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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.

Daniel Wild:

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](http://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. As a reminder to all of our listeners, hit subscribe or like wherever you're listening to this podcast so that you don't miss an episode.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, we've got a jam-packed episode today. We'll be talking about vaccine mandates, coalition senators withholding their support from the government, plus a couple of very interesting listener questions, and you're going to tell us what you are up to at the moment, which I'm looking forward to. To begin with, let's discuss some of the recent developments on the issue of vaccine mandates.

Daniel Wild:

A few days ago, the prime minister, Scott Morrison, came out against vaccine mandates, saying, and I quote, "Now it's time for governments to step back and for Australians to take their life and for Australians to be able to move forward with the freedoms that should be theirs." And Scott Morrison went on to say that, "Other than in specific circumstances, we aren't in favor of mandatory vaccines imposed by the government," end quote. Tony, this is a step in the right direction, although I might opine, may be a little bit too little too late. What are your thoughts?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, I agree with the prime minister that we shouldn't be mandating vaccinations. We don't need a no jab, no job situation, other than perhaps in some quite specific circumstances like doctors, nurses and age care workers. So I agree with the prime minister.

Tony Abbott:

My understanding of what happened in the parliament the other day is that it would've been a Senate resolution, which One Nation moved. Normally the government will vote against these resolutions as a matter of principle, because they're put up by independence Greens and the ALP really just to sort of make a point to strike a pose, if you like.

Tony Abbott:

So the government normally votes against them as a matter of principle, but it seems on this occasion, there were some Senate backbenchers who felt sufficiently strongly about the issue to vote against the whip, so to speak. But really, they weren't voting against Scott Morrison, they were voting against the state governments. They were, I suppose, simply expressing, with their parliamentary vote, the position that the prime minister himself had earlier adopted.

Tony Abbott:

So again, to get back to the main point, I'm not anti-vax. I got vaxxed as soon as I reasonably could. I think that these vaccines are effective at reducing the severity of COVID. Now though that we have something like 85% of the population vaxxed, the unvaxxed are a danger only to themselves. And that's why I think it's quite a big step too far to say to people, "If you're not vaccinated, you can't work."

Tony Abbott:

Let's face it, Daniel, if you look at the welfare stats, we've got a significant proportion of the working age population who for all sorts of reasons won't work. The last thing we need is to add another 5% or so of the working age population who can't work, because for all sorts of reasons, they don't want to get jabbed.

Daniel Wild:

Well, Tony, let's just dig in a little bit to the principle here behind the One Nation Resolution. So among other things, what that resolution called for is for states and businesses to be prohibited from discriminating against someone based on their vaccination status. And so in effect, that would mean that the federal government would be overriding state laws and imposing restrictions on what businesses can and can't do.

Daniel Wild:

And I think there's an interesting issue here, because some would say, "Look, that's not the role of the federal government. The federal government should not be overriding state legislation, and it shouldn't be inserting itself into the voluntary business of what the commercial sector wants to do." Others would say that there's been massive overreach by the states and many big businesses and the federal government perhaps should look at using its powers to override these mandates.

Daniel Wild:

I have to say, I'm in the second camp. I think the federal government should be looking to see what it can do to override some of these mandates where they've gone too far, such as here in Victoria. Tony, where are you on this debate? What are your thoughts on the principles of the issue?

Tony Abbott:

That's a very good, potted version of the different principles at stake here. On the one hand, I think the states have gone too far here. I'm particularly disappointed that in New South Wales, which has been the least authoritarian of the states when it comes to COVID, that state government agencies, the education department, the fire and rescue, the police, et cetera, have all effectively got a no job, no job rule running. It's not just the health department.

Tony Abbott:

So even in New South Wales, I think on this issue, the government has gone too far, and I think that's been a characteristic of the states throughout this pandemic. I think they've been all together too authoritarian.

