



# reMAKERS' MEMO #2, March 2020

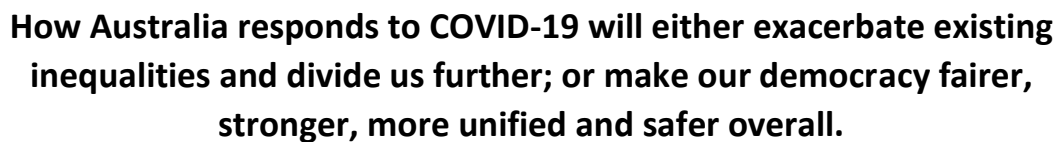
*An Australia reMADE primer to leadership in a time of coronavirus COVID-19*



## Introduction: leading in times of crisis

In the space of a few short months we've had a major lived experience of climate change in a national bushfire crisis; followed swiftly by heavy storms, hail and flooding in places, and now the coronavirus. We're told not to panic, but for many Australians our sense of vulnerability is all too real.

We knew how to help each other during the bushfire crisis and its ongoing recovery (whether by volunteering, donating, buying from the bush, holidaying at home and ultimately pushing for climate action). But how do we help each other through coronavirus besides washing our hands, self-isolating if sick and giving up non-essential travel?



**How Australia responds to COVID-19 will either exacerbate existing inequalities and divide us further; or make our democracy fairer, stronger, more unified and safer overall.**

Isolation is the opposite to how humans like to respond in a crisis. We're now not only questioning our everyday activities, we're stocking up on household essentials because how else will we make it through if someone in our family gets sick, or our community suddenly is under lockdown, and we need to stay home for a period of weeks?

We're also wondering about the very real impact of all of this on our ability to pay the bills, whether short-term if we're in insecure or casual work or long-term if the economy plunges into recession. One in four Australian workers is casual.<sup>i</sup> Household debts are at record highs. Savings are flimsy.<sup>ii</sup> The stock market is volatile.<sup>iii</sup> [This is a health crisis spilling over into an economic one](#), and no one yet knows how bad things will get.

On the upside, a crisis of this scale contains within it seeds of opportunity. The government is urging us to '[be our best selves](#)' (no doubt advice we'd like politicians and those panicking investors to heed also). Like the bushfires, this crisis is an opportunity to make caring for people our top priority – something we support practically, not just with rhetoric. It's an opportunity to strengthen our social safety net and the public institutions we rely on. It's an opportunity to publicly respect and depoliticise science. It's a great opportunity for a run on kindness, to model and promote the kind of country we want to be. Heck, if nothing else it's an opportunity to disrupt the 'warrior-martyr' culture of coming into work when sick. (Note: [beware assuming the crisis is at least good for the environment](#).)



## How do we make our country stronger from this crisis?

**Step 1: Talk about the public good and public institutions** (Medicare, the ABC, public hospitals, healthcare workers, paid leave). Building up the narrative of the public good will help us better respond to both crises and the roots of crises.

**Step 2: Watch out for politics of distraction and shock doctrine tactics** (eg: pushing through tax cuts, deregulation, privatisation) – as this crisis may be used to distract from other important issues.

**Step 3: Build community and strengthen our collective power** to ensure this makes our country stronger, reconnects us to our democratic values in a time of emergency, and supports citizens to ‘be our best selves.’

### 1. Talk about the public good and public institutions.

The Prime Minister’s frame is that Australia is well placed to deal with coronavirus because we have a strong economy. We argue that Australia is well placed to deal with coronavirus because of strong communities, public trust and public institutions.

- **Medicare, our universal healthcare system and our healthcare workers – investments and decisions made over decades – are why Australia is well-placed to handle coronavirus.** [Unlike in the USA](#), we’re not arguing over who has insurance, who can afford hospital care, or who should foot the bill for testing for COVID-19. Healthcare workers in Australia are highly respected and trusted professionals. Like in the bushfires they’re frontline heroes, willing to risk their own safety and their families’ health for ours.
- **Applaud our ABC and call for its funding to be protected from political interference.** Australians need reliable information. We trust the ABC most, and Facebook least.<sup>iv</sup> Yet because of funding cuts that started again in 2014, the national broadcaster will have to get by with \$106 million less *per year* until 2022 – this despite the extra \$3 million in costs of the emergency bushfire-related broadcasts.<sup>v</sup> Why don’t we have a fully independent ABC with independent revenue?
- **Celebrate the role of good government**, alongside our [publicly-funded research organisations like the CSIRO](#). Strong, democratic public institutions are game-changers in this crisis. Contrast to the US, where [private drug companies have managed to secure billions in public funds](#) while watering down provisions to keep the costs of medicines or vaccines reasonable.



- **Highlight Australia's paid leave rights** as essential to keeping everyone safe, and [join the call for them to be expanded to everyone](#) (including sole traders, gig economy workers, casuals, self-employed and small business owners). This pandemic will bring home the cost of inequality and how we treat our most vulnerable. We will only be as safe as our capacity to support everyone who needs to self-isolate with income, not just rhetoric.

## 2. Beware politics of distraction and 'shock doctrine'.

While the coronavirus is dominating headlines, what's not being talked about? Crises have been used all over the world to evade accountability and push through agendas that would otherwise be highly-scrutinised and fought. Naomi Klein calls this the '[Shock Doctrine](#)' strategy.

