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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 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. And this episode will be the final episode of season one of Australia's Heartland. We had originally thought of just doing 12 episodes, but the feedback we got was so popular from our listeners and from IPA members that we decided to add a few more episodes to take us to the end of November, and that gives us a nice 16 episode season one. And we might touch on what all this means at the end of our discussion today, Tony.

Daniel Wild:

But, otherwise we will get into today's discussion. There is a lot of ground to cover, as always. And to begin with, we've got to talk about the new variant of COVID 19. There's always a new variant, it seems, just around the corner. This is the Omnicom variant. There is from a public policy perspective, some good news I guess, which is the response so far from governments has been relatively tempered. There hasn't been a knee jerk reaction to lockdown just yet. And so let's hope that it stays that way.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, what perspective can you give us on what government should or should not be doing in response to this new variant?

Tony Abbott:

Yeah. And the first thing is that we shouldn't be panicking. We've had numerous variants over the course of the pandemic, this is simply the latest. While all of them have sparked initial concerns, none of them have really been that much worse than the other in terms of the impact on people's health. Some have been more infectious than others, but in the end whatever the variant, we just have to deal with it, we just have to live with it. And as we've been discussing now, Dan, for quite a few weeks, I think that there has been a bit of knee jerk authoritarianism in our overall response to the pandemic.

Tony Abbott:

Here in Britain, where I am at least for the next 12 hours or so, the response to the new variant has been a renewed mask mandate in shops and public transport. And as you know, I am deeply skeptical about masks in most contexts, as you know, the health advice on masks has been mixed and changing. And I think a lot of the time these masks have become symbolic rather than practical. They're a symbol of whether we think the virus is the most important thing in people's lives or whether we think that life is something just to be got on with. And so I will be very, very, very happy to see the end of mask mandates. And it irks me that the British government, which has, generally speaking, been more liberal than others, seems to have fallen back on masks in fear of this new variant. And as I said, we've just got to take this in our stride. The last thing we should do is panic because viruses mutate, it's just what they do. And our job is to be human and to get on with life and to make the most of each day and not to live life in fear.

Daniel Wild:

Well today in question time in parliament, Tony, and I appreciate you may not have had a chance to see this, but Scott Morrison said that he was adamant that Australia would stay open over the Christmas period, at least when it came to the domestic situation. But of course that raises the issue that the rules and the regulations are primarily in the remit of the state governments. And so, I reckon the federal government has been far too hands off on this issue and has largely allowed state government to do what they want. And, I'm concerned that with the powers the state governments have and the way in which they've been acting over the past 20 or so months, that there may be indeed a return to some of their more authoritarian approaches taken. Can you help us understand the dynamics at play here, Tony, between the federal and the state government's on this issue?

Tony Abbott:

Look, I can do my best Dan. Look, I was a health minister for four years under the Howard government, as you might remember, and the federally run parts of the health system back then were in pretty good shape. The big problem back then was the state of the public hospital system. And I was so often asked as federal health minister to do this and to do that, to try to improve public hospitals. The problem was that the only thing I could do as the federal health minister to improve public hospitals was to give the states more money and they would gladly take the money, but they would rarely do what they were supposed to do in return. You would sometimes get them to change things in the short term, but once the money was given, you were stuck with giving it forever and the change rarely lasted beyond a year or two.

Tony Abbott:

So the truth is that the federal government has much less real authority over vast areas of government than the public tend to think, and often enough then we in federal government would like. So I suspect that there are all sorts of things that states have done over the last 18 months or so that Scott Morrison and Greg Hunt would not like one little bit. But the question is, if you can't change it how much do you complain about it? Because disagreeing with the states without being able to change it can often make what is an unsatisfactory situation even worse, because it just makes you look impotent. And so it's not easy. This pandemic it's been absolutely unprecedented in policymakers lifetimes, it's exposed some of the difficulties inherent in the go of a Federation. And I think we've got to-

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Tony Abbott:

