



CHRIS KENNY

What's happened to the Australia I knew and loved?



JANET ALBRECHTSEN

Hats off to Andrew Bragg, the man who beat the Big Super bullies



SHORTENING THE ODDS

Brad Norington reports on Labor's comeback wannabe

# INQUIRER

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## LESSONS IN FAILURE

### In this land of the Delta Blues, Covid zero is no longer king

How we live with corona is a painful discussion that the nation must have

GREG SHERIDAN  
FOREIGN EDITOR



Institute, tells Inquirer: 'Delta is more serious. Studies from Canada and the UK suggest it's twice as likely to put you in hospital, in ICU and kill you.'

Other epidemiologists might be a bit more provisional in their judgments, but no one makes a serious case that it's any less deadly than previous strains.

The total number of new cases in NSW, more than 1700 since mid-June, is still small by international standards. But Australia has very few people who have experienced Covid so we have no natural immunity.

And still only 15 per cent of eligible adults are fully vaccinated. So we are immensely vulnerable. Our health systems could still be severely tested.

What we are desperately trying for now is far more adults to have at least their first jab by October. Bereklian thinks we could then lead more normal lives. But one job is vastly less protective than two shots.

MacIntyre thinks that if Delta is the dominant variant, then we need 80 per cent adult vaccination before we can safely open up. Coatsworth also nominates the figure of 80 per cent, but he argues that with a 50 per cent overall adult vaccination rate we should be able to give more freedom to the fully vaccinated.

'Younger adult Australians need a pathway,' Coatsworth tells Inquirer, 'when we get to 50 per cent of the entire relevant adult population vaccinated, with age groups of 60 plus nearly fully vaccinated, then you would still have restrictions, but greater liberties would be offered to the fully vaccinated.'

Professor Sanjaya Senanayake of the Australian National University, like Coatsworth and

'Rather than the whole economy opening up at a certain point, it's better to give those who have been vaccinated more freedoms'

others, says that when we do relax, it should be gradual: 'Rather than the whole economy opening up at a certain point, it's better to give those who have been vaccinated more freedoms'

This week, I undertook lengthy interviews with nearly a dozen of the most distinguished epidemiologists and infectious disease experts in Australia. All of them are keen to get Australia opened up as soon as possible. Not one thought the UK approach of declaring a 'freedom day' when all restrictions end was a good approach.

It's always difficult to communicate a nuanced message to the public one with positives and negatives. Professor Josie McVernon of the Doherty Institute tells me that it has been psychologically damaging to focus forever on getting back to our pre-Covid life.

She thinks it's striking that next door to Australia, in Indonesia, human beings can die because of a lack of medical oxygen while in Australia a certain sub-set in mental care still claim that Covid is just the flu. At the same time, she believes we can cope with Covid.

Similarly, Coatsworth says the idea of Covid zero 'has become addictive'.

Australia did brilliantly well compared with those countries we think most culturally similar.

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An average 15-year-old today is a year behind in their learning compared with an average 15-year-old in the year 2000 ... the decline in school standards despite the real per capita funding increase is one of Australia's great policy failures of the past two decades.

Alan Tudge, Education Minister

The educational science is as settled as it can possibly be on this. The divide in the education community is between those who follow the educational science and those who embrace sociology instead.

CIS education analyst Glenn Fahy

We had about 50,000 students Australia-wide in 2019 who started secondary school with bare-minimum reading skills if any at all.

Jennifer Buckingham, MultiLit director

We know what works. We are talking here about explicit instruction, the teacher being responsible for the learning of students.

AERO director Jenny Donovan

### FUNDING SPIURGE

Total government spending on schools



Source: ACARA

### FAILING GRADES

Australian students' PISA scores



Source: PISA

Declining education standards are a national crisis that's harming our children's future and our economy

PAUL KELLY  
EDITOR AT LARGE



In the list of policy failures over the past 20 years, the fall in school education performance must rank at or near the top - yet the response has brought contradictory voices and a denial of political responsibility to confront this disservice to young Australians and our economic future.

The inadequate level of school performance and Australia's steady decline both in absolute and relative terms has never hit the national political radar. It has never been presented as a national crisis. It is widely debated at state level - where responsibility lies for schools - yet there is no agreed, credible policy response being implemented as each state goes its own way with negligible results.

The issue is elemental. School children have not been properly instructed in reading, maths, science and the humanities. This should be seen for the institutional failure that it represents. Yet this failure has only begun to enter the mainstream media debate.

