**Gordon Campbell on Labour’s cave-in to the business lobbies**

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At a time when New South Wales is in crisis over the Delta variant, it seems bizarre that our government is willing to risk heading down the same track. Yesterday though, Labour appeared willing to jeopardise the gains made by the Team of Five Million, by embarking on a “pilot scheme” that will allow *hundreds*of business executives to go overseas to so-called “medium risk” countries and then self-isolate at home on their return. Whaat? In Australia, intra-family infection is known to be a major contributing factor in the spread of the Delta variant. Even the Greens have reached the conclusion that the Ardern government has simply caved in to the business lobby groups, who all think this is a really great idea. Basically, economic factors are being prioritised ahead of health and safety.

The pilot scheme entirely begs the questions of (a) what the safeguards are going to be, beyond closing the stable door after the infection horse has bolted (b) what constitutes the “essential” reasons that suddenly require hundreds of executives to head overseas and (c) what exactly is a “medium risk” country. The whole idea smacks of the seat of the pants “business first” logic that we normally associate with the National Party. It looks very much the high risk “New South Wales model” that National has advocated ever since the pandemic began. With hindsight, we now know why Sir David Skegg warned us in his report this week that we are likely to see one community outbreak of Covid-19 before year’s end, similar to what we’re seeing now in Australia. What Skegg didn’t tell us was that this outbreak would be self-generated, via an abrupt change in the government’s priorities.

**Welcome to Vaccine World**

What yesterday’s revelations confirmed is that the world is turning into a very small place for people who aren’t vaccinated While our government was putting the final touches to yesterday’s border opening plans, ….Canada [**was announcing plans**](https://www.newsweek.com/canada-announces-vaccine-passport-international-travel-1618547) for a “vaccination passport” that will enable fully vaccinated Canadians to certify their vaccine history when they’re travel internationally. (Canada’s document states what vaccine the passport holder received, and when and where it was administered.)

Leaving the pilot scheme out of this for a moment, New Zealand’s wider plans dovetail with that approach. Being vaccinated will be the key to a more open society within New Zealand, and will become a requirement for travel beyond this country and – possibly – within it as well. There’s a lot of wishful thinking involved. As Former Air New Zealand boss Rob Fyfe indicated yesterday, he clearly thinks we can risk having corporate chieftains travel to places where Covid is prevalent and then return home to self-isolate with their families without putting the wider community at risk. All while avoiding the lockdowns that, in his view, pose the biggest threat to business survival and economic prosperity. As they say in New South Wales, tell him he’s dreaming.

With the openings in mind, Fyfe added, business leaders need to be encouraging their staff to get vaccinated, while making it easier for them to do so. Although Fyfe didn’t say so, presumably the encouragement should extend to employers absorbing the costs if and when the side effects from the vaccine cause some of their staff to require time off work, until they recover. Overseas, the fear of losing income via side effects is known to be a major factor in vaccine hesitancy. Its an interesting question. In return for getting their trips overseas, how willing are the employer groups to pick up the tab for any extra costs back home? Surely if this lobby-driven pilot scheme does end up triggering further lockdowns, it shouldn’t be taxpayers who have to bail the business sector out. Lets get that in writing before we start the pilot scheme.

**Across the Borderline**

As PM Jacinda Ardern explained yesterday, there isn’t going to be anything like a ribbon cutting moment on a designated Opening Day. Instead, she indicated, re-opening to the world will be a gradual, risk minimising process in line with the elimination strategy that we’ve been pursuing all along. If we do survive the pilot scheme, a new border system will start to kick in sometime between January and March 2022, and it will consist of three main divisions :

• Low risk: Vaccinated travellers from low risk countries, for whom no managed isolation will be required
• Medium risk: Vaccinated travellers from medium risk countries, with less stringent isolation requirements
• High risk: Unvaccinated travellers and all travellers from high risk countries: 14 days in MIQ.

Offhand, it is hard to think of what would qualify as a “low risk” foreign country right now. No doubt, the government will be crossing its fingers that Australia (maybe) and the US (at a stretch) might be able to pass muster, come March 2022. In that respect, the divisions look like a code for separating First World friends and neighbours (whose vaccination rates will be the excuse for classifying them as “low” risk (regardless of their Covid outbreaks) and “high risk” Third World hellholes ( for God’s sake, don’t even think going to Africa, India, Fiji or Brazil) and with a grouping of Asian countries sitting in the “medium” risk category. In sum, there a 19th century feel to that three part classification scheme. And won’t China *demand* to be classed as a “low risk” destination, whatever the evidence?

As mentioned, between October and December, a “pilot programme” will be trialled for t between ‘hundreds” and “up to 1,000” outward bound New Zealand business people. They will then participate in a self-isolation test exercise on their return home, at home. (Partners and children will become the canaries in the family coalmine.) Business firms and organisations will be invited to nominate fully vaccinated staff who can claim to have a compelling reason to travel abroad.

