

Pandemic Leadership with Andrew Barr

Andrew Barr

ACT Chief Minister

In conversation with

Ebony Bennett

Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

Ebony Bennett [00:00:03] G'day everyone, I'm Ebony Bennett, deputy director at the Australia Institute, and welcome to our webinar series, thanks so much for joining us today. We've had a thousand people RSVP, so we're looking forward to a great discussion. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and acknowledge the traditional owners here, pay my respects and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. The Australia Institute does do these webinars at least weekly about the dates and times do vary. So head on over to our website at Australia Institute dot org dot IU to find out all the latest details. As only a couple of webinars left to go before the end of the year. And just a few tips before we begin to help. This all runs smoothly today. If you hover over the bottom of your Zoom screen with your mouse, you should be able to see a Q&A function a little box there where you can type in questions for the Chief Minister. You should also be able to upvote questions from other people and make comments a reminder to please keep things both civil and on topic in the chat, or will have to boot you out. And finally, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded, and if you have to duck out for any reason, you'll be able to find it up on Australia Institute DCTV. That's our YouTube channel. Very shortly after the webinar finishes, so I'm really excited about today's webinar worldwide. Obviously, we've been in the grip of the pandemic with more than five million deaths from COVID 19, a devastating statistic and one that I think we sometimes forget because Australia has had much more success with its public health response to the COVID crisis compared to countries like the United Kingdom and the USA. Obviously, the pandemic has been very difficult for a lot of people here. Federal, state and territory governments have made unprecedented but necessary decisions to close international and state borders to shut whole sections of the economy, sometimes to restrict travel. Sometimes school and aged care homes and Australians, many of them have been trapped overseas for more than a year and after a very long COVID free period here in Canberra, followed by another lockdown and extraordinary greater than 99 per cent, I'm told not quite 100 number of Canberrans have had the first dose of the COVID vaccination, making Canberra one of, if not the most vaccinated city in the world, a huge achievement by any standard. And last year, Canberra also became 100 per cent renewable, with a target of net zero emissions by 2045. So to discuss how Canberra has achieved all this, I'm delighted to welcome the state, Chief Minister Andrew Barr, who's led a positive and progressive agenda for Canberra since being elected chief minister in 2014. He's helped to make Canberra the most inclusive city and most LGBTQ friendly city in Australia, amongst many other things. Andrew Barr, thank you so much for joining us today.

Andrew Barr [00:03:05] Thanks. Great to be here. And thanks to the Australia Institute for these great webinar series.

Ebony Bennett [00:03:10] Thank you. So firstly, I want to ask, well, I want to congratulate you on a 100 per cent first dose COVID vaccinations a huge achievement. Although, as you just pointed out to me, probably we should be saying greater than 99 percent at the moment. But congratulations, that's amazing.

Andrew Barr [00:03:29] Yeah. Look, it's well, let me say that that credit is largely due to the response of the Canberra community of recognising the public health benefit of vaccination, but very significantly accrues to the individual and their family and friends. But it is clearly something that that benefits the entire community, and we've seen the practical outcome of a very highly vaccinated community in our COVID statistics as we've been progressively opening our economy and sort of reintroducing all of those, those things that we were so used to that had had to be temporarily suspended in order to respond to the pandemic so that that we have so few people in hospital with COVID related disease at the moment is a reflection of that very high vaccination rate.

Ebony Bennett [00:04:31] So Canberra, as I mentioned, obviously had a long stretch where it was COVID free. But once the New South Wales outbreak got out of control earlier this year, it did feel inevitable that it would get here. And of course it did. You were pretty diplomatic for most of the time, but you, at points were quite critical of New South Wales. This approach, in particular noting that the premier at the time was making decisions that ended up not just affecting the New South Wales jurisdiction, but often the entire east coast of Australia. And you copped some criticism. I think for prioritising higher vaccination rates before relaxing COVID restrictions, but I never really heard you set an upper limit. Obviously, we've we've done amazingly in terms of vaccination rates there, but not setting that upper limit on vaccination rates. Was that a deliberate strategy on your part?

Andrew Barr [00:05:22] Now, look, it was but but informed by the past vaccination uptake in the city. And I guess primed against what I felt was a lack of ambition at the federal government level for the level of vaccination in Australia could achieve that. There was always this sort of sense particularly emerging from the Commonwealth that getting to 70 or 80 per cent was about as good as it was going to get. So that's why all of the modelling was commissioned around those sorts of vaccination levels. And now it became very clear during the course of our vaccination programme that the only thing holding the isotope back from where we are now was lack of vaccine supply. And I think it's proven to be the case in other jurisdictions as well, particularly with the added impetus of having an outbreak and being in lockdown. You do say, I say to New South Wales and Victoria having the highest vaccination rates, I guess there was always a question about the vaccine hesitancy or the anti vax community has to realise how big that would be as a proportion of any population that the Commonwealth seemed to view it at being about 20 per cent when I think in reality, in some jurisdictions it might be that high, but in many it's significantly smaller. Yeah, we should have aimed

