

29 JUL, 2020

## COVID fight needs balance between health and economy

West Australian, Perth

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## MATHIAS CORMANN



The coronavirus pandemic continues to have a devastating impact all around the world, including here in Australia.

COVID-19 is an awful, highly contagious virus, harming lives and livelihoods. We are all working hard to protect people's health and save lives as well as save and protect livelihoods. Governments making decisions on this must strike an important balance. Yes, we must prioritise public health. Where economic restrictions help protect people's health and save lives, we should not hesitate to impose them.

However, we must not gratuitously impose unnecessary and avoidable economic or social harm for no or very little public health upside.

Governments around Australia were forced to impose significant economic restrictions earlier this year. We knew that would cause economic harm, that businesses would struggle to survive, too many would fail and jobs would be lost. As difficult as that was, our collective health mission justified the economic sacrifices we imposed on

businesses and households all around Australia.

As a country we were overwhelmingly successful in "flattening the curve" as a result of those efforts. Once suppression was achieved it was incumbent on us to ease restrictions as soon as that could be done COVID safely, so businesses could get back to business, jobs could get

restored, new jobs created and families get back to normal and rebuild.

Which brings me to the issue of State border closures.

Of course we support strictly isolating COVID-19 problem areas like those in Victoria. Yes, that should be done using all the available tools and powers of government, State and Federal working together. Whether in WA or other parts of Australia, none of us would want people from areas experiencing outbreaks of community transmission to travel freely into our local areas.

That's not a justification for indiscriminate State border closures towards all other jurisdictions.

Except for Victoria and NSW, all other States and Territories are in as good or better a position on COVID-19 than WA. There is no community transmission in any of those other jurisdictions. As of Monday, there were just seven active

cases (appropriately detected in quarantine) in the whole of Queensland, two in South Australia and just one in Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

If not now, when would our State Government restore people's rights to do business and engage freely with people in those parts of Australia? To not allow this now in relation to jurisdictions with very low numbers of active cases and no community transmission is costing jobs and keeping families separated for no reason.

A local WA exporting business recently purchased a multimillion-dollar piece of equipment required to deliver

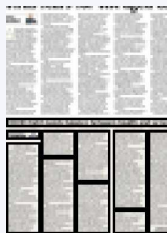
products into South-East Asia. It is sitting idle because the WA Government is refusing to grant permission to the SA-based technicians with the exclusive Australian rights to sell and set up the equipment to enter WA. Overseas customers will be lost, possibly for ever. Why, when SA has been without local community transmission consistently for longer and has fewer cases than WA.

Our Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer has consistently said that there was no public health reason for indiscriminate State border closures. In the Federal Court on Monday WA's own Chief Health Officer made the

same point. According to him, there is a less than one per cent chance of the virus re-entering WA whether our State border is closed to all or if it was opened to those States with a similar coronavirus profile as WA.

Given that evidence how can our State Government possibly justify imposing ongoing economic harm, job losses and inconvenience on WA businesses and households, restricting interaction with those jurisdictions? It is plainly not a proportionate response.

We also want to bring the AFL grand final to Perth. It would be a great economic and psychological boost to our State. Ours is the best stadium for it given Melbourne cannot possibly do it in current circumstances. AFL players have been based in Queensland or WA and have been regularly tested. Why on earth would we wreck our chances of hosting a grand final by insisting on hotel quarantine for AFL players who will have spent 10 weeks



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straight in Queensland, a State at least as COVID safe as WA if not more?

The Premier has said that the High Court challenge against his State border closure must stop.

The Australian Government did not commence these proceedings. Our intervention is to assist the court with these

important constitutional questions, not to back individual litigants. The High Court expects the Commonwealth to intervene in these types of significant constitutional matters. When the Commonwealth does, it will always put a legal view supported by our experts.

We live in a democracy where all governments and citizens are subject to the rule of law. There are limits and appropriate checks and balances on government power. Individual citizens have the right to bring a claim where they believe their rights have been taken from them by a government. The Commonwealth cannot simply cancel legal proceedings that have been validly brought on.

There is an appropriate balance to be struck by the McGowan Government, protecting the health of West Australians as well as protecting current jobs and not standing in the way of the strongest possible jobs recovery.

Keep working with us to prevent people from infected areas coming to WA, but also work with us in maximising business, trade and job opportunities where that clearly can be done in a way that is COVID safe.

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**Mathias Cormann is a WA Liberal senator and Federal Finance Minister**