Tony Abbott:

But on the other hand, I do think that the feds have to tread lightly here. Let's face it, we've infantilized the states enough over the last few decades, the last thing we want to do is to infantilize them even further. So I think it's a genuine conundrum. It really is a genuine conundrum.

Daniel Wild:

Well, I want to just pick up another part of this debate which I think is very interesting. And I want to put to you a quote by Senator Alex Antic. So he's a Senator from South Australia. He's one of the senators that voted with the One Nation Resolution alongside Gerard Rennick, Matt Canavan, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells and Sam McMahon. And [Erica Betts 00:07:31] abstained from that vote.

Daniel Wild:

And Alex Antic raises a really interesting point that I'd love to get your thoughts on, and I'm going to quote here what he said to the advertiser, "Most Australians take it for granted that denying employment, services or basic rights based on gender, race, sexuality, religious or political views is wrong." Senator Antic goes on to say, "Yet today, those who reject a COVID vaccine are being marginalized and demonized for no reason other than they refuse to comply with the whims of power-hungry health bureaucracies all around the country." End quote.

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Daniel Wild:

... of power-hungry health bureaucracies all around the country." I think it's a really interesting point to say we already have this morass of anti-discrimination law. Whether you agree with it or not, it exists. Why then would it be okay, under that rubric, for people to be discriminated against based on their vaccination status? What do you think of Senator Antic's observations there, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

Well, I can understand his view that there is a double standard operating here. I absolutely do understand that. And personally, as we've said over the last 10 minutes or so, Dan, I agree that these state vaccine mandates are completely over the top. Now that we've got something like 85% of the adult population double vaccinated, the unvaxxed are a danger only to themselves. So it's wrong to suddenly start saying to these people that if you have no job, you have no job. So I'm just not sure that the federal government really was in a position to achieve that which he wanted to achieve.

Tony Abbott:

And in the end, when you've got state governments doing the wrong thing, the best way forward is to change the government. The ultimate sanction on bad governments is electoral defeat. And I think too often these days, instead of getting into state politics and making the state parliamentary parties better, instead of voting against bad state governments, we demand that the federal government should fix it all for us. And that instinct, understandable though it is, has been part of what has got us into this problem.

Tony Abbott:

We do have a dysfunctional federation. It's been increasingly dysfunctional for decades. My government wanted to address this with a federation and tax reform white paper process, the objective of which would have been much greater clarity about who did what. We would have got the federal government out of some activities where currently it's a dog's breakfast of divided responsibilities. It would have got the state governments out of some activities, so it was much clearer who did what and which level of government was to be blamed when things went wrong, as they inevitably do.

Daniel Wild:

All right, Tony, thank you for that assessment. I thought we could move to our second topic of discussion, which is a broader topic. And this is something that we've received a lot of positive feedback from our listeners on, which is around you and I discussing some of these bigger issues facing our nation's future. And what I wanted to talk about today is Australia's egalitarian way of life. We often talk about, what does it mean to be Australian? And I think our classless egalitarian nature is something that's very fundamental to who we are as Australians. To begin with, Tony, I'd like to get your insight into what egalitarianism means to you. What are some of the components of that? How is it lived out in our day-to-day lives in Australia?

Tony Abbott:

In my judgment, Dan, an egalitarian society is one, to use the old expression, where Jack's as good as his master. Just because you might be the boss, just because your parents might be wealthy, just because you might hold down a big job doesn't make you an inherently better person than someone who doesn't have those characteristics or circumstances. So that's the essence of an egalitarian society. I think we always have been a very egalitarian society. I think it's one of our most attractive characteristics. I hope it will always be the case.

Tony Abbott:

And I suppose in an egalitarian society such as ours, if you are talking familiarly with someone, even if that person is the Prime Minister or the Premier or the head of BHP, your inclination will be to call that person by his or a first name. If you jump into a taxi, the inclination will be to get into the front seat, not the back seat because the driver is as good a person as you are. If you've got someone coming into the house to do something, whether it's to help fix something, whether it's to help with the garden or with the cleaning or whatever it might be, you treat them as your equal and not as your servant. I guess it's the Australian reticence about actually having servants which is, in itself, at the heart of our egalitarianism.

