

Hon Colin de Grussa MLC

Member of the Legislative Council, Parliament of Western Australia

Unit 3,
5 Chapman Rd
Geraldton WA 6530
Phone: 08 9921 4818
Email: colin.degrussa@mp.wa.gov.au



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Regional and Remote Western Australia and COVID-19

Introduction

Western Australia presents a unique case study on the effects and responses required to meet the challenge of the global COVID 19 Coronavirus pandemic.

Western Australia covers an area of over 2.5 million square kilometres but has a population of only 2.76 million people. Over 80% of this populace live in the greater Perth metropolitan area, which is around 6,400 square kilometres, or 0.25% of the state's total area.

This presents a significant challenge to all levels of government when it comes to the practical delivery of government services such as health, education, social services and housing to the remaining 20% of the population who live in various remote regional locations.

Overlay this with the current political landscape in Western Australia, where the State Government enjoys a significant majority in both houses of Parliament and unprecedented public approval ratings, which have effectively provided a mandate for the most proscriptive border control measures implemented in Australia.

Importantly, these measures were implemented with support from all sides of the political spectrum in the knowledge that Western Australia's unique set of circumstances meant significant risk should there be large-scale community-based infection in its regionally remote areas.

As a consequence, Western Australia has one of the world's lowest per capita infection rates with only 14 unknown source cases of COVID-19 detected since the start of the pandemic, with the community able to go about its normal life with little or no restrictions.

However, this success has come at a cost with the obvious issues of social dislocation and separation of families, as well as the economic costs associated with the difficulties of conducting business across state and international borders and restricted access to skilled labour for the agricultural and tourism sectors.

Crunch time is fast approaching with the State facing the prospect of 'opening up' amid the challenges of achieving the required vaccination rates to prevent widespread community infection and the health system from being overwhelmed; particularly in remote regional locations where the service delivery environment is difficult, and resourcing and capacity is limited.

Western Australian Government Response to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

On the 15th March 2020 the WA Government declared a State of Emergency under the Emergency Management Act and a Public Health Emergency under the Public Health Act in response to COVID-19.

On the 16th March 2020, the WA Government issued the first of what were to become a series of controlled border directions which restricted entry into Western Australia across internal state borders based on a suite of risk based conditions.

Whilst entry into Western Australia from international locations falls under the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government, quarantine requirements for international entrants were also covered by the directions. The conditions primarily related to testing, quarantine and entry provisions for certain categories of workers vital to for the continued operation of the State's economy and contained some of the world's strictest border control measures. The fundamental logic being that Western Australia's geographic isolation could work in its favour. Australia as an island continent shares no international borders with other countries, and Western Australia only shares two state borders with relatively sparsely populated states/territories. The aim was to create an 'island within an island'.

This approach has been successful - insofar as limiting the community spread of the virus – with only 14 untraced instances being detected since the start of the pandemic. Where community infection has been detected, 'snap lockdowns' of short duration have been implemented' which have avoided further community spread.

In July 2021 a major outbreak of the highly infectious delta variant of COVID-19 occurred in NSW, followed by Victoria, with sporadic and successfully controlled minor outbreaks in Queensland and South Australia. At its peak, the NSW outbreak saw a daily detected infection of over 1,500 people in September 2021, with numbers easing since. Victoria has seen daily infections peak at almost 2,300 in mid-October 2021.

Based on this, the Western Australian Government designated both NSW and Victoria as 'Extreme Risk' Jurisdictions. The restrictions were the strongest yet imposed and effectively only allowed entry into Western Australia for persons carrying out Commonwealth, State and specialist functions

Extreme risk jurisdictions

- *You are not permitted to enter without an approval through G2G Pass.*
- *Exemptions are restricted to Commonwealth, State and specialist functions only;*
- *If permitted entry, you will be directed to undertake 14 days hotel quarantine at a Government approved quarantine facility at your own expense.*
- *Approved travellers must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 PCR test in the 72 hours prior to departure.*
- *You must provide proof of receipt of at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, where eligible.*
- *You will undertake COVID-19 tests on days one, five and 13.*
- *You must wear a mask from when you enter WA until you arrive at government approved quarantine facilities. In addition if travelling by air, you must also wear a mask on the flight, and while inside the airport (with some exceptions – e.g. children under the age of 12 are not required to wear a mask).*

Source: <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/covid-communications/covid-19-coronavirus-controlled-border#ehr>

The decision to impose 'hard' border restrictions is supported by the general population, with recent polling indicating an 82% approval rating for the measures. This can largely be put down to the freedoms currently enjoyed by Western Australian where people can go about their normal lives with little or no COVID related restrictions.

