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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 Abbot 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.

Daniel Wild:

More importantly, we want to hear from you. That is why we have the Tell Tony Abbot 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 good day to all of our listeners. It's wonderful to be with you for another episode of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. A reminder to all of our listeners to hit subscribe, or like, wherever you are listening to this podcast so that you don't miss an episode.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I'm looking forward to our discussion today. There is a lot of ground to cover. Let's get into it with our first topic, which is the permanent pandemic powers in Victoria. This is a big issue, not just for Victorians, but for all of Australians. In my view, potentially the big threat that we've seen to Liberty, to freedom and democracy, in Victoria, since Federation.

Daniel Wild:

It's titled to Victoria's Public Health And Wellbeing Amendment Pandemic Management Bill 2021. I'll just quickly give a little bit of a context of it for our listeners before we discuss it. This was passed at the Lower House in Victoria last week. It'll go to the Upper House in the next few weeks. Likely to pass there because the cross benches have almost, without exception, blindingly followed Daniel Andrews throughout the entire pandemic.

Daniel Wild:

It'll come into the effect from the 16th of December, which is the day after the current state of emergency orders expire. As a reminder, those orders are the ones that allow lockdowns; so curfews, and mask mandates, amongst other impositions on our lives to be enacted.

Daniel Wild:

This bill will allow, amongst other things, Daniel Andrews to declare that there is a pandemic, whether or not there is even one case of a disease or a virus in Australia. It will allow for that declaration to be

extended in three month blocks, indefinitely. Those who do not follow the public health orders, for example, by protesting, to be imprisoned for up to two years.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I just want to start by getting your broad assessment of what is happening in Victoria. I'm very concerned about this. Do you share those concerns?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, as you know, because we've been discussing this on and off for quite a few weeks now. My great worry is that we will emerge from this pandemic with more overbearing governments, and more timid citizens. I know that the pandemic is serious. Certainly, it was serious before we got vaccination rates to where they are now.

Tony Abbott:

But the last thing that we should do is allow our pandemic mindset to contaminate the way we live, the way we regard the ordinary challenges of life as we go forward into a period where this particular disease will be endemic rather than pandemic. So I don't claim to be studying the Victorian political situation as fully as people in Melbourne. But, I have been paying the ordinary attention to what's been happening south of the Murray. And it would seem to me that Dan Andrews has got more enough powers under existing legislation to deal with any health emergency.

Tony Abbott:

The last thing we need is to see the Andrews Government getting more power. Frankly, I'd like to see the Andrews Government lose power. And I say that not just as a liberal, I say that as someone who thinks that we have to take the ordinary rights and freedoms of Australians seriously. And I don't think that the Andrews Government has done that nearly sufficiently over the course of this pandemic. And I think that this new legislation is a sign of a what seems to be an authoritarian outlook on the part of Victorian Premier in the Victorian Government.

Daniel Wild:

Well, it certainly is. Tony, as a former Prime Minister, I'd like to get your assessment on how you might approach this issue from a Federal Government perspective. My opinion is that the Federal Government needs to step in. This is a... I don't want to understate the significance of what is being proposed by Andrews.

Daniel Wild:

I think that if there's legal avenues through which the Federal Government could potentially challenge the constitutionality of aspects of the Andrews Legislation, I think that they should do that. I understand not everybody would share that view. But as a former Prime Minister, I would be interested in getting your assessment of what you see the role of the Federal Government might be here?

Tony Abbott:

Good question, Dan. And look, I haven't studied what avenues might be available to the Federal Government to intervene here. And it wouldn't surprise me if the only avenues available are perhaps

the use, and arguably the misuse, of the Treaty Power. Nevertheless, I can certainly understand why people would want the Federal Government to step in.

Tony Abbott:

Because the Federal Government is the senior level of government. It's the level of government that, in the end, the public look to as if you like the court of last resort, when it comes to politics. I used to find when I was the Health Minister, time and time again, being asked to intervene to fix problems with the hospital system. Regrettably, I didn't have the constitutional authority to fix problems with the hospital system. All I could do, back then, was to use the financial power of Commonwealth to try to get better behavior from the states.

Tony Abbott:

Unfortunately, what I discovered, and what I suspect so many Federal Ministers have discovered over the years, is that you can give the states extra money to do what you think they need to do, and they'll do it once. But they won't, as it were, stay the course. Very soon, they just go back into their ordinary ways of doing things.