Daniel Wild:

No, I think that's quite right. And what I think and what I'm a little bit concerned about is some of what I would see as some challenges to that society you've just described. And I guess there's always challenges, but I wanted to offer you my thoughts and a couple of challenges I see and just get you your thoughts as well. I think one of them is we're potentially becoming a little bit more class-based, a little bit more stratified as a society where this upward economic mobility is getting a little bit more difficult than, say, it was in the, say, post-World War II era.

Daniel Wild:

And another part of it, I think, is a social division through identity politics, which is essentially the weaponization of multiculturalism, where people are delineated by their race or their gender or their ethnicity, rather than being united around what it is that we share in common as Australians. And I think those are two very dangerous trends that we've seen develop over the last, say, 10 to 20 years in this country. I think that can all be overcome, but I think that those are two of the threats we face at the moment. Your thoughts on that, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

You won't be surprised, Dan, that I share your anxieties on both issues. A less equal society, a more economically-stratified society will tend, over time, to become less egalitarian as well. Really vast disparities of wealth do tend to create a lot of master-servant relationships, and over time that can be, if you like, solidified into something resembling the kind of class structure that we've never had.

Tony Abbott:

And yes, as you say, identity politics is toxic. We've got to always remember the fragrant phrase of Martin Luther King. "Let me be judged, not on the color of my skin, but on the content of my character." And there are so many factors today working against that, of which the most pernicious, as we've discussed before on this program, is critical race theory which, in its own way, seems to be creeping into Australian educational institutions.

Tony Abbott:

And the last thing we want is to see everything through a prism of race. And yet that seems to be inherent in the national curriculum, cross-curricula priority, which we've talked about before, of looking at everything through a lens of indigeneity.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah, we have discussed that before. Tony, do you reckon the COVID lockdowns have made this divide worse? I'm thinking in terms of the divide of the impact of the lockdowns between, say, big and small business, between public and private sector workers. I think it's exacerbated some of those divisions in our society. And of course, we've just discussed the vaccination. So do you think it's made some of these issues-

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Daniel Wild:

Of course we've just discussed the vaccination. So do you think it's, it's made some of these issues worse?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I certainly think that it's made us more querulous, and it's made us look at our neighbor less as a source of genial help and comfort and comradeship, and more as a potential source of infection. In my building in Sydney, for instance, Dan, there's a situation at the moment where masks are recommended, but not required. Now because I've always been deeply skeptical about these wretched masks, I know in some limited circumstances, they may have some value, but the extent of these mask mandates has been quite over the top, but in our building where masks are recommended but not required, some people are wearing them and some people aren't. And you can tell that there is a certain glaring by those who aren't wearing them, that those who are wearing them, that those who aren't. By the same token, there is if you like a certain solidarity between those who aren't wearing them. So I guess it cuts both ways, doesn't it.

Daniel Wild:

It does. And just on that, what I've noticed, I don't know if it's like this in Sydney, but in Melbourne at the moment, if you are sitting down at a restaurant, for example, you don't have to have a mask on, but those who are serving you do. And that makes me very uncomfortable because you have a sort of a servant class developing where there's different rules, where they are having to wear masks while they're waiting on you, which I find very uncomfortable. I sort of understand in a way the logic behind it, but that's something that sort of strikes me as being quite divisive and also something that you wouldn't see in a country like Australia. Is that the situation in Sydney as well? Have you noticed those kind of dichotomies occurring?

