



# Vaccine complacency could undo Australia's hard work

**C**onfronting delays in the COVID-19 vaccination program this week, federal Health Department secretary Brendan Murphy said: "We're not like the US or UK." He's right, but not in the way he intended.

Murphy argues that because we don't have scores of people dying, we can take our time with the vaccine rollout, "as quickly and carefully and safely as we can". "It's not a race," he said.

If that thinking extends to a lack of ambition about the proportion of Australians we vaccinate, then at best we'll squander a remarkable opportunity, and at worst risk another major outbreak and threaten the nation's prolonged economic recovery. If it reflects any complacency about the urgency of the vaccination program, it is terribly dangerous.

As of yesterday, about 130,000 Australians – or one in 200 – had received a first-dose COVID-19 vaccine. And this week the government admitted it would not meet its target to complete the vaccination program by the end of October.

Countries with significant case loads, such as Britain, the US and much of Europe, are vaccinating to save lives today rather than reach for so-called "herd immunity" – the point at which so many people have been vaccinated that another exponential outbreak can't occur. Australia, by contrast, has a real chance to achieve herd immunity. Whether we do so will be determined by government policy.

If anything, the government looks unambitious. It risks committing perhaps the greatest public policy bungle in Australian history if it cannot rise to the procurement, logistics and planning challenges to guarantee mass vaccination as soon



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as possible. After all its great work earlier in the pandemic, that is a terrible shame.

As UNSW Kirby Institute epidemiologists Raina MacIntyre, Valentina Costantino, and Mallory Trent have shown, the proportion of the population we need to vaccinate to achieve herd immunity varies substantially with vaccine efficacy. At 95 per cent efficacy 63 per cent of the population would need to be vaccinated. At 70 per cent efficacy, it rises to 86 per cent.

Australia has chosen to pin most of its hopes on AstraZeneca, which had 72 per cent efficacy in clinical trials, although some real-world patient data suggests it may be achieving considerably better results. We've only ordered enough of the Pfizer vaccine, with its 95 per cent efficacy, to cover at most 40 per cent of the population, and that doesn't account for potential wastage, spoilage and overdosing. We've inexplicably ordered zero doses of the equally high-efficacy Moderna vaccine. With the vaccines we're set to administer, we'll need to vaccinate about three-quarters of our population.

This will be a stretch given considerable vaccine hesitancy in the community, let alone dangerous anti-vaxxers, and the fact that the vaccine is voluntary.

There is another threat. If the UK, South African or Brazilian coronavirus variants, which appear

to be far more transmissible, were to reach Australia – say, through a hotel quarantine leak – before we complete our vaccination program, we would need to vaccinate more people. That assumes our existing vaccines are as effective against these variants, which is doubtful.

If these variants increased transmission by a third, we would need to vaccinate about 90 per cent of our population. Given we only manage to give 95 per cent of children their routine vaccines – and that's with strong incentives such as "no job, no pay" rules that withhold government benefits from families rejecting vaccination – this is pushing the limits of achievability.

Our politicians and health officials need to assure us the vaccines are safe, but also instill a sense of urgency. This is a race. We need to run. This means striking deals with Moderna and Johnson & Johnson to get more, preferably high-efficacy doses, here faster. The current, optimistic scenario of completion by December is nowhere near fast enough. A quarter of Americans have already received a dose, and they've been going since December.

We need to consider carrots and sticks such as restrictions on access to sporting events or large gatherings for the unvaccinated. Or extending the "no job, no pay" laws to coronavirus vaccines.

Australia's exemplary handling of the pandemic until now presents us with a unique opportunity to achieve herd immunity. This would allow the opening of our economy. But the government needs to be ambitious. That's not the vibe we're getting.

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issues from WorkChoices, the cost of living and changes to the family maintenance system. Going into the 2007 campaign, the Coalition held eight of the top 20 electorates of those eight, including the bellwether of Lindsay in Sydney's west.

Morrison may want to make the calculation that while the recovery favours men, he is favoured to pick up blue collar Labor seats at the next election. But there is another danger lurking for him in safe Liberal and National party seats. Independent conservative women have already demonstrated their

electoral power. Remember Abbott lost his safe seat to Zali Steggall?

