

## **Health Minister Mark Butler has revealed Australia's pandemic plan for COVID-19 was "grossly inadequate"**

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So let's listen in to the Health Minister, Mark Butler. He's speaking there with the Treasurer, Jim Chalmers, alongside him at this news conference, looking at the inquiry that we've seen into COVID. What this report does.

I want to thank the inquiry panel, Robin Cruck, Catherine Bennett and Angela Jackson for what is a thorough and a measured report. It is broad and it is thematic. It doesn't seek to examine individual decisions among the literally thousands and thousands of decisions taken by the national government or by state and territory governments.

And it doesn't seek to scapegoat people who were seeking to act in the best interests of our country and the community. But be very clear, it's a report that does not pull its punches. We all recognise and the report certainly recognise that Australia fared very well relative to other nations in spite of the enormous loss that we as a country experienced.

In significant part, that relatively good performance as a country was down to our leaders and our governments who worked incredibly hard and made some very courageous decisions. But in even larger part, our relatively good performance as a country was down to the extraordinary willingness of our community to cooperate with decisions taken by governments. As the report describes it, and I think former Prime Minister Morrison commonly described it, it was very much a Team Australia effort on the part of our community.

But in large part also, our performance is down to some of the most dedicated and certainly best trained frontline workers anywhere on the planet. Workers in the health and hospital system, in aged care, in childcare, in schools, in other frontline areas like retail, building services, cleaners, and so many other industries besides. And I'm conscious and I know the Treasurer is conscious that it is easy with the benefit of hindsight to second guess decisions or criticise decisions that were made in the heat of the fight against a once in a century pandemic.

And we're very conscious not to do that, but we have to learn the lessons of the past. And the first lesson from this report is that like most countries, frankly, our pandemic plans were grossly inadequate for the scale of the challenge that COVID-19 presented to us. The report makes clear, for example, that our plans such as they were included no plan that would deal with the closure of the international border, which was such a central part of our response, no plan to deal with quarantine, which was also incredibly important, no plan to deal with the workforce demands of a pandemic that went on for as long as it did.

And as a result, to use the words of the report, our response to the pandemic was not as effective as it could have been. And as a result of the lack of plans, leaders particularly were placed in the invidious position, to use the words of the report, of having to build the plane while it was flying. Our data and surveillance or disease surveillance systems were frankly, simply not up to the task.

The report talks about the use of paper systems, the use of facsimile machines. I know as health minister coming into office in 2022, I was unable to get really important data about the people who were dying of COVID in hospitals. Their vaccination status, their indigeneity, a whole range of other things that are critically important to putting together a good evidence-based response to the pandemic.

Another really important insight from the report, one of the most important insights, I think, is the lack of a shift through the course of the pandemic between a very understandable approach based on the precautionary principle at the outset, lock everything down, take a precautionary approach while we start to understand the scale of the challenge. A shift, the lack of a shift from that position in the early months to a position that was more evidence-based, that balanced risks and benefits took account of non-health impacts of decisions being imposed on the community by governments, by leaders, and did so in a proportional way. That is a really compelling insight from this report.

Relatedly, the inquiry report points to a lack of transparency around the rationale and the evidence behind decisions that were taken by governments that had such a profound impact on the lives of Australians and the freedom of Australians. That is a really important insight from this report. There are also very important insights at a more specific level around the impact of the slowness of our vaccine rollout, something that's been the subject of lots of commentary.

The failures in aged care, particularly in that first year in 2020, when so many residents of aged care facilities, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, were lost to us, and the stark inequity between the experience of particular groups in the community, particularly different groups from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, but also temporary visa holders, a really important insight from this report. The striking conclusion, I think, from this report, though, is that right now we are arguably worse placed as a country to deal with a pandemic than we were in early 2020 for a range of reasons. Firstly, because there has been really significant scarring on our healthcare systems, and the health workforce, a workforce that is exhausted by the demands of a once-in-a-century pandemic that's gone on for years.