As an example, WA hosted the nation's most high-profile sporting event, the 2021 AFL Grand Final, in late September. In the over 100 years of its history it is only the second time the event has been hosted outside of Victoria. With over 65,000 in attendance, it was a stark contrast between life in Western Australia and that in locked down Victoria and New South Wales. The optics of this cannot be overstated.

The Impact of the 'Hard' Border Approach

The 'hard' border restrictions in their various iterations have caused significant distress to families – with many examples of parents being separated from children and family members unable to attend important family events such as funerals and weddings. Whilst most people could travel from Western Australia to other states, the risk of them not being able to return to the State was significant.

There are examples of people obtaining the necessary approvals to return to Western Australia prior to travelling, only for that approval to be rescinded due to a change in the entry requirements and those people being left stranded in another state.

However, the hard lock down has been most felt by those located in other States, that have not been able to gain entry to WA to visit the sick or dying – or attend funerals. The emotional distress this has caused is incalculable.

The Economy

The Australian Bureau of Statistics released national accounts data released in September 2021 shows that Western Australia's domestic economy grew by 4.3 per cent in 2020-21 (measured by State Final Demand [SFD]). The result was the strongest growth of all the States and the highest growth in eight years. It follows Western Australia being the only State to record growth in its domestic economy in 2019-20, while all other States contracted.

The State Government has characterised the strong results as having been underpinned by Western Australia's success in 'crushing the COVID-19 virus', with our economy more open and with less restrictions than any other State. This has resulted in Western Australian businesses and households being consistently amongst the most confident in the nation.

- Each element of SFD grew in 2020-21 and all are above pre-COVID levels;
- household consumption grew by 2.6 per cent underpinned by record growth in retail spending, which has been the strongest of any jurisdiction;
- dwelling investment grew by 3.8 per cent, which has been boosted by the McGowan Government's Building Bonus; and
- business investment grew by 4.3 per cent, underpinned by the continued operation of the mining industry throughout the pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic, Western Australia's economy has grown by 5.7 per cent between the December quarter 2019 and June quarter 2021 - also the strongest of the States and almost double the rate of growth of the rest of Australia. Excluding Western Australia, the national domestic economy over this period has grown by 2.9 per cent.

Western Australia's extraordinary economic success can also be largely put down to its ability to operate its two biggest export industries, mining and agriculture, relatively unimpeded.

While other major mining jurisdictions suffered protracted shutdowns, WA's miners operated and traded uninterrupted throughout the crisis. In actual fact, minerals and petroleum sales in Western Australia grew by \$38 billion to \$210 billion from 2019-20 to 2020-21. Jobs supported by the sector increased from 135,000 in 2019-20 to 149,400 in 2020-21.

This can largely be put down to the State's ability to avoid protracted lockdowns and the bespoke travel arrangements put in place to accommodate fly-in/fly-out workers from other jurisdictions.

The Western Australian agricultural sector exports over \$11 billion of product per annum and due to favourable weather conditions and global economic factors, is forecast to have a record harvest and contribute substantial inputs into the Western Australian economy in 2021.

However, in contrast to the arrangements put in place for the mining sector, the agricultural sector has found it difficult to convince the State Government to prioritise pathways into the State for skilled workers. As a consequence, it is estimated that the sector will be short almost 1,000 skilled workers during this harvest season. This compounds the shortfall in seasonal workers that would normally circulate across Australia, which are mainly comprised of backpackers and holiday makers. This has had significant effects on the ability for the horticultural sector to complete harvest and has resulted in significant losses.

The shortage of seasonal workers such as backpackers has also caused significant hardship in the tourism and hospitality sectors, with many businesses unable to operate at full capacity due to a lack of staff.

Remote Aboriginal Communities – imposition of restricted access

There are more than 12,000 people living in 200 remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, across the Midwest, Gascoyne, Pilbara, Goldfields and Kimberley regions of the state. Indigenous Australians have lower life expectancies, higher rates of chronic and preventable illnesses, poorer self-reported health, and a higher likelihood of being hospitalised than non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2013; Bramley et al. 2004; Freemantle et al. 2007). As such, the residents of these communities are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than other Western Australians. Poor housing in these communities also often results in overcrowding – elevating the risk of rapid widespread infection – especially with a highly infectious virus such as COVID-19.

Almost all of these communities are located in extremely remote locations with limited telecommunication and digital connectivity and poor road access – with accessibility often compromised by seasonal weather events. As such, patients suffering severe illness requiring treatment in an ICU setting need to be airlifted to Perth hospitals – given the lack of appropriate health facilities in the communities and non-existent ICU capacity in remote regional Western Australia.

