

# Why the bell must toll for WHO chief Tedros

By **Geoff Raby**

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*Unless its China-trusting chief resigns, the World Health Organisation's pandemic failures will be weaponised by President Trump's assault on global institutions.*

WHO director-general [Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#) should resign immediately in the interests of the World Health Organisation and the wider United Nations-led multilateral system. US President Donald Trump has weaponised COVID-19 and Tedros has handed Trump the opportunity to damage further the rules-based multilateral system.

Just when Trump's reckless insouciance about the virus may have destroyed his re-election chances, Tedros' naivety towards China has given the President the opportunity to merge his [ongoing campaign against multilateral institutions](#) - which has just about rendered the World Trade Organisation ineffective - with his campaign against China. All of this is much to the delight of his supporter base.

It may seem audacious to suggest that the head of a major multilateral organisation is naïve. To achieve one of these enormously well-paid, tax free, and secure jobs requires years of political manoeuvring and a ruthless determination to win.

The competition is intense and the politics brutal, with major states arm-wrestling behind the scenes. But sometimes ineffective candidates prevail because member states become exhausted by the contest.

The Trump administration's efforts to dismantle the WHO by withholding funding in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis is the height of folly. Sound opinion from around the world is rejecting this. The Australian government, as could be expected in view of our supine relationship with the Trump administration, is having a bet each way.

China's expanding influence in multilateral organisations is of no surprise, and is a core part of China's statecraft. Under Trump, in particular, the US has looked away and created the opportunity for China and Russia to be more influential in shaping outcomes.

It is childish to criticise states whose statecraft takes advantage of whatever opportunity presents. China has already held the director general position of the WHO when Margaret Chan from Hong Kong was head of the body from 2007-17, and served with distinction.

### **Kill the whistleblower**

With COVID-19, Tedros should have and could have done much better.

The first signs of SARS-like illness in unexplained circumstances in a relatively poor part of China should have flashed all the warning signs immediately. The default position, in the absence of further information, should have been that this was SARS-2003 redux.

This is effectively what happened in Taiwan, which had learned important lessons from that time and applied them with great success on this occasion. South Korea, Japan and Singapore were similarly alarmed and acted accordingly. No one who had any familiarity with SARS was waiting for Beijing finally to get around to explaining itself.

Hong Kong, under the prevaricating weak leadership of Carrie Lam, hesitated on stopping mainland visitors until it threatened to re-ignite the 2019 protest movement. The people on the streets of Hong Kong knew what was going on. They demanded a halt to visitors from the mainland.

In each of these places, the knowledge of China and how it operates is high.

And still the WHO director-general sleep-walked through this. To its great credit, the Australian government acted with alacrity and against the advice of the WHO and banned travel from China. It could, of course, have done better by banning travel from the US, but presumably didn't want to encounter the ire of Trump, who at that time, was declaring COVID-19 a Democratic Party and media beat-up.

As this column showed early in March, the Communist Party of China has a well-established pattern of dealing with these types of events. It moves from cover-up, to denial, to kill the whistleblower, to blaming everyone and especially foreigners, if that can be done, to acknowledgement and presenting itself as the flag bearer of the great patriotic struggle against the adversary. We have seen this with HIV-contaminated blood in the 1990s, SARS in 2003 and the Sanlu Milk scandal in 2008, to name just a few instances.

With a consistent track record like this, and no change in accountability by the party through a more open media – in fact under Xi Jinping, everyone in the world knows that the opposite is the case – why then would the WHO director-general

accommodate the usual prevarications and deceptions by the party? Anyone dealing with China knows that the default settings are all turned to avoiding responsibility, risk aversion, and withholding bad news from levels above.

The hierarchical nature of the system in China is such that it is not entirely unreasonable that when Tedros met with Xi Jinping and other senior officials in Beijing on January 28, Xi himself may not have been across all the facts and aware of the concerns of lower level officials.

Such are the weaknesses of a hierarchical, authoritarian state. This is also fully understood by all with even a passing knowledge of China.

So on the party's well-known past performances when such shocks occur and on what any casual observer knows about how China operates, it beggars belief that Tedros did not follow the precautionary principle and for the sake of the world assume things were worse, much worse, than the Chinese leadership was reassuring they were.

Instead, [Tedros took the Chinese leadership's reassurance at face value](#), whether out of naivety or because he had done the calculus that wider interests would be served better by doing so.

Accountability requires consequences.

So Tedros needs to fall on his sword, taking responsibility for the actions of the WHO in the time from his meeting with Xi to when he declared a pandemic. Doing so would also be in defence of multilateralism in the face of Trump's America First nationalism.

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