Tony Abbott:

And yet you are stuck with the payments forever. And this is the difficulty. One of the things that I wanted to do as Prime minister through the Federation and Tax Reform, white paper processes, was to try to more clearly delineate who was responsible for what in our Federation. So that instead of having, what is so often currently a-

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Tony Abbott:

So that instead of having what is so often currently a dog's breakfast of divided responsibilities, it's much clearer who does what and who pays for what. And if you are the level of government, which is doing something, you should also be the level of government that is responsible for funding something so there's far less of the confusion where we see as we so often have something going wrong, the Commonwealth lacking the constitutional authority to fix it but the state's nevertheless blaming the Commonwealth, invariably on the grounds the Commonwealth hasn't shoveled out enough money their way. This is an ongoing problem for our country. Unfortunately, my success has scrapped that federation reform white paper, this is serious unfinished business, which just has to be addressed again so that we can try to make it much clearer who does what, who pays for what. So that when things go wrong, as they so often do, everyone understands who is to blame and can take the appropriate action at the ballot box. In the end that's what really needs to happen. The people who are unhappy with the Dan Andrews government in Victoria need to vote it out, simple as that. They need to vote it out. That is the ultimate sanction on bad government, electoral defeat.

Daniel Wild:

I just want to pick up on the important point you make about the structure of Australia's Federation. I think that one of the things that happened with the lockdowns is the states were responsible for imposing the health orders, but the federal government picked up the tab, JobKeeper, JobSeeker. And I think that that created a worrying set of incentives, which is, the states, as you say, could shift the blame to the federal government complaining that we're not getting enough money from Canberra. And the

federal government either was unwilling or unable to intervene in the policies that were causing those very significant economic and social issues by way of lockdowns.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, given your experience as health minister and, and prime minister, do you think, and I'm sort of talking about the future, if this happens again, how would you suggest that we might approach this differently?

Tony Abbott:

This is where, Daniel, we really do need a national royal commission to look into everything that's been done in the course of this pandemic and to consider what's been good, what's been bad, what's been indifferent. To compare and contrast what we did with what's been done in other jurisdictions, particularly countries like Japan, particularly places like Taiwan and a country like Sweden. We really need to look at everything that's been done around the world and compare it to what we did and ask ourselves, what can we do better? We've seen, over the course of this pandemic, our Federation under great strain as different states have done their own thing and in the process shut themselves off to a very great extent for very long periods to people from other states, which really does seem to be against the whole idea of being a nation. Now, I accept that we are a Federation, but our Federation has been under strain, the likes of which we've never before seen and that certainly is something that ought to be considered by a national royal commission.

Daniel Wild:

All right, thanks for that Tony. I'd like to turn now to the Glasgow Climate Conference still underway in Glasgow, about another week to go. We've seen lots of footage of the legions of private jets and motorcades and so forth parading around Scotland. One of the things that strikes me is in the discussion about reducing emissions, if that's what one believes we ought to be focusing on, there is very rarely, any serious discussion of two known technologies that work, nuclear and low emissions, high efficiency coal. Those are two technologies that ought to be on the table in discussing reducing emissions, shouldn't they Tony?

Tony Abbott:

Well, you won't be surprised to hear me agree with you on both those points. The most modern coal power stations are about 40% less emissions intensive than the ones that we've largely got in our existing fleet. I know our existing fleet is slated to be steadily retired over the next couple of decades, but we are certainly going to need affordable, reliable base load power. We cannot rely on unreliable intermittent, renewable energy for base load power. So we are going to need to renew our base load capacity. And frankly, there's no reason why coal shouldn't be an ongoing part of that for quite a few decades to come, at least.

Tony Abbott:

It's also true that nuclear is the one abundantly proven emissions free way to generate base load power in a country with very limited hydroelectric resources such as Australia. So I certainly think that that needs to be part of the mix. My understanding is that the government hasn't entirely closed the door to new coal or indeed to nuclear power on land as well as at sea. So, let's see what develops. But again, if it were up me, I'd be swiftly moving to repeal the legislative prohibition on nuclear power. Not because I think that we are going see a nuclear power station in the next 18 months or two years, but certainly in

the next 5 or 10 or 15 years it ought to be something which is not out of consideration because of a legislative amendment that was part of a quick fix back in the late '90s to get a new medical nuclear reactor underway at Lucas Heights on the outskirts of Sydney.