And I think we've got to cut our federal government some slack here. I haven't agreed with everything the federal government has done and said. But I think we've got to cut them a fair bit of slack when it comes to blaming them for the things that the states have done that we don't like, for the simple reason that other than object rhetorically, it wouldn't have been easy for them to make a difference. I suppose, with the wisdom of hindsight, we could say, "Well, at the outset, using the quarantine powers under the constitution, the federal government could have legislated to override the states." But I think at the time, that would have been extremely divisive, and arguably it would have distracted from the immediate practical health response. So again, frustrating though it is, and I suspect that I've been as frustrated as anyone throughout this, I'm not sure what else practically could have been done. And I think, as I said, we do have to cut them some slack here.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, as you mentioned, you were health minister in the Howard government. And I know you and I have talked about this a couple of times before, but I think it's important just to go over some of these issues again, because you were intimately involved in pandemic planning and response. And the plan that was there up until the eve of COVID-19 coming to Australia shores was very, very different to the approach ultimately taken by governments in Australia. I think the plan that was there preexisting COVID was pretty balanced and pretty reasonable. And it's unfortunate, in my opinion, that that was dispensed with. Can you help us understand what were some of the main considerations that you had as health minister in pandemic planning, and why is it that you think the state governments took a very different approach to the plan that was already there?

Tony Abbott:

The pandemic plan that was refined in my time as health minister and was essentially continued right through until August 2019 stressed quarantine at the borders to slow the spread of pandemic illness while we ramped up our health system to cope. But there was certainly no thought in the pandemic plans of widespread and frequent closures of schools, of businesses. There was no suggestion back then of the routine employment of stay at home orders. There was no thought of health authoritarianism. There would be an improvement in health services. There would be the rapid establishment of services, particularly through the hospitals, to deal specifically with the pandemic disease. There would be a lot of advice to the public. But there would be nothing like the draconian restrictions that in fact have been employed.

Tony Abbott:

I suspect, Dan, that one of the reasons why we went down the path we did was because this virus initiated in Wuhan, China. And the kind of public of health responses that you could expect from a communist government in Beijing would be quite different from the kind of public health responses that you would typically expect from a liberal pluralist democracy such as us. So I think there's a sense in which what we did here was culturally influenced, if you like, by what they did there.

Tony Abbott:

And let's not forget that if you stop life in its tracks, you can make a dramatic impact on an infectious disease. The trouble is an infectious disease, once it's with us, is almost impossible entirely to stamp out. So to maintain a degree of freedom from it, you've got to maintain a degree of restrictions, which would once have been regarded as unthinkable and which large slabs of the population have found thoroughly irksome.

Tony Abbott:

What we have seen in countries such as ours is an added element of political, social, cultural fragmentation between those who are happy to endure unprecedented restrictions and to keep them safe and those who absolutely hate unprecedented restrictions because it chafes against their sense of what a free society should be and what personal responsibility should be. So I think this whole period has been pretty difficult, spirit sapping for many of us. Certainly we'll be living with the economic consequences for many years to come. And I fear that we are going to have a long-term change, which I would regard as change for the worse when it comes to bigger government and popular readiness to conform with directives that are vastly more detailed and vastly more controlling than anything we would ever have expected outside of war time.

Daniel Wild:

Just one more question on this, Tony, before we move on to another topic. And what you've said there, I think is very important, which is about how the fact that this virus came from China and the response that they had in China influenced the response in Australia. I think there's been a few people that have observed that the whole idea of the integration of China into the global economic system and into international organizations like the World Trade Organization, and their growing role in international affairs was supposed to make China more like us. They were supposed to become more liberal and more democratic, but some have observed that perhaps we've become a bit more like them.

Tony Abbott:

We've become more like them. Yeah.

Daniel Wild:

We've become more like them with the response to COVID. Does this concern you? Do you think this is a long-term trend in Australian culture, or is this a transitory issue in relation to the virus?

Tony Abbott:

Well, let's hope it's an aberration. Let's certainly hope that we haven't become more like them. There's absolutely no doubt that at the official level, at least, China has not become more free as it has become more rich. And let's hope that Chinese ways of doing things will not become more prevalent in countries such as ours just because there's been a degree of commonality in terms of dealing with this pandemic. I have been, as you know, Dan, surprised, very surprised that Australians have put up with so many restrictions for so long. I certainly don't want to see ugly threats of violence. I certainly don't want to see any breaking of the ...