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higher. We did as a jurisdiction, and we put in place the framework to achieve and that was, you know, the most efficient mass vaccination programme run by a state or territory government. Excellent engagement with primary health care. So GP's, pharmacists and then the targeted outreach programmes. So I think the key point I'd want to make here is that our vaccination rates, yes, are impacted by our relatively small population compared to larger jurisdictions. The fact that it is a city size. But it is also the result of an incredible amount of hard work to get vaccines to people who otherwise would not have rocked up to a mass vaccination hub or engaged with their GP or pharmacist in order to get to the levels we've achieved. You have to do more than just a baseline programme. You have to take vaccines to people. Often in very vulnerable circumstances or in circumstances where trust in the health system or trust in government is very low, and so partnership with community sector health providers was essential and continues to be because we haven't stopped. And one of the things that saw me despite commentators have laughed at a little is that we've now notionally gone over 100 per cent in relation to what the Commonwealth estimated the Act's residential population to be. Now, in terms of our own data reporting, we are moving the denominator based on the number of first doses, which is now over three hundred and seventy thousand. When the Commonwealth thought we only had about three hundred and sixty thousand eligible residents 12 years and older. So I guess the other thing that this has proved is a mass vaccination programme might be more effective than a population census to give you an idea of how many people live in your jurisdiction.

Ebony Bennett [00:09:08] I just want to ask you particularly about that. Firstly, you've also put a huge emphasis on the importance of not just vaccinations, but other public health measures and IQ test, trace, isolate and quarantine as being part of the ongoing response. But just in particular, we noticed nationwide with that kind of rush to open up again the priority vaccination population. So the Phase 1A and 1B making sure that people in nursing homes, older Australians, but more importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the disability community, even though they were supposed to be a priority that didn't really pan out. What is the act? You've just said there it was important to go out to communities. What are the vaccination rates for those priority populations looking like at the moment?

Andrew Barr [00:10:00] Well, nation leading as well. And so that, I think, is a reflection of why we're not seeing the level of cases and hospitalisations that other international jurisdictions and indeed some of the other Australian states and territories have experienced currently experiencing or, I fear, will experience when they open up. All of the modelling demonstrated that the higher the level of effective vaccination and effective vaccination means a couple of weeks after you had your second jab that the higher that is, the lower the transmission potential, the lower the new case numbers, the lower the hospitalisations and the lower the number of people requiring intensive care within the health system. So it was always the case that if we vaccine supply not an issue, it is as long as you then put in place a set of vaccine delivery mechanisms that would cover off not just your mainstream middle class communities, but extend more more broadly across any number of different sectors of the entire community. Whether that was young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from multicultural communities, those in public housing or who are experiencing homelessness with all sorts of outreach programmes that were put in place. And that is the difference between an 80 per cent vaccination rate and ninety nine per cent plus. As I

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mentioned, we're still out even today with more widespread belief that more than 99 per cent with the first dose. We are still looking at the data at even small pockets of the vaccination across the territory and having pop up vaccination clinics in those locations.

Ebony Bennett [00:12:15] I was going to ask, I don't think probably any politician ran for that last election thinking they'd be encountering a global pandemic. Obviously, you're elected shortly after in the middle of re-elected after we're in the middle of one. But as I mentioned, governments were making huge and consequential decisions and restrictions on movement, all kinds of things that normally aren't contemplated. But I also think we've really seen the rise of state premiers and chief ministers in the role of state and territory governments during the pandemic lifted into the national debate. Do you think that we're going to see from now on that that's a permanent shift that state and territory governments are going to be playing a much larger role in the in the national debate from now on?

Andrew Barr [00:13:03] Look, yes. Perhaps not quite at the same level as though it was during a public health crisis. But this this isn't the only area of public policy where I guess decision making and heavy lifting, if you like, is undertaken at the state and territory level within the federation. One need only look at climate change as another policy area. But there are numerous others where the nature of our federation is that the states and territories are either the prime deliveries of the service or indeed set the policy or regulatory framework for a particular area of government service delivery or indeed regulate private sector activity. So forget to go back to the start of the question. It was a national civics lesson in how power is distributed across our federation and see so much of the media coverage of Australian politics is focussed on, frankly, a lot of hot air at the federal level where they argue about not a lot because under our constitution and that they delineation of responsibilities, the Commonwealth government churns a lot of money through the economy. They have clearly in external affairs role and a national defence role. But when you think about it, the Commonwealth doesn't operate a single hospital. It doesn't employ doctors and nurses in any content. It doesn't run schools, doesn't run energy systems. Does it run public transportation? It doesn't have a particular role in cities where 75 per cent of the Australian population lives. So, so much of the day to day delivery of government services and policymaking is devolved to state and territory governments into local government.