Daniel Wild:

Why do you think it is that nuclear and coal are very rarely on the table? It seems that when we're talking about reducing emissions, often we're not really talking about reducing emissions, we're talking about wind and solar power and they are by no means the most efficient or effective ways of reducing emissions. Again, assuming that reducing emissions is what your priority might be. Why is it the case that coal and nuclear haven't been a bigger part of the discussion in Australia, do you think?

Tony Abbott:

One of the difficulties, Daniel, with this whole Glasgow process has been the cavalcade of very rich and very powerful people telling less rich and less powerful people that our lifestyles have got to change. Whereas, none of them seem to be taking commensurate steps themselves. I mean, I don't see too many of the people who turned up in private jets at Glasgow offering to change their lifestyle while they're telling us to drive different cars, to shun jet travel, to stop eating meat and so on. What we need to understand is that-

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Tony Abbott:

Go on. What we need to understand is that achieving net zero anytime soon in the absence of currently unknown and unproven technological change is going to be very costly and very inconvenient. And this is why countries like China and India and Indonesia have not made anything like the same level of commitments that countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Western Europe have made. Now, Scott Morrison to his great credit, Angus Taylor to his great credit, while signing up to the target of net zero by 2050, have commendably resisted some of the steps that the green zealots of demanded of us such as the elimination of coal by 2030 and the massive reductions in methane by 2030. Which obviously would have an extraordinary impact on Australian agriculture and would jeopardize our affordable and reliable power.

Daniel Wild:

I just want to pick up on a couple of things you said there, the first, you sort of talk about the global aspect of this, which I want to turn to in a moment. Firstly, your point about the dichotomy between the say the mainstream and the elites in terms of what emissions reductions means for them. I think that what is happening is there is a erosion of trust among the public, firstly brought on by lockdowns which disproportionately affected regular Australians, working class, middle class, small business owners especially. And secondly now, on the back of those very destructive lockdowns this global push by the elites for net zero, which again is going to significantly impact jobs, incomes, as you say convenience of life of ordinary Australians, not of the elites. And as I mentioned, I think this gets to a deeper issue of trust that the public will have in our public institutions. Do you share those same concerns, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

Of course I do Daniel. I should stress that I regard myself as a conservationist. I think that most political conservatives do regard themselves as conservations. The last thing I want to see is our waterways

polluted, our bushland degraded, our skies full of particular pollution. I'm all in favor of reducing carbon dioxide emission as far and as fast as we can, but that should not be done at the expense of jobs, industries, and people's standard of living. Now, the government to its credit is stressing that this technology pathway is not going to mean new taxes. It's not going to mean massive new spending, it's essentially going to be achieved using existing pots of funding and existing policy parameters. Because the government is counting on new technology to appear at different times over the next three decades that will get us comparatively painlessly there. And that's the point, we should not jeopardize the strength of our country, we should not jeopardize the prosperity of our people, in a bid to get emissions down particularly when the really big emitters are making no such steps themselves.

Tony Abbott:

The last thing we want to do is to be ourselves impoverished in what turns out to be a futile green gesture, because as we know, China's emissions are increasing on an annual basis by the entire Australian total, which is why our former chief scientists famously or notoriously depending upon your perspective told a Senate estimates hearing some years ago that entirely eliminating emissions in this country would make virtually no difference to climate change.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I want to pick up on that point about China some research that we undertook a few months ago found that China emits more CO2 in 16 days than Australia does in one entire year, which helps to put in perspective the relative contributions to global emissions Xi Jinping, of course, is not at the conference. But he said in a statement that China was committed to net zero by 2060, now I'm not sure who believes this. But my point is, if we're not careful Australia is at risk of giving away our global competitive economic advantage, which is always, at least for a number of decades, been based on a cheap energy and resource abundance. I'm deeply concerned about where that might be heading. Tony, you've had a lot to say about China and its role in the geopolitical order, how do you view these climate change summits within that context?

Tony Abbott:

I think that China's commitment to net zero by 2060 is about as reliable as their commitment to one country two systems until 2050. Frankly, China will do whatever is in China's interests, regardless of any commitment that's made. If you are a classic Marxist, you're entirely justified in making any commitment you like to the capitalists and then breaking it if it serves your purpose. So, I don't think that China's commitments on these sorts of matters can be taken particularly seriously. And certainly the old story, don't listen to what they say so much as look at what they do. And China is massively increasing its emissions, not because it particularly wants to increase its emissions but because it wants to build a stronger economy so that it can deliver a better life to its people and can maintain the communist's bargain that as long as the people are prepared to surrender their freedom, the government will try to deliver them prosperity. And in the process give itself the economic strength to attain the kind of military and political dominance that it's seeking over the United States in the Western Pacific and in our own region.