To help keep remote Aboriginal communities safe from COVID-19, the State Government put strict travel restrictions in place – with tourists and travellers not allowed to enter the communities. Consistent with the approach adopted with the imposition of a 'hard border' the logic was to avoid the risk of any infection whatsoever, as the health effects could have been catastrophic as has been evidenced in other parts of the world that experience similar circumstances.

The Health System

In the most serious of cases, patients with coronavirus require treatment in the Intensive Care Unit — and while there are 111 ICU beds in Western Australia, the only regional ICU beds are in Western Australia's largest regional city, Bunbury, located 160km south of Perth

The State's Health Minister has stated that the preferred model would *“see people treated in their own communities but if patients were sick enough to need intensive care, they would be flown to Perth”*. This could represent a significant logistical exercise as all COVID-19 patients requiring ICU treatment would invariably have to be transported using the Royal Flying Doctor Service. To put this into perspective, an ICU patient in Kununurra requiring transport to Perth for treatment must embark on a 4,400km round trip.

It is with this in mind that the State essentially took the decision to do all within its power to halt the spread of COVID-19 in the first instance, as the consequences of a serious outbreak in a regional area (particularly in the Aboriginal population) could have been devastating. It did not possess the capacity or human resources to build intensive care capacity within a system that relies on all patients to be transferred to Perth, rather than being treated in their community.

In relation to the availability of ICU beds throughout the entire hospital system, Western Australia has seen a slight decrease in capacity from 2020 to 2021 from 6.7 per 100,000 population to 6.0 — the lowest in Australia. The health system in general has also been under significant pressure with 490 code yellow alerts in the health system in the 12 months to June this year. A code yellow is an internal code for when a hospital is struggling to cope with a situation — ranging from ICT issues to excessive demand at an emergency department, potentially preventing more patients from being admitted. Of the 490 code yellow incidents in the past year, 111 were capacity related.

In response, the state government recently announced \$71.6 million of funding for a health workforce attraction and retention strategy to employ more doctors, nurses and midwives, as part of its \$1.9 billion health and mental health spend in the 2021/22 state budget. However the Australian Medical Association and State Opposition has expressed concern that the additional investment by the State Government will not deliver any real capacity within the time required and the health system as it currently stands will struggle to meet the challenges of a COVID outbreak — especially where ICU surge capacity may be required — given this will draw resources from an already overstretched health system.

The Pathway to Opening Up

The success of the 'hard' border approach has resulted in many benefits for Western Australia. Its people enjoy freedoms not experienced almost anywhere else in the world, with no protracted and damaging lockdowns and very limited impacts on its health system as a direct consequence of COVID related illness.

Western Australia's economy has actually grown during the pandemic, with the State Government recording a \$5.6 billion 2020-21 budget surplus, in an environment where most governments around the world are operating significant deficit budgets in response to the COVID pandemic.

However, the successes have also built in a sense of complacency in Western Australians simply because they have not endured the many hardships as have so many. This has resulted in lower vaccination rates — which are imperative to opening Western Australia to the rest of Australia and the rest of the world.

At present, double dose vaccination rates sit at 59.6% as compared to NSW at 85%, Victoria at 74.7% and the ACT at 87.9%. In fact, WA has the lowest double dose vaccination rate in Australia.

The picture is even worse in regional Western Australia – with some areas, such as the Kimberley region recording rates of just over 41%.

This can be put down to the historic issues of the logistics of distributing the vaccine, suitable facilities for storage and administration of the vaccine and the human resources available to deliver the jab. The lack of vaccination uptake in remote regional areas is also compounded by the cultural and practical issues related to convincing those in remote Aboriginal communities to become vaccinated – which is significant for the reasons already stated.

Consistent with its no nonsense approach to border entry into Western Australia, the State Government has recently implemented the most proscriptive mandatory vaccination regime in Australia. The mandated requirement will cover almost 75% of employees throughout the State.

Further to this, the State Government has flagged that entry restrictions into Western Australia will not be eased until after Christmas 2021 once double dose vaccination rates have reached between 80 and 90% – reflecting its very conservative risk-based approach.

COVID 19 Mandatory Vaccination and Vaccination Program Policy

- *Based on the latest health advice, a mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policy for a majority of occupations and workforces in WA will be introduced in a phased approach.*
- *The policy follows the existing mandates in place for workers in high-risk industries, including those interacting with people at an increased risk of being infected with COVID-19, or people who are vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, or where it is necessary to avoid catastrophic risk to the safety of the community.*
- *The policy's phased approach is to apply mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for expanded industries in WA, as well as a requirement for all critical workers to be vaccinated to attend work in the event of a lockdown or similar restrictions.*

Source: https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus/COVID19-vaccination-program/Mandatory-COVID19-vaccination