Ebony Bennett [00:15:07] Yeah. Last year, we spoke to former Prime Minister Julia Gillard kind of during the pandemic, it was overall about mental health, but she was kind of reflecting that the pandemic has perhaps helped people to understand that who is in government, you know, really does matter when big things like this happen and that expertise matters a great deal. What have you learnt about leadership during this time and what do you hope that others might take away from? I guess this extraordinary moment in history?

Andrew Barr [00:15:35] Yeah. Well, look, it has been for the act. It sort of felt like two years of a rolling crisis between bushfires, catastrophic storms and hail events that rolling that sort of Nate Labor, seemingly with about two weeks respite into a global pandemic. So look, I I have I mean, both

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of those crises, the major ones, bushfires and the pandemic. But both, I guess, policy areas and portfolio areas that are inspired by long career and territory politics were not areas I had ever been the minister. So that I guess it was a steep learning curve for me on both as a first minister. You come to appreciate the the breadth of expert advice that you can call upon, and so to a certain extent, it is about putting in place the right governance structures to be able to have ideas and concepts tested and then also responses tested because, you know, at our level of government, it's not just about the theory, it's about the practise. And I guess the key takeaway for me in all of this is to as a leader to listen to and absorb as much expert advice as you can put in place the right decision making structures that allow the different perspectives to be brought to the table, but then to make a decision because ultimately you have to. And in many circumstances, what we found was that we often didn't have any good choices, and all we had to choose from was a series of bad options and you had to choose the least worst. And that that was a frequent occurrence, you know, in the last two years, although on a personal note, you also have to learn that you will make mistakes. And I guess the thing that that I've been conscious of is not wanting to repeat a mistake, I'll make them every leader will make them, every government will make mistakes. But it's when you keep on making the same mistake over and over again all that you you don't learn from the lived experience of other jurisdictions Good day in your country or overseas that it that it can become obviously very frustrating for the community. But I think difficult to step forward to the next challenge if you keep on repeating mistakes. Well, too big to be frank. Wait, we were watching what was happening in New South Wales and Victoria, where there had been outbreaks before in terms of how we manage their government communications, how we handled our press conferences, our direct engagement with the community did learn lessons from what was clearly going wrong in some of the other jurisdictions. And then broadly, from an Australian perspective, we've largely been about sort of three to six months behind the northern hemisphere in terms of their lived experience. So again, a key lesson for us and what we need to focus on in the next five months. Is to get our booster programme rolled out before the next Australian winter, because that is the next major risk point for us in terms of COVID, as we're seeing in the northern hemisphere, as immunity starts to whine a little amongst certain sections of the population and that they have an unvaccinated, a significant unvaccinated cohort. So I think Australia at the moment is at about 83 per cent double dose. It's likely that now that will rise maybe towards 90 or even beyond 90 per cent as Queensland. Why starts to pick up their vaccination rates and. And Victoria closes in on New South Wales in the I say, but there's a key lesson from the northern hemisphere that we should all be aware of that the pandemic isn't over and we need to focus on our next our next significant risk point. And that would appear to be the winter of 2020. So what am I focussed on now? Obviously, just completing the primary vaccination course that then we're already into the booster programme and we need today.

Ebony Bennett [00:20:10] Yeah, I can say we've got nearly 500 people on the line with us today. Thank you so much. Just a reminder if you joined us a bit late. You can type in questions for the Chief Minister into the Q&A box and we'll come to those in just a minute. I do want to get on to climate change, but I guess first of all, sticking with that theme of leadership and the role of the states for a long time now, the act has been governed under a Labor green kind of power sharing arrangement. And it seems to me that every federal election we have scare campaigns about minority government. You have clearly made it a success with the Greens in the states, and it seems to me you take a kind of approach that reminds me much more of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who, despite winning majority government wanted to govern in cooperation with the

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Greens there. I guess my question to you is in federal politics, we've certainly seen the rise of the crossbench and minor parties in recent years and many independents having success. What advice would you have for a prime minister negotiating a minority federal government next year?

