

## Minority Report – Sam Hibbins

### Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### Health and Human Services

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical need for Victoria to have well-funded, properly structured health and human services systems.

I have supported the government's health-led approach; however, it is clear the pandemic, and in particular the second wave, have exposed systemic shortcomings in both our health and human services systems.

Failings in hotel quarantine, the contact tracing system, outbreaks amongst health care workers, inadequate communication with multicultural communities and the mismanagement of the public housing lockdown are all cause for a comprehensive review of our health and human services departments.

The Grattan Institute cited under-investment in public health in their submission, stating that the failings in contact tracing were *"a symptom of under-investment in public health, and public health IT, by both sides of politics over decades."*

They also recommended *"the Victorian government needs to reinvest in public health staffing and infrastructure."*

Looking ahead, it would be a mistake for any failures and subsequent recommendations for improvement, to be explained away as relating to just to a 'one-in-100-year event'.

Responding to emergencies, managing disease outbreaks, protecting public health, looking after people most in need and engaging with multicultural communities are not one-in-100-year events that are at the periphery of government responsibilities, but core functions that are at the centre of both our health and human services systems.

I therefore support an independent, external review of the new Department of Health and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, to determine how they can best meet the needs of the Victorian community.

Both these departments together formed the Department of Health and Human Services until the machinery of government changes come into effect on 1 February 2021.

The review should look at whether both departments have the necessary level of funding, staffing, and resourcing, as well as the most appropriate structure to meet the needs of the Victorian community.

The review should be undertaken external of government by individuals with relevant expertise and experience, be open to submissions, and be made public upon its completion.

**Recommendation 1: The Victorian Government undertake an independent, external review of the Department of Health and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.**

**Recommendation 2: The Victorian Government significantly increase recurrent funding for public health.**

I note the submission of the Australian Medical Association which stated:

*AMA Victoria supports reforms to drive the structural changes necessary to support the delivery of a more cohesive and efficiently coordinated public health system in Victoria; one that is less siloed and more accountable and effective.<sup>iii</sup>*

They recommended:

*...that a Royal Commission be called into the Victoria's Response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of inquiry will be necessary in order to learn and apply lessons learned from this pandemic and build a sustainable and resilient workforce and health system for the future.<sup>iv</sup>*

I also note the public comments made by infectious disease expert Dr Lindsay Grayson in support of reform to Victoria's Health Department citing both funding and structural issues.

*Watching the recent rise in Victoria's COVID-19 numbers, it's time to discuss the reality – namely, that the Victorian Health Department is one of the worst-funded and dysfunctionally organised in the nation.<sup>v</sup>*

*...now is a good time to start planning a revitalised post-COVID-19 structure that could better serve Victoria. We don't need an expensive review by KPMG or PWC – we simply need to look at what aspects of the current Victorian structure are worth saving, then assess the health structures of other states that have managed COVID better than Victoria, to identify those elements that could be emulated.<sup>vi</sup>*

Furthermore, an article by Paul Sakkal in The Age in response to the hotel quarantine inquiry stated:

*Melbourne University infectious disease expert Dr Lindsay Grayson said the inquiry raised "crucially important" questions about whether the Health Department was fit-for-purpose to protect public health.*

*"The government should be asking if it's reasonable the department be left to restructure itself or if there should be an external review given the seriousness of the findings," he said*

*And Australian Medical Association Victorian president Julian Rait supported the call for an external audit, saying a panel of experts including governance experts, health experts and people from interstate, should probe the agency's structure.*

*"Given the scope and depth of the problems, you'd have to ask why would you not do a root-and-branch review of the department and its failings to ensure Victorians were better served in future by a properly functioning department," he said.<sup>vii</sup>*

I also note numerous submissions to this inquiry recommended reforms and additional funding to Victoria's healthcare system.

It would be appropriate for these recommendations to be considered by an external inquiry looking specifically out our health and human service systems.