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Tony Abbott:

I certainly don't want to see any breaking of the law, but I've got to say, I have noted the massive demonstrations that have taken place in most of our big cities over the last few weeks in favour of freedom. Again, without wanting ever to see stuff being over the top or violent or damaging or vandalistic, it's good to see that people are taking freedom seriously and are making their views absolutely obvious to people. I'm disappointed that notwithstanding the massive demonstrations that we've seen in Melbourne against the ongoing state of emergency and it's proposed replacement, that it

seems that an independent in the upper house has been found to back the Andrews Bill with a few more cosmetic amendments.

Daniel Wild:

That's right. Yep.

Tony Abbott:

Notwithstanding which, once the premier has declared a pandemic, it will essentially be a health autocracy with the minister able to make any order reasonably necessary for public health, with almost no checks and balances.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah, indeed. Those protests you referred to, or the demonstrations Tony, here in Melbourne, it's been well over 100,000 on the last couple of Saturdays. It's been very significant and I think heartening to see a lot of people coming out to defend freedom and democracy. You're right. This Bill that now looks like it's going to pass in Victoria is deeply concerning as you and I have discussed over the last couple of weeks. I did now want to turn to another issue, Tony, in the cultural space. As we talk today, it is the last day of spring. Tomorrow is the first day of summer and that means one thing and that's cricket. Cricket will be back. I'm very much looking forward to the test cricket and the Ashes series against England.

Daniel Wild:

The first test is in about a week's time. I wanted to talk about the new captain, Pat Cummins. No dad, he's a fantastic cricketer, great person, but I have been a bit concerned by some comments he's been making in the media about wanting to use his platform as test captain, to campaign on issues like climate change and "racial inequality". Some of what he said to the Australian a couple of days ago, and I quote, "The game has a big footprint". He's talking about cricket. "We fly all over the world in jets. We've got big stadiums, play under massive lights. The fields use so much valuable water. There's a lot we can do". Tony, I'm pretty uncomfortable with sports stars using their platform to campaign on issues that are ultimately pretty contested in the community. I think that sports people should be uniting us. Sports should be a place for us to come together. I'm concerned about this development. What are your thoughts?

Tony Abbott:

People are entitled to their views. Even Australian cricket captain are entitled to their views and if they want to tell us what their views are, fair enough. The cricket captain is an authority on cricket. He's not an authority on politics or culture, other than I suppose, sporting culture and there's no added essential validity or weight to someone's views just because they happen to hold an unrelated position. I think the danger when sports people use their sporting prominence as a political pulpit, is that it may turn people off the sport itself.

Tony Abbott:

I must say when it comes to rugby, for instance, the whole Israel Folau thing made me disinclined, or certainly it made me less inclined to follow the national team and it made me less inclined to go to the international games. I love rugby. I've played rugby for the first 30 odd years of my life. Some of the best friends I have are people who I met through rugby. It's a wonderful sport. Sport builds character, but I think we need to be careful about misusing things and as I say, being a sports star, it doesn't necessarily

make you the world's best human being and it certainly doesn't make you a guru on politics. I think if sport is used as a platform for other things, it's not going to help the sport, whatever it might do for the cause you're campaigning for.

Daniel Wild:

I agree. I live in Melbourne and I'm much more of an AFL fan than a rugby fan, and in many ways, the AFL is probably a bit worse than rugby in the virtue signaling and it's engagement in cultural issues. It does put you off. A lot of people are put off by it and this gets to a bigger issue, doesn't it, which is so many of the major institutions of our society, of our civic society, religious organizations, sporting organizations, community organizations, they seem to be more and more inclined to engage in political issues and social issues rather than focusing on what the core motive, mission and vision of their organizations are. I think that becomes, as you say, off-putting, but it also divides us quite a lot, I think, as a community. Do you share those views?

Tony Abbott:

I do, Dan and I think the easiest thing in the world for the CEO of a struggling business is to come out with some politically correct announcement, which will earn cheap applause, which may well distract attention from deficiencies in the core activity. I think we've seen a lot of that in recent times. People going for the cheap applause by aligning themselves to something which they think is going to win them kudos from the politically correct chorus. In the end, if you are a sports person, your job is to be as good as you can be at that sport. If you're a business person, your job is to provide the best possible product or service. It's to do the right thing by the customers, by the staff, by the shareholders. If you are a religious leader, your job is to do what you can to turn people's minds to the higher things, to I suppose, inspire or evoke in people a sense of the transcendent, a consciousness that there is more to life than the here and now that we are constantly, we need to be better tomorrow than we are today.

