

“People Matter” – Let’s Not Make Exceptions

by **Jocelyn Chey**

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The corona virus emergency should bring out the best in people, but in some it is causing vicious blame-sharing. Fingers are being pointed at Chinese Australians and accusations levelled of lack of patriotism and even illegal activities.

This global epidemic requires global solutions. Australia has a chance to work more closely with the People’s Republic of China to this end and should avoid relations sinking to a new low.

Reflecting on our universal desire to live in a safe society, philosopher and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowen Williams comments in [an interview for the BBC](#) that this period is a chance for people “to settle down and think what matters to them, and who matters.” Isolated in our homes, Australians think first of their family, friends and colleagues, but also, as citizens of a maritime nation, of their relatives and contacts across the seas in New York, Madrid or Hong Kong. As the viral wave of COVID-19 infection spreads across the globe, all Australians wish they could be closer to those they love, no matter where they are and could help in some way. Penned in their own homes, they fight feelings of powerlessness.

Chinese Australians, who make up five percent of the population, have been feeling this pull of family and community since they first heard of the virus outbreak in Wuhan in late December. Now there is sympathy for other Australians with relatives and friends in Europe and America, but support for those in distress in China has been notably absent. There were alarming reports of racist taunts and abuse of local Chinese throughout January and February, prompting the Prime Minister rather belatedly to state that the government placed a high value on the country’s ethnic Chinese community. Nevertheless, anti-China feeling persists and it seems is being fanned by hawkish lobbyists in Canberra and elsewhere.

The Fairfax media have published several articles recently about Chinese Australian-owned businesses back in February organising shipments of surgical gloves and other medical supplies to help the Chinese fight against the Covid-19 virus. [The most recent article](#) by Nick Mackenzie and Anthony Galloway appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 2 April. There are reports elsewhere that the same businessman, Yuanping Kuang, named in this article, is now organising for supplies of medical equipment from the PRC to assist efforts to control the epidemic in Australia. Mackenzie and Galloway

allege that this is at the direction of the Chinese Communist Party and part of a PRC soft power campaign to exert political influence in Australia.

The first outbreak of COVID-19 was in the PRC. There government measures to diagnose, control and treat it were heavy-handed, but results have shown them to be effective so that the country will recover more quickly and sooner than the rest of the world. Having stepped up production of medical equipment and hygiene products, the PRC has material and technology to share with others, and half of the world is desperately short of supplies. This week China has sent 10,000 virus kits and ventilators to Palestine, for instance, and is considering sending a medical team to assist local doctors.

Such aid should surely be welcome, but, rather, there is a growing concerted effort in the West to discredit the PRC and turn people against accepting its aid and advice. The media is making much of the fact that some PRC masks and virus testing kits are of inferior quality. (It seems some may have been privately imported and not part of a Chinese government aid package, and PRC officials have said that they originated from factories that were not certified by the government.) The US and China are engaged in tit-for-tat rounds of recriminations and blame for the outbreak and spread of the virus. It would seem wise for Australia not to involve itself in this unproductive argument, but that apparently is not understood in Canberra, where senior journalist Chris Uhlmann [states](#), "It's a fair bet that the bulk of the population has got some key messages: that this threat came from China, that its totalitarian regime's first reaction was to lie and that Australia is far too reliant on an unreliable nation."

One regrettable result of the corona virus epidemic has been that governments everywhere are pulling up drawbridges and retreating into national isolation. The dangers of this approach are recognised by the United Nations, which this week launched [a new plan](#) to counter COVID-19. UN Chief Antonio Guterres described it as the "greatest test that we have faced together since the formation of the United Nations." "What the world needs now is solidarity. With solidarity we can defeat the virus and build a better world".

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