Andrew Barr [00:21:19] Yes. Well aware that there is. There is a distinct possibility that that could be the result of the 2022 federal election. It will certainly be the case in the Senate that even if there is a majority on the floor of the House of Representatives, that all legislation will need to be negotiated through the Senate. Look, there's many things I could say. I think the pragmatic advice is that the institutional framework that that governs the act power sharing arrangements and it has done for a number of parliamentary terms, it is a recent agreement that that outlines shared policy objectives, puts in place a framework to deal with matters that might be contentious before cabinet and resolves the issues associated with supply and no confidence in ministers. And the first minister in the lock in the conditions under which you can operate a stable government. I think we've demonstrated that we can. I would argue the circumstances in the ICTY make that more realistic because of the electoral system and the nature of the territory economy and frankly, the goodwill that both the Greens Party and the Labour Party bring to show our governing arrangements. Look, it helps that Shane Rattenbury and I have known each other for a while now. We might, we might have been a day and you together in the 1990s, although I knew of Shane and we amusingly ran on the same ticket in student politics way back then. But we probably got to know each other a lot better about 15 years ago and have been working together very well since then. So I think part of that is leadership and your, you know, your capacity to be able to compromise. I have a I was saying that if I can get 80 per cent of the policy outcome, often you'll take that it's better than than getting nothing. And I think we have seen countless examples at the federal level where it's sort of now an all or nothing approach and a unwillingness to compromise at times has led to governments or prime ministers falling. So look, I think the nature of the electoral system does make a big difference. Mm-Hmm. We've had 10 elections in the ACTU. Only once has there been a majority government and there were some pretty unusual circumstances that led to that. So the starting point is that you're right, you're either going to be governing in minority or governing as some form of multi-party coalition. The same can be said of the New Zealand electoral system. And so now you work together doesn't mean you agree on everything or that the priorities are exactly the same all of the time. But we've been able to do that very effectively. I will say it does take a good degree of my time that I have to carve out a certain amount of time just to to manage a multi-party system, government and system. But that is what it is. That's part of my job. I would argue we're going okay because we've been able to deliver a range of a very significant nation leading, often international leading reforms and hold it, you know, hold the government a multi-party government together very safely.

Ebony Bennett [00:25:09] Yeah, absolutely. And that, I guess, brings me back to climate change in terms of nation leading, the act really has been leading the way, particularly around climate policy for many, many years now. I think beginning with the reverse auctions around solar power, but obviously going 100 percent renewable last year, we've just seen the Glasgow pact sign after enormous amounts of consternation. The prime minister appears to have secured a net zero by 2050 commitment from the Nationals, and that's looking a little bit wobbly. I was really interested to say that the Act and New South Wales had both signed up to the COP26 declaration on accelerating the

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transition to 100 per cent zero emission vehicles. My first question is how is that transition going in the act, particularly in terms of things like electrifying the bus fleet and things like that

Andrew Barr [00:26:08] look really, really well. We we've got a number of major procurements there are already underway are in the pipeline, tens of market standing, looking at new technologies and then looking at how we can integrate, for example, vehicle to grid technologies. We've got a big camera battery, a distributed network of batteries across the territory that's about it, which had some market soundings and about to enter into the procurement phase that that includes large scale batteries that includes community level batteries, household level, as well as what I describe as sort of institutional government battery installations, things that would be tied, for example, to public transport depots where you would store and and recharge a fleet of buses, but also associated with universities, tie schools, public health facilities. And so we're looking across the portfolio of of territory government buildings and assets as to how we can have this really big battery. It's got multiple purposes network stability, reliability of power supply, being able to strategically located batteries so that you don't need to undertake further expensive network augmentation. The poles and wires front, for example. And then I think looking at the South Australian government model in that partnership with Tesla, the potential to arbitrage and actually earn income for for the territory. So all of these projects are either at the cutting edge of state and territory governmental or where a fast follower of one of the other states or territories. As much as I like the ACTU to be first in everything we can't see. But we were not first. I want us to be an early adopter and a fast follower. If another jurisdiction has trialled something and it's worked and it's it's definitely worth worth that wall to either partner with them or to pursue something independently. You mentioned New South Wales and a big shout out to Tim that we work together on a number of things that demonstrates that you to use the American term reach across the aisle and work with the other side of politics. I mean, look, we're not in direct political competition with each other. We're not vying for the same job. So we can, you know, we can collaborate effectively. And one of the key things that we've worked on and announced at at COP26 was the Subnational Government Zero Emissions Forum, where we will work together, collaborate with other Australian states and territories and indeed subnational governments from around the world to to share ideas and best practise on how governments that sit below national level governments can can work together to act to decarbonise their economies, to take the economic development opportunities that are going to be there in the transition. I guess it's no surprise just to finish one point. I do want to make it Australia, and our efforts at COP26 were a bit underwhelming. But the only reason that we are exceeding those Paris targets is the work of state and territory governments and of communities and of the business sector. At the Australian government has been very disappointing, and we're going to get there, I think off the back of the work at subnational government level. So sort of regardless of what happens in terms of national policy at next year's federal election, although I hope it will be yet more ambitious. We'll get there off the back of the work of states and territories of the community and of the business sector. I just hope we have a federal government that will support us, not stand in our way.