To repeat: Across the Tasman, as Ardern conceded yesterday, in-family transmission has been a prime way of spreading the Delta variant. Offhand, it is hard to imagine what business reasons could be so compelling as to justify putting the nation’s health – and the p[ublic health system – in such jeopardy. Maybe Kirk Hope of Business NZ can give us a couple of examples. Can there really be hundreds of such cases? Have ticket, must travel. (Business class travel is really good for Air New Zealand’s bottom line.)

**Missing The Boat**

As Isaac Brock put it in one of Modest Mouse’s finest songs about science and its self delusions ..“We were certainly uncertain?/ I’m pretty sure I am.” And moreover:

*Our ideas held no water
but we used them like a dam…
Was it ever worth it?
Was there all that much to gain?
Well, we knew we’d missed the boat
And we’d already missed the plane…*

To be fair, there’s a reason why the first quarter of 2022 is a faraway land dotted with “ maybes” and “perhapses” It will be year’s end at the earliest before we can realistically hope to get 80% of the population fully vaccinated. Even if we manage to reach that ambitious target, (a) some fully vaccinated people may still be able to infect others and (b) some of them can still get sick themselves and die. In sum, the vaccine doesn’t offer a failsafe protective shield against getting infected. It merely reduces (significantly) the likelihood of hospitalisation and death.

There are related uncertainties. On MoH advice, the government has extended the default interval between the two Pfizer vaccine shots from three weeks to six weeks. (You can still choose three weeks, if so inclined). The extension is the outcome of weighing the short term social benefits of having a brief gap between the two Pfizer shots – ie getting more people fully vaccinated faster – against the longer term benefits of having a bigger gap that generate more antibodies, and delivers better quality protection. Given that the border openings will raise the infection risks, the government has chosen to go with the bigger gap/better protection option.

**Gambling, with Science**

But this is a complex gamble. In the short term, that new six week gap means riding our luck, given that the Delta variant is already in our MIQ facilities and is actively seeking the weakest link in our border defences. One dose of Pfizer gives reduced protection against the variants. Hmm. Who would want to be making these calls? True, a three week interval might maximise the breadth of the social shieled. But since the virus is not currently rampant in the community, do we use this breathing space to lengthen the interval, and thus achieve a stronger shield against Delta and the other variants likely to be coming down the pike over the next 12 months? These are not black and white decisions.

Thankfully, this week’s report by Sir David Skegg has highlighted the ongoing inadequacy of our stocks of ICU beds and ventilators. At the beginning of the pandemic we had less than half the ICUcapacity of Australia, and yet their ICU units are currently on the verge of being over-run by the Delta variant outbreak. If we’re going to increase the risk by opening our borders in roughly six months time, we urgently need to beef up our ICU capacity. What precisely, are the target numbers of ICU beds, trained staff and ventilators required to allow the government to feel reasonably comfortable with the border changes it has in mind? It would be re-assuring to know.

As for the politics of it all… As things stand, the political right lacks any credibility in its comments on how we should manage the opening of our borders. If New Zealand had been governed during the pandemic by National and the Act Party, this country would right now be indistinguishable from New South Wales. That’s why it is so bizarre that the government is risking a pilot scheme that could have been dreamed up in happier days, by NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian.

And why are we doing this? Yes,[**Air New Zealand is losing money hand over fist**](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/air-new-zealand-and-auckland-international-airport-downgraded-by-jarden/2KLTFCEHETZZ6JRW4F2QYHJBJE/). But surely, this “pilot scheme” risks triggering level four lockdowns that would delay the return of international air travellers, and cripple domestic air travel. Right now, infections are few and far between here, and the Covid death toll remains low. Economic growth is so healthy that Reserve Bank intervention is being brought forward to dampen down inflation. We continue to have low wages, but there is reasonably low unemployment. Most precious of all, New Zealanders have spent 2021 being able to live, mingle, play sport, and go out downtown in ways that most other developed countries can still barely imagine. No one wants to jeopardise those gains. Nor should we. We should be ignoring the children in the Act Party yelling“ Are we there yet?” from the back seat. Instead, we seem to be caving in to them, and are showering their corporate sponsors with treats.

**Footnote One:** The legality of some of the proposals to do with border openings will soon – probably – be tested in the courts. Can a health option – vaccination – really be turned into an compulsory requirement before New Zealanders can travel overseas? Sometime in the near future, there may be international agreement that a vaccination passport – of the sort Canada is proposing – is necessary for international travel. Would such a global agreement contravene our Bill of Rights? Probably. Might it still happen? Probably.