Tony Abbott:

So, China is relentlessly and ruthlessly pursuing its own national interests. I'm not saying that Australia should be like China in this, I'm just saying that we should be very careful about allowing our wonderful idealism to jeopardize our ability to push back against the countries that don't share it.

Daniel Wild:

Tony just flowing from that, you've had the opportunity to travel a bit over the last few months and I was hoping we could-

Tony Abbott:

And look, Daniel, I probably should apologize as it were to the listeners for having had that ability, given that most Australians haven't had it. But one of the very few exemptions to the travel ban-

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Tony Abbott:

... Very few exemptions to the travel ban was if you were traveling on government business. And I guess I got to go to Britain several times as part of the UK board of trade. I got to go to India as a special representative of the Australian government on trade. And the most recently, I was able to go to Taiwan at the invitation of the Taiwanese government. So, that gave me an opportunity to do things that the rest of us haven't had over the last 18 months. Frankly, it disappoints me enormously that we haven't had that opportunity. And this is one of the many things that I think was, if you like, was part of a generally over the top response by Australia at all levels to this pandemic.

Daniel Wild:

No, fair enough. It's a good point to make. And I thought we could just... The reason I bring that up, Tony, is just in closing our thoughtful discussion today, I was hoping that you might be able to give us a bit of a global perspective, a bit of global sense of what is happening. There's a lot of... I think people feel a bit of anxiety about the future. A lot of changes have been happening with lockdowns, very significant changes to our way of life, and a lot of uncertainty about the future. Are you able to give us a bit of a perspective based on your international travels of how you see things playing out over the next few years?

Tony Abbott:

I wish I could say I was optimistic, Daniel, but I see lots of quite dangerous flashpoints in the world. The Middle East is an ongoing problem. The Iranians' desire for nuclear weapons is to completely undiminished, and I can't see that ending well. Russia's intentions to regain its overlordship over the former Soviet territories remains strong. And of course, the energy dependence of Western Europe on Russia is increasing, therefore Russia's economic leverage over Western Europe is increasing.

Tony Abbott:

And then of course, there's the China issue. Now, as we've discussed before on this program, Xi Jinping has successfully suffocated Hong Kong. Taiwan is next on Beijing's hit list. Taiwan is a successful liberal pluralist democracy of almost 25 million people, and I don't think a country such as Australia can afford to be indifferent to its fate.

Tony Abbott:

Now, whatever happens between China and Taiwan, I think there are going to be seismic consequences for our part of the world. Either there will be the crushing of a vibrant liberal democracy with a consequent

cold war in East Asia, the likes of which we've never before seen, or there will be an escalating conflict between China and the democracies. And obviously, that has all sorts of dreadful consequences as well.

Tony Abbott:

Now, the only way forward under these circumstances is for the democratic world, the free world, to show as much solidarity as we possibly can with Taiwan and to make it crystal clear to the Chinese that any attempt to alter the status quo by force will have the most severe consequences, economic and military. I think that's the only way to dissuade Xi Jinping and the Beijing government from moving quite swiftly on Taiwan in a bid to end what they think is the century of humiliation.

Tony Abbott:

So I hate to sound pessimistic, but I fear that the next few years won't be great and that the difficulties of the pandemic might be but the first foretaste of more difficulties to come, and that a degree of resilience and grit might be called for from us, that hasn't been demanded of us for a couple of generations, at least.

Tony Abbott:

So I wish I could sound more optimistic. I guess, because we like to end on an optimistic note, let me just say this, Daniel. As Margaret Thatcher once magnificently pointed out, the facts are conservative. And I think that at some point in time, we are going to wake up from our current illusions when it comes to so many of the subjects, which are currently bedeviling us and particularly vexing the thinking of so many of us on the center right of politics.

Daniel Wild:

No, thank you for that, Tony. And I would just add on that hint of optimism at the end there, that every generation has to fight for its freedoms and its values. And we may not have chosen these times, or we may not have chosen these fights, but it's up to all of us to make the case and to keep going, and as you say, to show that resilience.

Daniel Wild:

So thank you, Tony, again for another very interesting and important discussion. And I'm looking forward to talking with you again next week.

Tony Abbott:

Thanks, Dan.

Daniel Wild:

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