Ebony Bennett [00:30:24] Well, you've taken the words out of my mouth. My next question was going to be about is the federal government essentially? I mean, when it went to Glasgow and in the national the national plan, it was clear the prime minister was saying there's no new policies in this.

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This is all based on existing policies. I mean, to what extent are states going it alone because there is such a vacuum there at the federal level?

Andrew Barr [00:30:50] OK, I think that's a factor. We would still have responsibilities, even if the federal government was doing a lot more. So I guess I look at this as that is another practical example of where. Power and responsibility lies within within the federation. Now don't get me wrong. We could get there a whole lot quicker and we could deliver some amazing economic development outcomes if the federal government was backing in the policy responses of the state and territory level and backing in community action. So it sort of feels like we're doing this with one hand tied behind their back. But we want to reassure everyone who's watching this and who will watch this, that there is serious intent at the state and territory level. There is the sort of collaboration that people want to see across political parties and to a certain extent, we're just determined to get on with it. But we could do a whole lot better, get there a whole lot faster if we had a supportive federal government. And, you know, electric vehicles are one such example. You know, if we had some a better policy frameworks at the national level that backed in the decisions that state and territory governments are making, then a lot could happen a lot more quickly. So that's what I'll be looking for next year. It's not just federal government setting targets, but being practical about how they're going to work with the states and territories to actually deliver on the targets. Setting targets is one thing, and it's very important. It's not a good setting, a target if you don't have a pathway to achieve it. And a lot of the doing is done it at our level of government, across government operations and the things that we regulate. The government is working with the utility that we are a 50 per cent owner to make the transition away from fossil fuel gas to electrify Canberra. And we're doing it because we can. And when we're a part owner in the business entity that will actually deliver the act,

Ebony Bennett [00:33:05] I'm going to go to questions from the audience in just a second. So just a reminder that if you've got a question for the chief minister, please Typekit into the Q&A function. Much appreciated and I might come back to you. I was going to ask you about voluntary assisted dying, but I might just do a couple of questions from the audience and we might come back to that there. The first question is from Richard Tuffin. He says, Hi, Chief Minister, I would love to hear about the good and the bad of dealing with national cabinet, especially the federal representatives.

Andrew Barr [00:33:37] Okay. Well, look, thanks, Richard, for the question. I think on balance, national cabinet has been a positive. It has meant that the prime minister's circle of advice is much broader than it would otherwise have been, and it has forced compromise. From the federal government, but also between the states and territories, because I think the one negative thing that people have been frustrated about is a sense that there hasn't necessarily always been a unified and coherent national response, that it has devolved a little bit and felt at times like different countries within one continent. But national cabinet has also been an effective moderating exercise at times between the premiers and chief ministers. It's been an opportunity to air particular issues or policy approaches to look at what's worked in another jurisdiction and what hasn't. But undoubtedly, it has been frustrating for the prime minister because it's, I guess, has demonstrated to the nation that the prime minister doesn't hold all power in the country. And I guess I found the the level of secrecy in

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which he wants to attach to the forum are unnecessary and surprising that to let everyone in on the secret. They actually isn't that much that has been discussed in that room that isn't extensively debated before the meetings or after the meetings. The agenda is routinely dropped to the federal press gallery and I would read about what was likely to be discussed in the meeting if the prime minister was raising it. You read it in the Murdoch press. I sorry, I subscribe to the Australian newspaper so that I know what is being dropped by the federal government for a national cabinet and a range of other range of other purposes. I have jokingly referred to it as the Liberal Party newsletter. Now it largely serves as an information source on what they consider to be important in the things that they will drop out. But let's be frank, there are also media outlets that are perhaps more on the progressive side of the ledger that have been used by state and territory governments to advance particular agendas within the national cabinet form as well. So there aren't that many secrets given this so many people in the room. The one thing I would say is that it has been important, and I think the group has held together well in this regard that some issues required consideration over more than one nation. That's how I felt, and I always felt it was important that you could discuss what was on the agenda going into a meeting and then you would discuss the decision and the outcome afterwards. But when you were in that deliberative phase, which often was only several weeks. You should keep that within the forum, that's how a cabinet should operate, in my view, inside. I think that is the appropriate level of protection for national cabinet meetings is that material should be cabinet in confidence, if you like, until the decision is made. And then when a decision is made, information should be released that outlines the basis for making that decision, and in large part, that is actually happened at the modelling that is underpinned. Decisions has been released mostly because if the Commonwealth didn't do it, then the state or territory was to, and that was a good tension within the environment.

Ebony Bennett [00:37:24] Yeah. So Terrence Howard, I hope that answered your question there on transparency of national cabinet. But just while we're on that subject, the next question is from Andrew Bell, who says that you, chief minister at times have been somewhat critical of mainstream media and how it reports, particularly during the pandemic. Do you think with media being closer to its audience in a place like Canberra meant that we avoided some of the pre-loaded outrage around private policy that have dogged governments elsewhere?