**Footnote Two:** There could be similar legal problems in making vaccination mandatory for those employed in certain jobs. Normally it is the state that makes such demands of public employees. In Australia though, [**a major private sector firm called SPC**](https://thenewdaily.com.au/finance/finance-news/2021/08/05/spc-vaccine-covid/) has been trying to make Covid vaccinations mandatory for its employees. Legal challenges are being threatened.

**Footnote Three:** One fly in the ointment of the government’s border opening plans will be the problem of our border staff /airline security staff being able to detect fake vaccination certificates and/or passports. Germany has [**reportedly been battling**](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57344546) a roaring trade in fake Covid documents. If there’s an incentive to bypass MIQ costs and requirements and/or to shorten the mandatory isolation periods, this will feed the market for fake vaccination documents. And if there’s only Kris Faafoi standing in the way of the counterfeiters …that is going to be a problem.

**Footnote Four:** While the mRNA vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna ) have so far avoided the side effects (and related public relations nightmares) that have beset the AstraZeneca and Johnson& Johnson adenovirus vaccines, that dream run may be coming to an end. On Wednesday, the FiercePharma website revealed that Europe’s drug watchdog [**has begun investigating the mRNA vaccines**](https://www.fiercepharma.com/pharma/europe-probing-link-between-pfizer-biontech-moderna-covid-vaccines-and-skin-condition-2?mkt_tok=Mjk0LU1RRi0wNTYAAAF-1e3oq4URzLQ6ZJHfcTz2WPX3jGgMDsSDQONgPXmEDjFAXxDIsKHErt-IlTyd8eNE-EE7qEtY9MhTIXRYw9sK2PBiqc9IWLWJzBOrLkI0UIB5UIoNnVY&mrkid=118073764) over a couple of very, very rare side effects encountered among the hundreds of millions of doses of the Pfizer vaccine thus far administered:

*Europe’s drug regulator*[***revealed***](https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/documents/covid-19-vaccine-safety-update/covid-19-vaccine-safety-update-comirnaty-11-august-2021_en.pdf)*that it is*[***investigating***](https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/documents/covid-19-vaccine-safety-update/covid-19-vaccine-safety-update-spikevax-previously-covid-19-vaccine-moderna-11-august-2021_en.pdf)*a possible link between mRNA vaccines and new conditions reported by a few recipients of the shots. The European Medicines Agency is trying to determine if the mRNA shots can trigger an allergic skin reaction called erythema multiforme or two kidney disorders. It has requested additional data from Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna.*

More to come on this, obviously. Bloomberg is reporting that shares in Pfizer and Moderna have dropped for the second day in a row,[**losing roughly $60 billion**](https://link.mail.bloombergbusiness.com/click/24717939.578031/aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmxvb21iZXJnLmNvbS9uZXdzL2FydGljbGVzLzIwMjEtMDgtMTEvbW9kZXJuYS1iaW9udGVjaC1sb3NlLTcwLWJpbGxpb24taW4tdmFsdWUtaW4tdHdvLWRheS1zbGlkZT9jbXBpZD1CQkQwODExMjFfQklaJnV0bV9tZWRpdW09ZW1haWwmdXRtX3NvdXJjZT1uZXdzbGV0dGVyJnV0bV90ZXJtPTIxMDgxMSZ1dG1fY2FtcGFpZ249Ymxvb21iZXJnZGFpbHk/55089f473b35d034698d9725B22bed450) in combined market value.

**Second hand clothes, Third World problem**

On another subject entirely…reportedly, quite a lot of the used clothing that the West puts into charity bins ends up in rotting textile mountains in Ghana – where the local term for this trade in second hand fashion garments translates as “The Clothes of Dead White Men.” [**Read about it here.**](https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/foreign-correspondent-fast-fashion/13494062) Apparently, some of the charities and commercial operators send the dregs to Malaysia and the Malaysians on-sell it at a mark-up to traders in the UAE who on-sell it to Africa and to some parts of eastern Europe….

Yes, some Ghanaians still do finally get a fashion bargain. But Ghana is a Third World nation of 30 million people with limited textile recycling capacity, and an estimated 30 million garments are reportedly arriving in Ghana every fortnight, 40 % of which are unwearable. So they get dumped and end up in the waterways, choking the aquatic life, or they get burned, exacerbating air pollution over the capital, Accra. What’s the solution? Don’t give away to charity torn or stained garments, or those with buttons missing. And maybe..we should all consider buying fewer clothes.

**Weekly playlist, with The Weeknd**

A new Weeknd single! A new Courtney Barnett single ! A new (and different) Big Thief single ! Plus um…a new Billy Idol single. (Well, it is his first new music in seven years.) I’ve mentioned Nashville country singer/writer Ashley McBryde before, but the song of hers Ipve included on this playlist uses a single metaphorical object – a stone – to reference all of her wildly mixed emotions (anguish to anger to acceptance) triggered by the suicide of her brother. It is an impressive track. Here’s the playlist :

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