Tony Abbott:

Look, that is the situation in Sydney, as I last understood it, that if you are at a restaurant, you are not required to wear a mask once you were sitting at the table, but the staff are quiet to wear masks. I just think that again, it's about treating your fellow human beings as people with whom we really are all in this together and this idea that some of us should be masked up and some of us don't need to for whatever reason strikes me as it strikes you as pretty odd, particularly given the very thin evidence that other than in very unusual circumstances masking does any good.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah, no, I completely agree. And I hope these mandates go away as quickly as possible.

Tony Abbott:

I mean, it's interesting, Dan, I was in an airport the other day. Thank God we're allowed to go to airports again because there is the possibility of travel. And every couple of minutes there was announcement over the PA telling us how we had to wear a mask for our own good. And literally you could have fired a cannon down the domestic terminal of Sydney airport and not hit anyone. There were so few people there and yet we were being told how essential it was that we're absolutely masked. And of course, once you get on the plane, you're allowed to take your mask off to eat and drink. And it's interesting how many people seem to constantly have in their hand a little plastic water bottle one way or the other to have tiny sips.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah.

Tony Abbott:

But we're constantly told that it's absolutely essential that we wear these damned masks. And yet at the same time, we don't have to wear them for 50% of the trip if we've got something that we're drinking or eating. So look, again so much of this, which should be left to common sense and to individual choice has become the subject of rules, and taken on the whole, these rules are becoming deeply, almost unconscionably oppressive.

Daniel Wild:

No, you're quite right. I have to admit, Tony, there's been a couple of times where I've been on the train for example, and I've had a relatively empty cup of coffee with me for most of the trip as there's a way of dealing with that.

Tony Abbott:

But the police in Victoria have been checking haven't they?

Daniel Wild:

I-

Tony Abbott:

If the people are carrying empty cups.

Daniel Wild:

I think that's been the case. Fortunately, I've not been checked up on yet, but I always leave a little bit of coffee just at the very bottom, just in case. So anyway, Tony, you mentioned that you've been traveling. Why don't we discuss that for a minute? So where have you been traveling to, and what is it that you're up to? Can you share with us and our listeners, where you are at the minute?

Tony Abbott:

Well, again, Dan, I should apologize to the listeners because on three or four occasions over the last 18 months, I have been able to leave the country because I've been on government business, either British government board of trade business or on Australian government India trade envoy business. And this is why I'm out of the country. Again, there's a meeting of the UK board of trade in Belfast later in this week. I'm also doing a bit of charity work. I'm on a number of charities connected with the Japanese philanthropist, Dr. Hander. That's why I'm out of the country and look at the United Kingdom, which in some respects has been hit harder by the pandemic than Australia. Certainly seems to have life going on reasonably much as normal although, although yes, the people working in restaurants are masked here in London in the same way that they are in Sydney and Melbourne at the moment. And I think there are still quite a lot of office workers in particular in Britain who are working from home.

Daniel Wild:

No, thanks for letting us know that, Tony. And thank you also for getting up early. I think it around 6:00 AM that we kicked off this morning with you in London. So we greatly appreciate you getting up early and keeping up the weekly discussions. I did want to turn to our questions now. And the first question I wanted to ask you actually flows on exactly from what you were just discussing. It's a question from Stefan from our Facebook page and Stefan asks, "Tony, given your international experience, can you

compare Australia and the UK in terms of the response to COVID?" You've talked a little bit about the differences at the moment. Is there anything else you can elaborate on there, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

Look, as I said, at the beginning, you can criticize every government from one standpoint or another. I suspect that if we really did try to do a fair minded cost benefit evaluation of all the significant countries' responses, we could well end up concluding that countries like Sweden and Japan, which never had across the board lockdowns, which never closed schools and universities, which tried to have as light a touch as possible on this will turn out to have had the best combination of health, economic, and social outcomes. But look in Britain, they weren't able to shut the virus out with closed international borders in the way we were. There are massive people movements in and out of the United Kingdom, so at no stage have Britain's borders been closed.