Interviewed by Inquirer, I asked new federal Education Minister Alan Tudge whether he felt the Australian public was even aware of the extent of the crisis. 'Probably not - and when I point it out to people they are typically shocked, as they should be,' Tudge said. 'When I point this out in my speeches people are shocked to find we have declined in our school standards even against ourselves by about a year's worth of learning over two decades. That is an average 15-year-old today is a year behind in their learning compared with an average 15-year-old in the year 2000.'

The public interest of students, parents, business and community is being sacrificed. Witness Aus-

tralia's 20-year battle over how to teach primary school students to read. Reading is the foundation of education. Without reading, a child cannot succeed in secondary school or in the workplace.

The struggle over reading is the ultimate example of subjects being taught with little or no basis in the science of learning. Tudge makes the alarming point: 'I don't think there is a consensus as to the source of this problem among educational theorists.' The result is division about school curriculum, flawed teacher training at universities, irresolution from state education ministers and, because of the federation, a national government with limited impact on classroom practice.

Central to Australia's problem is the misuse of a great idea - that the 'knowledge capital' of countries determines their success. As a nation we loved this idea for a generation. Many economists and politicians fooled themselves into thinking Australia was actually implementing it. But they made a colossal blunder - they failed to follow the data. They had contempt for the science of learning.

Jenny Donovan, director of the Australian Education Research Organisation - the body created by state and federal ministers to spearhead research - told Inquirer the evidence was convincing. 'We need to focus on practices that deliver the most effective

learning outcomes,' Donovan said. 'We know what those practices are. The evidence is extremely robust, up there with the most evidence-based stuff there is. We know what works. We are talking here about explicit instruction, the teacher being responsible for the learning of students; teachers revisiting the content to ensure it is learnt and maintained. This approach is supported by cognitive science and our understanding of how the brain learns.'

Yet this is not the approach followed in most Australian classrooms. 'The problem is these practices are not necessarily well understood by teachers,' Donovan said. 'There are concerns teachers will be accused of lacking creativity in their approach. I believe these fears are misguided. We need to look into why teachers aren't picking up the most effective practices.'

'Indications from the assessments suggest that learning is not going well. We know from surveys of teachers where they are fairly frank that they don't know how to teach reading or writing.'

Tudge is unusual - a federal minister deeply versed in education before he entered politics. His mission is to return Australia by 2030 into the top group of education nations. He brands as 'damned' the story of the past 20 years. But he has no hope

unless the states share this as a genuine commitment.

Tudge said: 'Our standards have fallen significantly over the past 20 years despite the massive increase in school funding. A kid today has 60 per cent more resources allocated to them than they did 20 years ago. Funding for schools has increased by 38 per cent in real per capita terms over the past decade.'

Incredibly, our performance has gone backwards. Politicians who talk passionately about equity have presided over classroom methods that have done more to damage disadvantaged students and handicap them for a lifetime than virtually any other public policy in this country. Yet there is no accountability.

'The decline in school standards despite the real per capita funding increase is one of Australia's greatest policy failures of the past two decades,' Tudge said. 'The real problem in educational theory is that we've had an approach essentially based on child-centred inquiry and so-called child-skilling which has been hostile to a knowledge-rich, explicit instruction method. This has been the triumph of progressive ideology over evidence-based practices. The evidence is clear that explicit teaching is far more effective than purely child-centred learning.'

What does the science of learning tell us? One person deeply

qualified to answer is Jennifer Buckingham, director of strategy at MultiLit, a literacy instruction provider. Buckingham has spent the past 12 years spearheading the battle to inject phonics back into schools as the evidence-based method to teach young people how to read.

She told Inquirer: 'Education departments have tended to be uncritical, not look at the data and not ask: Why aren't a significant proportion of students able to read at the end of primary school?'

'How can that question have been ignored? And it has been ignored for far too long.'

We had about 50,000 students Australia-wide in 2019 who started secondary school with bare-minimum reading skills if at any all, and that's being going on year after year. Seven years of full-time schooling should not result in a kid not being able to read. Reading underpins everything else. It is impossible to succeed in education if you struggle with reading. There is a responsibility here in terms of government departments and ministers around Australia who thought this was acceptable.'

Creeping failure has been tolerated by education ministers. And this struggle is not limited to reading. The conflict over how to teach pervades all subjects and is now erupting in maths. The core problem seems almost unbelievable. Tell us? One person deeply

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