Andrew Barr [00:37:55] Look, I suspect so, I think the ownership of of media in the act is a little different from some of the larger media markets in Australia. I promised several years ago to not be a running commentator on AT&T ad policy of break from that only to say that now it is very clear that. In Australia now, if the commercial media so that it has to generate revenue in order to fund its newsgathering operations is largely now going down an American path where it chooses a tribe, a key audience based on its ideology or the ideology of the media outlet, and largely delivers news and opinion to that war. So I fail as a nation with now really almost completely lost. A straight down the line news reporting outlet, ISI Australian Associated Press, is as close as you can now, so we have a blurring of news and opinion, and opinion is fine as long as it's labelled as opinion, but it's when news reporting. Is actually an opinion piece, but it's not identified as that. I think that's where I have the biggest issue, but I reluctantly accept now that unless and unless a media outlet is publicly funded, it doesn't have to rely on advertising revenue and to deliver eyeballs and an audience to generate it's to pay its journalists. They have to pick it, and that's that's what's happened to the

Australian media. Now, unfortunately. We do appear to have some technical difficulties if. Anyone is still out there. Apparently, yes, I've been told you can still say it here, so. So we'll just wait for the connexion to to come back.

Ebony Bennett [00:40:50] Well, are we back?

Andrew Barr [00:40:53] I've got audio, but I've just.

Ebony Bennett [00:40:58] I've got your video there now. We are way back. Sorry about that, everyone. I'm not quite sure what happened there. We've never had that happen before. I think the question was around the impact of New South Wales policy on the Act. And then what lessons from the Act's success might there be for other states who are still in the midst of their vaccine rollout?

Andrew Barr [00:41:20] Sure. Okay. Well, look, we were always very cognisant of what New South Wales were doing for reasons obvious reasons of being a small jurisdiction wholly contained within that state with significant cross-border travel but significant integration of our communities, economies, health services, education services. It was always critical to align as best as we could with New South Wales whilst making our own decisions. Now, I guess there are a few flashpoints over over the last 18 months, but probably the one that annoyed me the most was when hundreds of Canberrans were stranded at Victoria on the Victorian side of the Victoria and New South Wales border, unable to drive back to the city. And it took the New South Wales government will wake up to ultimately endorse our very sensible proposal around how we could safely get them back that that was a low light. And look at various times as well. Announcements were made in our New South Wales policy without any advance notice. And I mean, I guess that often I would go into an 11:45am press conference not knowing what New South Wales were going to do until they stood up at 11am. And so I had a very short period of time in order to to respond and then at various points, so people would have seen this. There were certain journalists dispatched from particular media outlets with a particular agenda to push and that played out as it did in my various press conferences.

Ebony Bennett [00:43:14] The next question that I've got is from Neil Norman. He says this one's particularly for my fellow Canberrans with such a high rate of vaccination, does this mean the multi culty will be back on in twenty twenty two?

Andrew Barr [00:43:28] Right, look, I'll leave that to to Minister Chime to make the public announcement on, but what what I have said is that say, a number of these big events take a lot of resources and time in advance to prepare. So a number of our events for 2022 are still going to be COVID impacted might look a little bit different from how they've been run previously. And so I think people should look to 2023. All things being equal and no more lockdowns and private outbreaks. To to say when know events in Canberra might return to what we were used to pre-COVID. But we'll have a little bit more to say about about multicultural festivals in Latin and Floriade, amongst others

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in the not too distant future. But we're having to run New Year's a different this year as well just to reflect the Typekit circumstances at the time.

Ebony Bennett [00:44:32] I will say as much as I love Floriade, I very much enjoyed Floriade coming out to the suburbs in my particular suburb. It's been lovely.

Andrew Barr [00:44:42] I think one of the one of the great lessons and experiences that we'd want to retain as part of the event in the future that it doesn't just have to be in one location.

Ebony Bennett [00:44:52] The next question that I've got is from Thomas Adam. He says that it's been a very long 20 months for everyone in Canberra. But could you provide assurances without going into what you've already done to small business that you'll start to hear some of that concerns to to do more? And I know that the opposition leader Elizabeth Lee, has also been quite critical of efforts to help small business. What's the government doing on that front?