When Julia Gillard and Abbott were negotiating with independent MPs for the right to form minority government after the 2010 election, all six crossbenchers were male. In 2019, three of the six on the crossbench were female. If the examples of Tame, Higgins and Contos inspire more women to run for Parliament, they may decide who runs the country regardless of what Morrison wishes to talk about.

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# Boomer feminism is the last thing we need now

**I** was around five years old when I got my first feminist T-shirt. "Women are not chicks" it read, with a little drawing of a baby chicken underneath. My father explained that it wasn't acceptable for women to be talked about as though they weren't human, which made sense. I loved that T-shirt.

In the intervening years, I have owned many feminist T-shirts and I have had plenty of time to reflect on what feminism has achieved. I am deeply conscious that I am beholden to the women who went before me, who made it possible for me to choose education, independent travel and a career. I have also had plenty of time to reflect on some of the ways feminism has not worked for women, on the shallowness of the feminism we celebrate, and the unintended consequences of Boomer-era feminism.

We are in a transformational feminist moment. The powerful words of Australian the Year and child abuse survivor Grace Tame unleashed pent-up anger. She exhorted women to no longer be silent about sexual abuse and harassment. Her call was answered by allegations of rape inside Australia's Parliament House, and

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amplified by stories of non-consensual experiences that thousands of young women poured into an online petition. A rape allegation against a cabinet minister, who strongly denies it, has ensured the anger's focus remains centred on Parliament House.

On Monday, the Boomer feminists and their intellectual heirs will converge on the national bogan moth trap, under the hashtag #March4Justice. They are channelling righteous anger, felt by women around the country, about the ongoing poor treatment of women. But they are crippled by a limited Boomer understanding of what women's rights have meant to most women. To get it right this time, feminism must learn from the wrong turns, as well as acknowledge the ground covered.

Boomer feminism brought us the sexual revolution. In some perverse ways, the "rape culture" young women are currently protesting is a

consequence of Boomer failure to review the revolution's progress. The benefits of sexual liberation accrued only to the already privileged, and the young and the disadvantaged have been lumped with the costs. While ground-breaking feminist Germaine Greer sowed her wild oats, women without her maturity, social class and intellectual advantages went from being chattels to commodities.

Centuries of tradition about the right and wrong way for men and women to interact were swept away – and I am not sorry to see most of it go – but without it there was a void, which has been left for boys and girls to fill as best they can.

This has contributed to the difficult conversations now arising around consent and its grey areas. "We haven't yet developed a vocabulary to deal with the disappointments, regrets, heartache, confusion and frustration that come with sexual freedom," says Claire Lehmann, editor of ideas website *Quillette*. "The irony is that in focusing so much on 'consent' we have forgotten about the emotional and moral valence of sex. So it's not surprising that many young people

have no vocabulary to deal with its many complexities other than a black and white legal concept."

Thanks to the birth control pill, women and men can be free of the biological consequences of sex. But sex still has consequences we are looking for ways to express.

Marriage rates dropped as sexual freedom caught on. With no other way for women to meet the expectations of a male-centric workforce, many forwent children.

## Feminism must learn from its wrong turns.

While some are glad to be free of their biological destiny, others have lived to regret it. The early 2000s saw a spate of rueful articles by women who had missed their childbearing years in pursuit of the Boomer feminist dream. Marriage rates rose slightly after that – chiefly among the middle classes – but women still have fewer children than they say they would like. These should be feminist issues. Especially because poorer women are more

likely to be unintentionally single mothers. In recent times, #MeToo was the catalyst for women to reveal boorish sexual behaviour they have been subjected to – from leering to rape. It was cathartic and made real change in workplaces, as men were made aware that poor behaviour would no longer be tolerated. But the inexorable logic of activism pushed the movement to the point of backlash. One US study found men were more reluctant to hire women as a result of the #MeToo movement, and more reluctant to have one-on-one meetings with them. In a US poll, 57 per cent of respondents were as worried about men facing false accusations as they were about women being assaulted. Women have sons too.

As a new generation of women makes itself heard, middle-class Boomers should not once again make the moment about them. I hope the women converging on Parliament House will reflect on what must be done better. It's time for change, and more Boomer feminism is the last thing we need.

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