The APS has lost, the Australian Public Service has lost, key personnel who learned a lot through that pandemic, but have moved on from their positions, often through exhaustion. As I'm sure the Treasurer will talk about, governments are in much more

significant debt than they were before the pandemic. But crucially, crucially, this report says that a number of the points I've already made about the lack of real-time evidence-based policy and the **lack of transparency** has driven a large decline in trust, which the panel members say, and these are their words, means that many of the measures taken during COVID-19 are unlikely to be accepted by the population again.

**The erosion of trust** is not only constraining our ability to respond to a pandemic when it next occurs, but it's already, we know, bled into the performance of our vaccination programs, including our childhood vaccination programs. So, since the beginning of COVID in 2010, for example, you've seen, we've seen a reduction of seven or eight points, percentage points, in the participation of, in the whooping cough vaccination program for under fives and the measles vaccination program for under fives, which means that we are now well below herd immunity levels for those two really important diseases. So, the erosion of trust has had very, very significant impacts on the community.

Can I say that this inquiry received a really huge response from the community, very substantial numbers of submissions, participation in the processes of the inquiry. There are **26 recommended actions for the national government. 19 of them are recommended to be prioritized over the next 12 to 18 months, seven in the longer term.**

Cabinet considered this report yesterday and appointed PMNC, Prime Minister and Cabinet, to lead a cross-government task force to work through those recommendations and come back to the Cabinet. I think without doubt though, the most important recommendation from this report is the establishment of a Centre for Disease Control, a CDC. As you know, Australia at the beginning of this pandemic was pretty much the only OECD nation without a central authoritative Centre for Disease Control.

And it was an election promise from Anthony Albanese made in one of his budget reply speeches to close that gap and to establish a CDC here in Australia. The Treasurer approved \$90 million in a previous budget to establish an interim CDC, which is now operating within the Department of Health. It is undertaking for participating, for example, in our stress testing of our ability to respond to an avian influenza event and doing a range of other preparatory work as the inquiry report makes clear to establish a more permanent body.

Today, I can announce the government is investing \$251 million over the forward estimates, as well as funding ongoing, to establish an independent authoritative **Centre for Disease Control** to commence from the 1st of January, 2026. Legislation will be introduced into the parliament next year to set out its independence and its functions in clear legislation. It will be headquartered here in Canberra, as is recommended, in order to be close to national decision-making.

Its functions will very closely reflect the recommendations from this report. And

importantly, this is something that we have been working very closely with states and territories about and relatively recently, the state and territory health ministers, by resolution, indicated their support for a CDC to be established at a national level. The first priority of the CDC will be to establish a comprehensive joined-up data and surveillance system in partnership with states and territories, but to have a single, comprehensive, real-time data and surveillance system.

And for our surveillance capability to be world-leading, including our use of wastewater surveillance, which we know has been so important. The CDC will be also responsible for providing independent evidence-based advice about particularly a pandemic response, but more generally, our responses to communicable diseases. It will also be responsible for engagement with regional and international partners.

And I have to say, as I've engaged with a number of my colleagues from other countries, there is a huge enthusiasm among like-minded countries for Australia to close that global network, that gap in the global network, and for there to be a single authoritative body for CDCs from the US, from Europe, and so many other countries besides to engage with an important partner like Australia. It will also obviously be responsible for leading pandemic planning and testing or stress testing of our ability to respond to a pandemic in partnership with relevant departments, including my own, the Department of Health, and the National Emergency Management Authority, NEMA. This is an enormously valuable report from Robin and Angela and Catherine.

And again, I want to thank them for the work that they did. I want to thank the Secretariat from PM&C that worked so closely with them, and to all of those Australians who participated in this important process. And today's \$251 million investment by this government is really an opportunity to lay a foundation for Australia's future pandemic preparedness.

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