Andrew Barr [00:45:21] Well, it's in fact the single largest area of new expenditure in this year's budget. So over the course of the pandemic, four hundred and seventy five million dollars of assistance has been directly paid to businesses across the Act economy. Small, medium and large businesses in the city also received billions of dollars of JobKeeper assistance, perhaps distressingly in terms of the design of that particular programme. Nearly \$200 million was paid to businesses whose revenues went up during the pandemic, so the Commonwealth Treasury have undertaken an analysis of both household and business balance sheets pre-pandemic and where where they were in September of this year and found over \$330 million of accumulated savings across household and business balance sheets across the nation. Now, the act is around two per cent of the national economy, so we can anticipate that around \$6 billion to six six to \$6.6 billion is sitting on the balance sheets of households and businesses. Now, obviously not every household and not every business, but aggregated economy wide. That is an extraordinary amount of both Commonwealth and territory government stimulus that's sitting on household balance sheets and business balance sheets that's now either being invested or spent. So I keep a very close eye on the weekly data that's emerging out of the banks in particular on spending in the economy. And what we're saying is that in the week just past that spending in the act economy is up 20 per cent on the equivalent level in 2019 pre-pandemic. And so there is a very strong V-shaped recovery occurring in the territory economy at the moment. Now, of course, the breadth of that and the depth of it is still to be determined, and it will vary from industry to industry. But what we are saying, you know, is a very significant spend in hospitality because we haven't been able to for for weeks and weeks. So try getting a booking at a restaurant at the moment, even as restrictions have eased, it's it's clearly money that's flowing through the economy is this fiscal year of this calendar year is going to be the best year ever? No, of course not. You know, we've just had one of the most significant economic shocks in modern history, and business support programmes are not designed to be profit replacement, but they are safety nets. And so we've paid out a lot. The money and we've got some ongoing programmes still to pursue

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Ebony Bennett [00:48:33] while we're on the subject of the economy. Last year, there was a pretty clear rejection from voters in the state of the lower taxes, better services slogan from the Liberals. I think people could see the cognitive dissonance there. You've committed to a whole bunch of tax reforms, including land tax reform. I notice speaking again of McCain that New South Wales potentially is going to be exploring some of those tax reforms, as well as we look towards the recovery and as people I think have come to expect a lot more of government services. How important is it going to be to look at the revenue base of government and tax reforms at the state level as we go forward?

Andrew Barr [00:49:17] Well, it's still going to be an important part of a broader tax reform agenda nationally. I guess the question will be the extent to which the Commonwealth government might wish to put in place a tax reform fund, perhaps similar in principle to the national competition reforms that occurred in the 1990s that would assist states and territories to make that that transition. It was all for now, and this has been a lived experience in me, say, even though our reforms are a 20 year process. Whenever you change a tax system, there are potentially winners and losers from that from that challenge. And so the way to ameliorate that is either to undertake short, sharp reforms that are assisted in their delivery by the Commonwealth. Or you have to take the longer path, which is where the ICTY is at because we didn't receive Commonwealth support to undertake the transition that we have and I look more broadly. Australian government balance sheets have taken a massive hit. And most states and territories have taken on their levels of public debt that. Two or three years ago, you would be very surprised that we would have. And so that there will be a task as the economy recovers to to restore our budget positions. It's not chasing surpluses for the sake of chasing surpluses. But you cannot run an ongoing operating deficits forever and the ask for the I say T as as will be the case for the other states and territories will be a, you know, a gradual repair of our budget positions. Now that's fortunately already underway in the state, but it's going to take years. It's not something that will just rebound in months.

Ebony Bennett [00:51:30] Excuse me, I'm just choked there for no reason whatsoever. And the next question that I had for you, I kind of flagged earlier. Speaking of things that take many, many years to achieve, we're seeing a lot of legislative change and reform around voluntary assisted dying laws. But obviously, both the territories are prevented around making legislation on those. What's happening on that front? And is Canberra likely to end up in a situation where across the border in Queanbeyan, people can access voluntary assisted dying? But you know, we're prevented from voting on any such legislation here.

Andrew Barr [00:52:09] I think there's a great risk of that occurring. You've got a bill in the New South Wales parliament co-sponsored by 27 MPs from Think Pretty Well, every political party that's represented in there. I'm not sure what one nation's position is on that, but you've got Labor independent, liberal, national green. You name the political party in the New South Wales parliament. There appears to be a co-sponsor for this bill. That will if it passes the New South Wales parliament, that means all six states will have legislated leaving only the ICJ in the Northern Territory without the ability to do so. I said at the beginning it was absurd and anti-democratic. That was before Victoria passed its laws and became the first state. It is increasingly absurd as h as a original

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site passes legislation so that there's really two paths forward here. Either the Commonwealth Parliament determines to overturn the Andrews bill and allow the territory parliaments to have this debate, like our state colleagues or, I guess, the other pathways the Commonwealth legislates itself for the territories. The more democratic means would be would be the format to devolve the issue to the territory parliaments in the same way as the states have been able to deal with it. But there is an alternate passport, and so I guess it depends on whether your principal position is around territory rights and you have a different view on voluntary assisted dying or whether in fact you're most interested in the outcome. The actual policy outcome, rather than the means to which to achieve it. So I think that the two pathways forward. The issue isn't going away. I would expect in the next federal parliament that at the very least there'll be a private member's bill with a conscience vote on the matter. I would hope that there might actually be a government sponsored bill that would pass through both houses with a view to removing the veto and allowing the issue to be considered over a period of time. In an in-depth way by the Territory Parliament