## **Environment**

As discussed in the interim report, the government has delayed the implementation of new environmental laws and decisions on critical environmental matters, citing COVID-19 as the reason, namely:

### **Environment Protection Amendment Act 2017**

The Environment Protection Amendment Act 2017 introduced stronger laws to protect the environment and increased the powers of the Environmental Protection Agency. The implementation of these laws was delayed by 1 year following the passage of the *COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Act 2020*.

### **Climate Change Act 2017**

Interim carbon emissions reductions targets for 2025 and 2030 were required by law to be decided by the Victorian Government on 31 March 2020 and tabled in parliament within 10 sitting days.

### **2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report**

The 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report showed a significant decline in Victoria's natural environment as well as increasing rates of native species extinction. The report also included recommendations to improve environmental outcomes for Victoria.

The Victorian Government was due to respond to the report on 23 April 2020.

### **Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Central West Investigation.**

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Central West Investigation proposed an increase of 58,115 hectares in protected areas including national parks, conservation parks, nature reserves, bushland reserves and heritage rivers.

The Victorian Government's response was due by late February 2020.

Despite delaying critical environmental decisions, the Government has also made several environmentally damaging decisions during the pandemic, including:

- Lifting the moratorium on onshore gas drilling in Victoria
- Signing a ten-year logging deal with the federal government, which will give the logging industry an exemption from environment laws.
- Continuing with the environmental effects statement process of the Western Port gas import terminal despite environmental and community groups seeking a delay in hearings until after lockdown.

Action on climate change and environmental protection should not become a casualty of the pandemic. Indeed, they should be at the forefront of the government's recovery efforts. Dropping the ball on climate and environment now will have significant, detrimental effects for Victorians long into the future.

**Recommendation 3: The Victorian Government finalise its decision on interim climate change targets and responses to the 2018 State of the Environment report and the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Central West Investigation as a priority.**

**Recommendation 4: The Victorian Government prioritise investment in climate action and environmental protection as part of Victoria's economic recovery.**

## National Centre for Disease Control

Australia's response to the pandemic has been hindered by divisions between state and federal health systems, and public and private health services. Victoria's extensive network of general practitioners have been largely sidelined.

A national centre for disease control would assist with the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and help us to deliver a coordinated response for future pandemics.

The President of the Australian Medical Association Victoria gave evidence in support of a national centre for disease control.

*Mr HIBBINS: I just want to just touch on preparing for future outbreaks. A number of other countries do have centres for disease control and prevention that ensure all sectors of the health system work together in responding to infectious threats. Do you think this is something that we should have here in Australia?*

*Assoc. Prof. RAIT: Absolutely. In fact in April last year I met with Sharon Lewin, the head of the Doherty Institute, and had some meetings also with Angie Bone of the Department of Health and Human Services and Terry Symonds as well to try and cultivate perhaps or encourage a centre for disease control to be established in Victoria.*

*Now obviously there are politics around which state it should be located in, but I would have thought that the Doherty Institute in Melbourne would be ideal for exactly this purpose. I think that throughout this pandemic we have seen mixed messaging and we have seen some variations in the different things that different states do, and I think that there would be much better coordination if there was a national centre for disease control.<sup>viii</sup>*

### **Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government support the establishment of a national centre for disease control in Melbourne.**



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<sup>i</sup> Grattan Institute Submission

<sup>ii</sup> Grattan Institute Submission

<sup>iii</sup> Australian Medical Association Submission

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Medical Association Submission

<sup>v</sup> *Politics lies at the heart of the Victorian Health Department's problems - 7 July 2020 -*

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/politics-lies-at-the-heart-of-the-victorian-health-department-s-problems-20200707-p559pp.html>

<sup>vi</sup> *Victoria's Health Department needs a total restructure – 22 September 2020 -*

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/victoria-s-health-department-needs-a-total-restructure-20200922-p55y1e.html>

<sup>vii</sup> *'Disaster': Calls for external audit of health department after scathing hotel quarantine assessment – Paul Sakkal 21 December 2020 -* <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/disaster-calls-for-external-audit-of-health-department-after-scathing-hotel-quarantine-assessment-20201221-p56pcu.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Associate Professor Julian Rait OAM President Australian Medical Association (Victoria), Hearing Transcript 12 May 2020