

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 26. Lockdown

24 August

Something long feared has come to pass. Following on from major cities such as Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, Canberra too has entered lockdown.

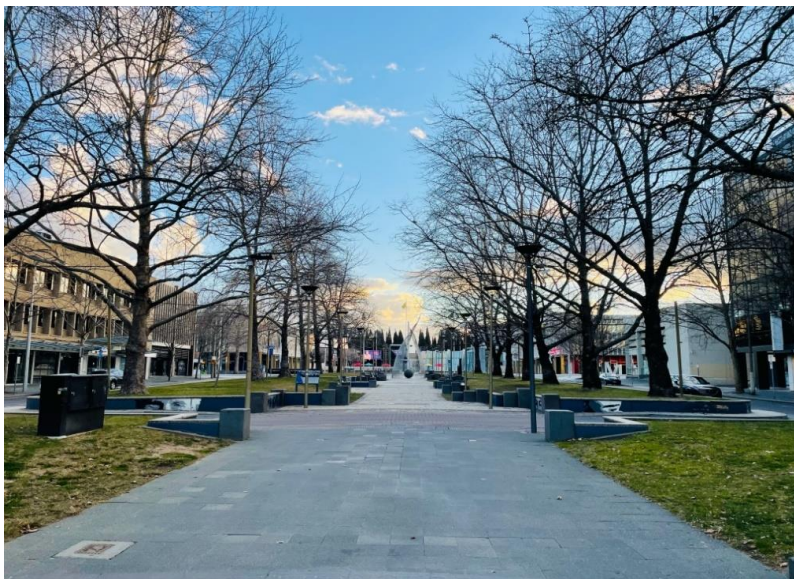
1. Luck runs out

When I think about, I have been blessed since arriving in Australia late last year. Despite many of Australia's states and major cities entering into lockdown following discovery of infections, I was able to conduct multiple business trips as planned and without suffering any impediments.

Being able to visit all of Australia's states and territories in the six months since my arrival was regarded by many as "miraculous". However it appears that this luck has run out. My trip to Sydney scheduled to take place in July had to be cancelled after the entire city of Sydney went into lockdown. In a similar way, my scheduled visits to Thursday Island, Cairns, and Melbourne, all of which were supposed to happen during August, ended up being cancelled. I've keenly felt just how difficult it is to conduct diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. "Et tu Canberra?"

Having given up on being able to visit the regions in August, I decided to concentrate on my activities within Canberra. However all of a sudden on the 12th, an infected person was discovered within the city of Canberra. By 5 o'clock in the evening of the same day, the whole city had entered a week-long lockdown (thereafter, following discovery of 19 new infections on the 16th of August, the lockdown was extended for a total of 3 weeks, up to the 2nd of September).



The centre of Canberra returns to silence

Since my arrival in Australia, Canberra had remained untouched despite lockdowns taking place in many other major cities. With its low population density and low level of outsiders coming into Canberra, it appeared to be blessed.... However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canberra shows how the situation has become gradually more serious.

3. What does 'lockdown' mean?

Under the lockdown currently in place in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), where Canberra is located, residents are in principle confined to their homes and only allowed to venture outdoors under the conditions outlined below. Moreover, the wearing of masks is compulsory when outdoors.

- For essential shopping only, such as for groceries and medicinal supplies
- To receive medical attention, including undergoing a PCR test or being vaccinated
- Exercise is limited to 1 hour outdoors a day
- To provide essential care
- When it is impossible to work from home, and to conduct any essential work and/or study

Both supermarkets and hospitals are open, but restaurants are closed and can only offer takeaway meals.

4. Strict measures

Just by these examples alone, you can understand how strict the measures are compared with Japan, where even though it is under a state of emergency the pedestrian crossing in front of Shibuya Hachiko remains packed with people. What's even stricter is the fact that many police officers have been mobilized to patrol the streets to ensure that the lockdown measures are being adhered to. Anyone found in violation of them has to pay a steep fine.

When looking at Australia's mass media, I've come across articles that state "A former prime minister was stopped and asked by a policeman what he was doing while exercising outdoors" and "A politician was forced to pay a fine after not wearing a mask".

Furthermore, even if there is only a single case of contact, the movements of the infected and places that are believed to have been exposed to infection are all reported by the media, and all residents who were at that place during the designated time frame must then go and have a PCR test. Much like whack-a-mole, no effort is spared in thoroughly tracking down movements and getting rid of COVID-19.

5. What is the Embassy doing?

There are probably a lot of people asking this question. But don't worry, we haven't closed.



The entrance to the Consular Section of the Embassy thoroughly implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures

The Embassy falls under point No.3 above, “essential work”, and so the staff at the Embassy have been given special permission to come to work. More specifically, consular duties such as issuing passports, registering as a Japanese national living in Australia and issuing birth certificates need to continue without interruption so as to be as convenient as possible for resident Japanese citizens.

However, as an Embassy, it is vital that we co-operate with the heightened crisis awareness currently in place in the ACT. And so the Embassy staff have been divided into two teams, who then work at the Embassy on alternate days (when not in the office, staff work from home).

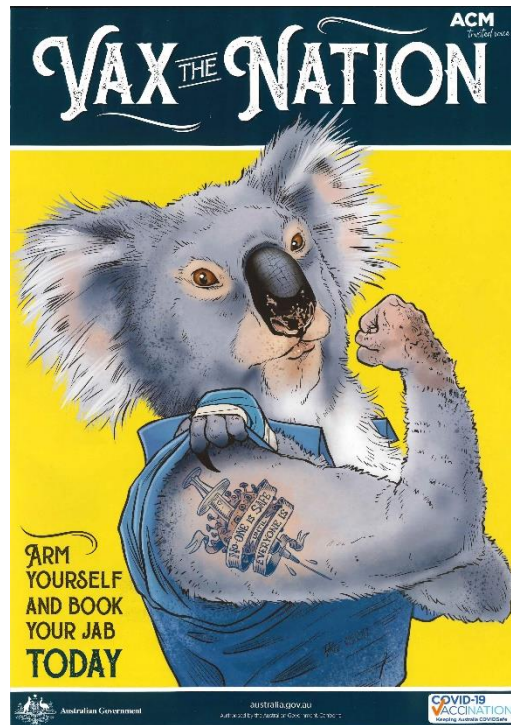


I too work in the office and from home on alternate days

6. Praying for an early resolution

Despite all of this, I am strongly expecting that the situation will be resolved quickly and that we will be able to resume our normal diplomatic duties.

Fortunately, the delivery of coronavirus vaccinations, which is considered an essential part of the framework for an early re-opening, continues to grow day by day. In the ACT, 1 in 3 people eligible to receive a vaccination have already received their second dose, while 1 in 2 people have received at least 1 dose (85% of those aged 50 and above have received at least 1 dose). Expectations are that the current lockdown will speed up that process.



An Australian government poster urging people to get vaccinated

Once the lockdown is lifted and the situation stabilizes, I intend to resume the major events hosted by the Embassy. In the meantime I cast my eye over the many books that I've accumulated as presents from Australians since arriving here, and will continue to pray while deepening my knowledge of Australian history and society.

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