Tony Abbott:

I think that striking poses on the fashions of the moment is usually at odds with the core business of whatever you might be in. I guess you'd expect this from a conservative, I am deeply skeptical of people who suddenly discover the latest fashion.

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Tony Abbott:

Suddenly discover the latest fashionable cause, jump on the bandwagon, make heroes of themselves. Short-term heroes of themselves, because invariably, their main job is neglected in the process.

Daniel Wild:

Yeah, well said, Tony. Thank you for that perspective. Well, that brings us to, now, what'll be the final segment of season one of Australia's Heartland. I thought what might be nice for our listeners, Tony, is, given all of your experience, you've had something like three decades in public life. You've been a prominent minister in the Howard government, Minister for Employment, Minister for Health, then opposition leader and ultimately, prime minister.

Daniel Wild:

Now, you're one of Australia's leading public intellectuals in your role as a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs. I thought it would be a very nice note and an interesting note to end on, if you were looking back on speaking to your 30-year-old self, with everything you know now and all of your wisdom and experience, what kind of advice would you give to yourself?

Tony Abbott:

It's a very good question, Dan. I'm not saying for a second that everything I did was right and well advised. I'm not saying that, if I had my life over again, I would do everything identically. But, I've got to say that I've had a wonderful life so far. An absolutely wonderful life so far. I think that the reason for that is that, basically, my instinct has always been to have a go.

Tony Abbott:

If in doubt, think as much as you can, but in the end, take counsel of your hopes rather than your fears. If your heart tells you it's right, give it a go. I can remember, in my first few weeks as an MP, we had a politician's retreat at a resort on the outskirts of Canberra. It was not long after the 1993 election.

Tony Abbott:

The opposition was struggling. John Houston was still the Opposition leader, but he wasn't doing very well. The mood was pretty glum, but I remember John Herron saying to me, the wonderful John Herron. A senator from Queensland, former Liberal Party President in Queensland. A surgeon before he went into parliament, a very good and decent minister for Indigenous Affairs in the early part of the Howard Government.

Tony Abbott:

John Herron said, "It's the things you don't do that you regret in this business, not the things you do do. It's the things you don't say, not the things that you do say. If you have a go, you might make mistakes, but you will also make a difference. If you sit back and wait for others to speak, if you sit back and wait for others to lead, well, you're letting others make the running."

Tony Abbott:

Now, fair enough, but do we want to be people who make a difference or do we want to be people who simply go with the flow and let ourselves be carried along by a tide that others have created? I just think the world is a better place where people speak their minds, where people do their own thing and let them speak their minds respectfully. Let them speak their minds thoughtfully.

Tony Abbott:

Based on all the facts they can muster, but in the end, let them speak their minds and let them do their own thing. Let them be themselves. I just think that great Australian instinct to have a go is so incredibly important. I hope that, when my life is finally over, people will say, "Yes, he was someone who had a go and he didn't always succeed, but yes, he made a difference."

Daniel Wild:

No, that's a wonderful note to end on, Tony. Thank you for that. I don't think anyone would ever accuse you of not having had a go. You've always been willing to give a lot of yourself in public life. In politics, in debate, in your role in volunteering. We thank you for that. Again, I just want to say thank you

personally, Tony, for getting up so early. I think it's something like 6:00 AM your time in the U.K. and our listeners greatly appreciate you doing that for us.

Daniel Wild:

Thank you for what has been a very enlightening few months talking with you. On behalf of all of our listeners, can I say thank you for the generosity of your insights? Your perspective and wisdom and intellectual leadership is, I think, needed now more than ever, given the very significant challenges we face as a nation.

Daniel Wild:

We are all very pleased and happy that you've decided to continue in public debate and continue engaging in the debates of our time, now as a Distinguished Fellow of the Institute of Public Affairs. I look forward to all of the work we're going to continue doing in your capacity at the IPA. Thank you, Tony, for the discussions. In closing, is there anything you'd like to say?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, just what an honor it's been to have these conversations. I look forward to starting again in the new year. Obviously, if the listeners have got any topics that they would like us to explore, I'm all ears and I'm looking forward to delving into them.

Daniel Wild:

Fantastic. Tony, thank you once again. I look forward to picking up this series again in the new year.

Tony Abbott:

Thanks Dan.

Daniel Wild:

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