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Tony Abbott:

At no stage have Britain's borders been closed to the extent that ours were. The coronavirus hit them hard and early. They did suffer a large number of COVID related deaths last year and the early part of this year. I don't want to say that Britain is, if you like, a shining success and Australia is in some way a relative failure. But I do think that the British government did two things right.

Tony Abbott:

First of all, they vaccinated very fast, very early. Second, once vaccination rates approached 70%, they had what amounts to freedom day. Now, it's not complete freedom as we've just been discussing. The people working in restaurants are still wearing masks. The people working in shops by and large are still wearing masks.

Tony Abbott:

But certainly they made a point of saying, back I think it was on July the 19th, that the worst of this is over. Essentially normal life has resumed. I think from a psychological point of view, that was a very important thing to do and all credit to Boris Johnson for it.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah. Just quickly on that Tony. Do you reckon they're going to lock down again. Because that's what's happening in some countries in continental Europe. At the moment Austria for example, going in that direction. I know there was some talk of another potential lockdown in the UK but as far as I can tell, that's not going to happen. Is that the sense that you get?

Tony Abbott:

That's the sense I get. Their health experts are just as divided as ours are. The headlines tend to be grabbed by the health experts with the most alarmist prediction. Look, the public debate in Britain can be just as skewed and just as catastrophes as ours has been over the last 18 months. But I do think there has been a greater reluctance in the British political class for lockdowns. The British parliament for instance has had many more vocal members against lockdowns than our parliament appeared to have had.

Daniel Wild:

All right. Thank you for that Tony. I just wanted to take one more question. This one's from Ava, also from our Facebook page. A bit of a critical question but I'll go with it and see what you think.

Daniel Wild:

Ava asks, have we become too soft as a society? We used to be rugged individuals and now we want government to look after us, end quote. Tony, what do you think of Ava's question?

Tony Abbott:

It's a very good question. I suspect that once you get to a certain age, you start to feel nostalgia for the good old days. I certainly wondered at some points in my time as a not always that hands on parent, whether I was being more protective of my kids than my parents had been of me.

Tony Abbott:

For instance, when I was a youngster, every weekend you'd just go out roaming in the bush. Cracker night was an opportunity to throw penny bangers at your mates up and down the street as opposed to something that could only be fireworks but not something that you could only look at from a far. A point in place by professionals in those days.

Tony Abbott:

I can remember dad dropping me in a couple of mates off in the hills behind Taree to spend five or six days paddling canoes down the Manning River without any contact through mobile phones or anything else with our parents. But we had a shield view right view about life in those days.

Tony Abbott:

I don't think Maggie and I were helicopter parents. I think our kids were encouraged to get around him and do things and learn for themselves by trial and error how to cope in the wider world. But I'm sure I was more protective of my kids than my parents were of me. Yes, you do worry. Where is the next generation of SAS going to come from?

Tony Abbott:

How are a people going to cope in the wilds if for whatever reason the GPS system isn't working? If they can't look at the sky and say, actually that's north. If they can't look at the clouds and say, well, actually the weather is about to change. If they can't look at a river and say, well, if I follow that, I'm likely to come somewhere.

Tony Abbott:

I worry about our capabilities unaided by technology. I worry about our physical and mental toughness. I worry about our spiritual depth because in the end, you need things to believe in. Preferably things that have stood the test of time and that wonderful human beings from generation unto generation have believed in as well so that there is this continuity between us and our fourbears.

Tony Abbott:

Look, I worry about all of these things. The challenge is not just to lament the passing of the old virtues and the old strengths. The challenge is to do everything we can here and now to keep the best of what we've had and build on it.

Daniel Wild:

Well, I think those are some pretty wise words to end our discussion on today Tony. I think we'll leave it there. Thank you for that. On behalf of our listeners, can I say thank you again for joining us so early over in London and have an enjoyable rest of your trip.

Tony Abbott:

Good on you, Dan. Lovely to talk to you. We'll do it again next week.

Daniel Wild:

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