- On Wall Street, [banks are calling for deregulation to 'fight coronavirus'](#).
- Businesses are calling for tax cuts (surprise!), but economists say these won't work.<sup>vi</sup>
  - More effective would be a boost to household spending power or a government-backed "debt-holiday" at the bank.<sup>vii</sup>
- Watch for potential "solutions" that support money and markets over people and planet. For example, a push to get more people onto private health, a crackdown on employee rights, or a pushback against pokies reform on the basis that the hotel industry is already suffering enough.
- Watch for punitive measures that unduly impact people without job security/on low and modest incomes – such as heavy [fines and possible jail time](#) for those who do not self-quarantine.
- While Australians may be prepared to [accept laws to forcibly shut down public venues or quarantine people](#), we should be asking for safeguards and sunset clauses to ensure these aren't abused now or down the track.

## 3. Build community and strengthen our collective power.

The infrastructure of resilience isn't built in a day. The ripple effects of this [singular global event challenge our way of life](#): revealing the vulnerabilities in our hyper-connected, highly complex, leveraged and stressed system. COVID-19 is an opportunity to address some of these, and create a more humane system that's also more robust and resilient.

- **It's our capacity to look after each other, rather than the myth of rugged individualism, that sustains us.** For years we've been told balanced budgets, GDP growth and low debt matter above all else; that we can't afford to care for people and planet before markets and share prices. Crises and disruptions put our priorities into perspective.



- **Time to expand basic rights.** If the Prime Minister thinks it's patriotic for businesses on ['Team Australia'](#) to offer paid sick leave during coronavirus, why isn't it the right thing to offer paid sick leave all the time, just as we offer every Australian paid parental leave?
  - The ACTU has called for paid sick leave to be extended to all workers, and several ride-sharing companies are getting on board.<sup>viii</sup> Instead of waiting for the next crisis to reveal the cost of people coming to work sick, we could ensure everyone who works in Australia has paid sick leave.
  - It's also a good time to kick off a public conversation about some kind of [universal income](#) or [services guarantee](#).
- **Coronavirus an opportunity for a run on kindness.**
  - Yes, people are stocking up on household goods, but fights over toilet paper do not define us. We do not ridicule people for [trying to maintain a sense of control during times of uncertainty](#) or stocking up because everyone else is (but by all means, we try to keep a sense of [humour](#)).
  - There's a lot individuals can do: letterbox drop your street with community contact details, put up a noticeboard for offline communication, invite people to use window signs to signal if they could use supply drops.
  - Make sure no one on your street/in your apartment block, especially our elderly, are left to fend for themselves.
  - If you're particularly financially secure, you can join people volunteering to [#shareyourpay](#), forfeiting part of your salary to allow other employees and casuals to stay on.
  - It goes without saying that racism, scapegoating and 'othering' of people is not how we show our best selves. We do not want to feed any narrative that turns us against each other.
- **Do not let caring work go quietly invisible and unsupported.** If our schools close en masse, it will be overwhelmingly mothers who stay home from their jobs to care for children. How will families manage and afford this? How will women and their employers/businesses be supported, visible and celebrated?
- **Think about cross-issue solidarity in a time of coronavirus.** As the COVID-19 virus reveals cracks in our system, it's an opportunity to drive solutions across multiple problems.
  - Ensure all Australians can access a bulk-billing GP.
  - Raise the rate of Newstart at long last.
  - If governments can mobilise billions to fight a flu-like virus, we can mobilise billions to fight the climate emergency threatening all life on earth.
  - Expand basic rights like healthcare to people seeking asylum.
  - Every Australian should have a roof over their head (again: [America](#)).
  - Our universities should be well-funded and not reliant on the business of international students to make ends meet.



## Conclusion: What kind of country is best-placed to handle COVID-19?

If we don't want an authoritarian state cracking down hard on rights and press freedom, or business unduly profiteering from human suffering – then a strong democracy and solid, well-funded public institutions are essential. As are a strong sense of community trust, responsibility and cooperation at all levels of society. Happily, Australia has great strengths here to be proud of and build on.

What could we be aiming for? In 2017, we embarked on a qualitative research project to ask Australians from all walks of life to describe to us the country of their dreams. People frequently teared up when they talked about communities where families and neighbours look after one another and we all had the time to care and be cared for, to play and to rest. They spoke about peace of mind from knowing that our essential services are up to the task and that we have what we need in times of hardship. They spoke of a country that sees caring as essential work, supported by business and government alike. They spoke of a country where people don't have to scramble to hold down one or more insecure jobs simply to survive.

These ideas and values became the [Vision for an Australia reMADE](#).

*If we were to wake up tomorrow in this Australia, how much less stressed and afraid would we be of COVID-19? As reMAKERS and leaders at all levels of society, let's take the steps now to support this safer, stronger, kinder 'best version of us.'*



Australia reMADE promotes [a vision of the country we're aiming for](#), and the systems change needed to create it. We're an independent, non-profit leadership network for reMAKERS at all levels of society. We are funded by a range of civil society organisations and philanthropy. To get in touch, contact [info@AustraliareMADE.org](mailto:info@AustraliareMADE.org).

**Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present.**





## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-09/coronavirus-looms-as-catastrophe-for-casual-workers/12039154>

<sup>ii</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-04/interest-rate-cuts-wont-help-coronavirus-hit-firms-economies/12020208>

<sup>iii</sup>[https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-09/\\$100b-wiped-off-asx-worst-opening-since-global-financial-crisis/12038162](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-09/$100b-wiped-off-asx-worst-opening-since-global-financial-crisis/12038162)

<sup>iv</sup><http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8064-abc-remains-most-trusted-media-201907220424>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/03/bushfires-add-3m-to-abc-emergency-broadcasting-costs-as-coalition-cuts-funding>

<sup>vi</sup><https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-09/coronavirus-can-scott-morrison-stave-off-a-recession-covid-19/12037522>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-04/interest-rate-cuts-wont-help-coronavirus-hit-firms-economies/12020208>

<sup>viii</sup><https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/uber-announces-coronavirus-compensation-as-unions-demand-support-for-casuals-20200309-p548as.html>