



**MANNINGHAM**  
UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

## U3AM at Home

### **A Summary of our Current Affairs Discussions**

The enthusiasm for discussion never wanes in this highly interactive environment at U3A Manningham, whether in the classroom pre COVID-19 or during lock-down through Zoom.

Each week our class members have read the newspapers and watched the TV news and current affairs programs. The group of people with diverse backgrounds are fully briefed to express their views about current, social, political and economic issues.

In February and March this year, little was known about COVID-19 and the worst was rightly assumed. Australia's leaders reacted quickly, worked in unison and chose to buy time; to lock their populations down while health systems were fortified with a timetable for easing their way out. COVID-19 appears to predominately kill the elderly, especially if they have an existing chronic disease.

Our Current Affairs class members have been provided weekly detailed statistics about the COVID-19 situation by U3A Manningham President and Tutor, David Jenz. There are only five of the fifty states in the USA that have deaths by state lower than Victoria's 12.1 per 100,000 residents. New York's death rate is 171 per 100,000 residents, whilst New Jersey has the highest at 183 deaths per 100,000.

Globally, media attention has been at the front-end of daily news reports. The Victorian Government's move to Melbourne's Stage Four against the risk of transmission of COVID-19 was picked up in Asia, North American and European Union (including UK) news services within 24 hours.

Victoria's COVID-19 drama played out on two separate stages in mid-September with two markedly different narratives. In the Spring Street media room of the Premier a rosy picture of optimism and positivism was painted as the warming spring weather outside. But across town, the hotel quarantine inquiry was painting a darker picture where senior government officers were questioned in forensic detail about the decisions they'd made in the Autumn.

Longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's finances are also crystallising. We can expect a record federal budget deficit well beyond \$200 billion in October this year. An astounding injection of assistance into the economy, dwarfing the record \$54.5 billion set by the Rudd government during the depths of the global financial crisis in 2009-2010.

The Prime Minister has called for an independent international inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak's origin. As a result, China has suspended beef imports from five Australian abattoirs, and slapped a crippling 80 percent tariff on Australian barley with our wine exports expected to be affected too.

The Australian Government is responsible for foreign affairs and the Prime Minister has urged Premier Daniel Andrews to reconsider committing Victoria to the Belt and Road initiative to avoid the rocky road of debt-trap diplomacy. After years of drought, fires and now COVID-19, Victoria can least afford to do so as the Metro Melbourne tunneling works are now well over budget.

Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel, addressed the National Press Club in Canberra in February this year. His view of supporting the use of gas as an energy source is not consistent with a safe climate according to a group of twenty-five leading Australian scientists. Gas is the fastest growing source of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, the most important greenhouse gas driving climate change. However, the International Energy Agency has estimated that coal to gas switching has avoided more than half-a-billion tonnes of emissions between 2010 and 2018.

Dr Penny Sackett was Australia's Chief Scientist between 2008 and 2011 and is now an honorary Professor at the Climate Change Institute, Australian National University. Professor Sackett advised that if gas-fired electricity emissions can be lower than those from coal-fired plants, should Australia expand its fossil gas industry as a means of combating climate change? The answer is NO if we want to avoid the worst climate change outcomes.

Australia needs to assist in the fight to limit global warming to well below two degrees to begin to reduce all fossil fuel consumption – coal, yes, but oil and gas too in this decade. Planned and rapid coal-to-renewables switching is now the responsible path. Gas will have a role in the near term, certainly, but the science is clear.

Britain's 75% of coal-fired power in 1970 has now reduced to 2% in 2020.

The world's biggest science project, International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), funded by the EU, China, USA, India, Japan, Russia and South Korea at a cost of \$25 billion reached a construction milestone last month and is expected to be commissioned for nuclear fusion in 2035 and that will reduce the cost of electricity without producing nuclear waste.

Australia's perception of the USA has plummeted over the past year. Three in four Australians have no confidence that President Trump will do the right thing for the world. The findings are contained in a study by the Washington based Pew Research Centre released on 16 September. Comparing attitudes towards the USA in thirteen countries across Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific. A key reason from the findings was the failure to contain COVID-19 which has killed more than 200,000 Americans.

Only 33% of Australians have a favourable view of the USA compared with 50% twelve months ago. This is the lowest rating for the USA since Pew Research started polling Australians in 2003. This trend was repeated around the world with perceptions of the USA falling by 27% in Japan, 16% in Britain and 13% in Germany.

Four in ten Australians on the ideological right have confidence in President Trump's handling of global affairs, compared with one in ten Australians on the ideological left, whilst 53% of Australians said they regard China as the world's leading economic power, compared with 35% for the USA. This finding has held up for more than a decade.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's deadline for a BREXIT agreement is 15 October and unlikely to be met. A key sticking point is access to European fishing boats in UK waters and state aid to industries. The EU is determined to ensure a level playing field for competition so British firms cannot undercut the bloc's workplace standards or pump public money into UK industries. The EU has told

Britain it should scrap a plan that would break their divorce treaty. Boris Johnson has vowed to press ahead with a draft law that could sink four years of BREXIT talks.

A violation of the Withdrawal Agreement between the EU and Britain could lead to a messy divorce resulting in chaos in supply chains across Europe and spook global financial markets. With a trade agreement, nearly \$1 trillion in trade between the EU and Britain could be thrown into confusion come 1 January 2021, compounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the divorce deal, the Republic of Ireland remains a member of the EU, a restriction Britain wants to remove.

This is a sample of issues discussed by the class members of U3A Manningham in Current Affairs throughout this very unusual year, regularly provoking noisy, mixed reactions and observations, but all with goodwill, humour and a willingness to share and learn.

**Ron Wilson, Class Member, Current Affairs Group C**