Ebony Bennett [00:54:45] and I will note that the Australian Institute did hold a forum just before lockdown with a cross-party group of MPs from or MLAs from the Legislative Assembly for people who are joining us, not from Canberra. It's a very big issue here in Canberra and really encouraging to see that even MLAs who don't necessarily personally agree with voluntary assisted dying like Julia Jones, who came along to speak to our politics in the pub, are still very conscious that the territory should have the rights to legislate on this in a democratically or in in a democracy, essentially. So a long way to go on that one. Thanks for answering that one. Just to finish up, I want to come back to the pandemic. The pandemic leadership is obviously the same here, but we've got a couple of people in the questions asking about what's the modelling say and what is the public health officials say about what's happening for under-12s people who can't be vaccinated at the moment? And what are we expecting there? How do we keep kids safe?

Andrew Barr [00:55:50] Yes. Okay. Well, without an approved and licenced vaccine for under 12s, the public health advice is that the best protections that they can be provided are to vaccinate all the adults around the kids. They the actual evidence in terms of infections, transmissibility between children, the severity of infections, the number of hospitalisations, the proportion of cases requiring intensive care and the number of people who've succumbed to the to the virus and the disease are much more positive for under 12s. So in short, the public health advice is that that kids transmit less. If they get the virus, it's it's less severe, the disease is less severe. The data that was presented to the last national cabinet meeting is that the hospitalisation rate is very, very low compared to adults and that there have been no deaths in Australia from anyone under 12 from COVID. So that's that's the sort of the lived experience. Obviously, there will be more transmission, there will be more cases whilst whilst we await the results of the the trials, particularly of the Pfizer vaccine. That they've done they've got emergency approval in the US. But I think it's a degree of caution being demonstrated by the TGA and the target within Australia. I want more evidence before they'll approve the vaccine for the 12.

Ebony Bennett [00:57:56] Thank you so much. We've probably got time for one last, very quick question. I know there's so many in here. Thank you so much, everyone, for all your amazing

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questions. I'm sorry, as always, that we can't get to all of them, but I will just finish another pandemic question. There's a question here. What tips do you have for business in relation to reopening in the current climate? Should they be demanding that workers be vaccinated, employ people to check credentials? What what's your advice as we're opening up in general?

Andrew Barr [00:58:29] Okay. Well, in an Ice Age context, with the vaccination rates that we have, we are not mandating vaccination in most settings in some high risk settings, particularly where workers would be dealing with unvaccinated people, so particularly children under 12. There are requirements I know in aged care settings, in health care settings, but in a business context that that was hospitality or retail public facing. I think this it's important to have private safety plans in place and to take sensible precautions. The virus is endemic now, so it will circulate. The vaccines provide the most effective protection against severe disease, but they still plays a role for public health social measures and to test, trace, isolate and quarantine. But they are they are not the primary drivers of the public health outcomes now. But they can't just be forgotten, can't be forgotten. Oh, look, I think it depends on the on the industry sector and people know what's high risk and what's not now where significant transmission has occurred, and you can still transmit the virus even if you're fully vaccinated. And probably the big risk at the moment is that most positive cases. In vaccinated people, the individual is asymptomatic, so they don't even know they've got the virus. So I come back to a point I raised at the beginning, which is they priority over the next five months is to roll through our booster programme. I know it's a booster isn't compulsory. But I can't encourage you enough that we are really going to go to work as hard on the peace programme as we have done on the primary vaccination programme.

Ebony Bennett [01:00:41] Well, we're going to have to wrap it up there. We've just hit two o'clock and I hate going over. So thank you so much for your time today, Chief Minister. We really appreciate it. And as a Canberran myself, you know, I've really found it reassuring. Your focus on high ambitions for vaccination rates and also, I guess, the community spirit that all of Canberra has come together with. I know we've all embraced that Canberrans tag that we got through that transcription era, but it really feels like the whole community has come together. Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it. Thanks everyone for your questions. I'm sorry, we didn't make it to all of them, but thanks for coming along today. Make sure you subscribe to our podcast, follow the money and you can check out, as I mentioned, the recording of this webinar on Australia Institute Dot TV, that's our YouTube channel. If you had to duck out for any reason or want to tell someone else all about it, thank you so much again, Chief Minister, take care of yourselves out there, everyone. If you're not in the act, do you get vaccinated as soon as possible? And we hope to see you next week at pole position that we do every fortnight with Doherty in Australia and the central media. Thanks very much, everyone.

Andrew Barr [01:01:57] Thank you.