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## We must abandon fortress Australia at some point, says Sutton



By [Michael Fowler](#)

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Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton has told healthcare workers in a private seminar that the country will reach a critical juncture where it must abandon its fortress Australia approach to COVID-19 and “make a call on letting it run” once vaccinations have been widely offered.

In recordings from two recent events leaked by government insiders, Professor Sutton also revealed he had been “shocked” at the “steadfast” refusal by some people and agencies to adapt and acknowledge mistakes during the coronavirus pandemic.



Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton said the time to open borders should be once vaccinations had been offered to all adults. PENNY STEPHENS

Professor Sutton told the audience at an event in late April that vaccinations were not progressing as fast as he would like and Australians were lacking urgency because of the country’s success against coronavirus.

The Chief Health Officer indicated a time would come when the Commonwealth would have to reopen international borders and accept there would be cases of COVID-19, although the impact of those cases would be stifled by vaccinations.

“We need to somehow communicate to the public that we’ve gotten to a place of complacency because we’ve driven transmission to zero but we will face newly emerging transmission, and a critical juncture where we need to make a call on letting it run,” he said.

“I think that’ll be when we’ve got as high vaccination coverage for the adult population as we can possibly get to, so everyone being offered it, and building that confidence in vaccines as much as we can ... then we need to really say ‘look, we can’t sit on our hands here’.

“We all need to step up to get vaccinated in order to open up Australia to world travel and arrivals so that our education sector, tourism sector and all of the other kinds of compassionate reasons for us to see family and friends overseas can come to the fore.”

Professor Sutton’s beliefs are akin to those of Nick Coatsworth, Australia’s former deputy chief medical officer, who said on [Saturday that the “false idol” of COVID-19 eradication could not be maintained indefinitely](#) and the nation must become “prepared and comfortable” for the virus to spread in the community.

Professor Sutton made his comment at an event in late April, three weeks before Dr Coatsworth.

In its budget this week, the federal government outlined an aim to have offered all Australians a vaccination by the end of this year but forecast international borders to open only in mid-2022.

Amid a groundswell of opposition to the protracted border closure, federal Victorian MP Tim Wilson said the country risked becoming a “hermit outpost”, and the closures were “not sustainable”.



Speaking out: federal backbencher Tim Wilson said sentiment on border closures will eventually flip. DOMINIC LORRIMER

“While public sentiment may still support closures now, it will change as people are vaccinated and business people need to travel, families need to be united and we come to realise how much it is costing our country,” he said.

Dave Sharma, federal MP for Wentworth in Sydney, agreed there were “real and significant costs, economic and personal, to keeping our borders closed”.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said he agreed with Dr Coatsworth that Australia should not pursue the “false idol” of eradicating COVID-19.

“We are not pursuing a [COVID-19] elimination strategy ... you can’t eliminate the virus,” the Treasurer said on Saturday.

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Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton

Yet Mr Frydenberg ducked questions on when Australia might begin to approach herd immunity. About 10 per cent of the country’s population have received at least one dose, including more than 30 per cent of people aged over 70.

Australia began a travel bubble with New Zealand last month and discussions are ongoing regarding a future bubble with Singapore. However, a revival of the international student market, Victoria’s biggest export at \$6 billion in a normal year, appears unlikely until the second half of 2022 at the earliest.

Speaking about authenticity in public messaging and the “weaknesses and errors” of government during the 112 consecutive days of tough restrictions in Victoria’s second wave last year, Professor Sutton said: “It’s really interesting, I have seen lots and lots of people and agencies respond to the kind of critiques that arise through media and community engagement.

“I’ve been ... a little bit shocked at how much there is a digging in of heels, a kind of steadfast refusal to adapt and sometimes a steadfast refusal to acknowledge mistakes. And I think it’s important to really go to that because you build trust by being able to speak to that, really honestly and transparently.”

In a statement to *The Sunday Age*, Professor Sutton said he was reflecting on “the approach taken by some people and agencies around the world who did not act as early and robustly as they needed to,” and his comments were “in no way a reference to the Victorian government”.

“No one can accuse the Victorian government of not adapting quickly in the face of this virus,” he said, pointing to the state’s successful elimination of community transmission last year and an outbreak of the UK variant in February.

The comments were made at an event reflecting on his past year as Chief Health Officer.

Professor Sutton has remained outspoken since becoming a household name in Victoria last year. In January he used Twitter to rebut the government’s claim that he had not signed public health orders in time and last year revealed on radio that Melbourne’s night-time curfew was not his idea.

- **Clarification**

**An earlier version of this story reported that Professor Sutton’s shock had been directed at the Victorian government. *The Age* accepts that in this passage of his speech Professor Sutton did not refer directly to Victoria. The story has been altered to reflect this.**

With Michael Koziol

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