

Where's the Covid elimination highway off-ramp?



Michael Barnett
comment

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While so many of our key trading partners have a roadmap to open up and live with Covid-19, New Zealand remains wedded to the 2020 rule book of eliminate, stamp it out and, if in doubt, lock it out.

Our position is enviable, but we are keeping the lid on to keep people we need out when we could and indeed should be leveraging our global advantage.

We should be deploying all the safeguard tools now at hand to give the economy a jump-start into growth rather than being constrained by labour shortage woes from housekeepers to programmers and visa decisions that seem to be inconsistent in the application of the rules and justification regardless of skill or sector.

Too little, too late is what is happening at a time when business wants to rev up, employ and upskill more people, recover revenues and pay down debt and liabilities.

Vaccination, a Covid-free travel pass, use of a range of quarantine procedures, an arrival traffic light system and pre-departure testing all would let us open our borders safely to the droves of students,

teachers, tourists, seasonal labour, skilled tradies, techies, family members and yes, wealthy investors who will create new businesses rather than coming here for lifestyle reasons.

We need more than a thin dribble of people from the growing list of needed skills that cannot be found locally allowed through our borders, more international tourists from other vaccinated countries and more support for other productive sectors beyond what seems to be the current favoured film production crews.

We're overdue for a reality check that resolves the present priorities and issues. Our economy is trucking along, still overly reliant on primary exports when we need

to be leaning so much more heavily on seeding a digital economy and building technology centres of excellence.

We must compete with the rest of the world. Right now, Australian tech sector recruiters are out and about in our cities after the very same skill sets we need but with much more lucrative salary and benefits packages to offer candidates. They, like other countries, deemed safe and business-friendly, are wooing the same investors we want and need to create new industries, inventions,

innovations and sectors to build a more robust, diversified, productive and competitive economy.

This is not the time for complacency, back-patting and spin. We want the government to look after securing our futures, jobs, opportunities, wealth and place in the world – in fact a world we want to be able to travel around for business or pleasure and a country that can attract and retain future-proofing skills to come here to live, work and play.

As a nation, we have gone along docilely with the Government, doing as we are told from working with home, limiting social interactions when necessary, masking up on the bus or train, and getting tested if we have a cold.

But the urgency is now lacking. We are jaded. Instead of comfort that the Govt is doing right by us in every way, we're irked by the never-ending stream of positive news and opaque messaging over vaccination rates, rollout priorities and invitations to make an appointment for a jab.

Every day we see photos of people on holiday somewhere warm in the Mediterranean or Mexico, progress on mass vaccinations in Britain, the US and

Singapore, and different countries' plans on how they are making ready to live with Covid as the new normal, complete with

community containment strategies to quickly minimise outbreaks but without lockdowns.

It's time for the Govt to share the plan on how New Zealand will live with Covid – presuming there is a plan being hatched.

There are many willing minds ready to lend their ideas and experiences and precedents for us to learn the lessons from of what will work, what won't and what the best risk containment strategies are from countries as diverse as Singapore, China and Israel.

Even Australia, during its worst number of cases in months, has a plan, phased and nuanced, ready for action – and one that goes beyond the transtasman bubble. This virus will not be eliminated but will continue to morph, the world's leading experts say.

We must take a giant but informed leap of courage, using the best science, technology, medicine and practice and be like the rest of the world, living with Covid-19 in the community. If we do not get moving, test the plan and tell people what is next, we will be left in the cold.