowed health bureaucrats to have so much control over our lives? Thank you.

Tony Abbott:

Well, when you're in unprecedented circumstances, obviously you turn to people who you think might know more about it than you do for help and guidance. Obviously, if we're diagnosed with a serious illness, we listen very, very, very intently to our doctors in the hope that they might be able to make it better for us. Now it's perfectly reasonable to turn to the epidemiologists and the other health experts at the start of the pandemic, but in the end, as we know, expertise and judgment are not always the same and health experts can be just as fallible and indeed just as divided as the experts on any other topic. And this is where we elect governments to test all of the various expert opinions and to weigh all of the various claims against the national interest. And there are times when I have myself bridled a bit at the readiness of some of our Premiers, in particular, to justify everything they've done, however harsh and unreasonable on the basis of so-called health advice, which is never published.

Tony Abbott:

So I'm kind of with Margaret, I think that it's important that we continue to live in a democracy not a 'docdoccrecy', because however much we respect the medical profession, and I certainly have a great deal of respect for the medical profession, in the end it's the elected and the accountable politicians who should be in charge.

Daniel Wild:

Great. Margaret, thank you for that fantastic question. As a reminder to our listeners, the hotline is 0399464307, dial in and leave your question for Tony. Tony, our final question, a bit of a change of pace in this question is from Peter. From Newcastle, Peter, what did you want to ask Tony?

Peter:

Hi Tony, this is Peter for Newcastle. It's just a quick one from me, I was wondering, did you watch much of the Olympics? And if you did, what were your highlights?

Tony Abbott:

Yes, I think sport is fantastic. I've played a lot of sport. I still try to get out on the bike, get out on the surf board. And I'm an ambassador for one of the great Handa charities, the International Sports Promotion Society, and I was doing a bit of work for ISPS while I was in the United Kingdom, so I very much appreciate the power of sport. That said, I was quite busy and I was on the road a lot and I was in multiple different time zones, so the only bits of the Olympics I actually saw was the odd snippet on the news and the odd snippet in the newspapers. But nevertheless, I did get a strong sense of just how welcomed the Olympics were for two reasons.

Tony Abbott:

First, because right around the world the Olympics this year were a wonderful reminder that there is a normal life quite aside from the pandemic. And second, for us in Australia, a reminder that yes, we are one country. And I think that's often been lost sight of in the middle of this COVID state of origin conflict that we've seen so often between the states over the last 18 months.

Daniel Wild:

Well, I think that's a wonderful note to end on, Tony. There is a path to normalcy. I think there is light at the end of the tunnel. We are going through a lot of challenges, but we've had a lot of challenges before in Australia and I think we've gotten through those challenges because of a commitment to our shared values, and I think those values are very much still a part of our way of life and who we are as a people. As we come out of this pandemic, I'm confident that things will continue to get better. So thank you very much for your time and your comments, Tony, and your analysis. And thank you of course, to all of our listeners tuning into our first episode of the Australian Heartland.

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, two things, this too will pass, and we shall overcome.

Daniel Wild:

We shall indeed. Tony, thank you very much.

Tony Abbott:

Good on you, Daniel.

Daniel Wild:

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