

The Culture of Being Prepared

Most of us have heard of the Boy Scout's motto 'Be Prepared'. In 1907, Baden-Powell, an English soldier, devised the Scout motto: Be Prepared. He published it in *Scouting for Boys* in 1908. Upon hearing the Scout motto, someone asked Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell the inevitable follow-up question. "Prepared for what?" "Why, for any old thing," he replied.

In *Scouting for Boys*, Baden-Powell wrote that to Be Prepared means "you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

Certainly governments spend a lot of money, I would suggest trillions of dollars on the defence of their national interests, and being prepared for war at regular intervals, inevitable as it may seem.

In the halls of governments, there is an ingrained culture of preparedness for skirmishes, with armed forces continually on the alert to take action against a potential invader.

What can we say about the preparedness for an even more serious invader that has killed several times more humans than the combined loss in all wars? How have governments handled preparedness for SARS, MERS, AIDS, EBOLA, COVID-19 and other pathogens?

Through history there have been outbreaks of these pathogens at regular intervals with each government following a similar pattern of making decisions without knowledge, such as initially downplaying the seriousness of the outbreak, indecision on border control, suitability of protection equipment, use of untrained personnel, and the latest - to mask or not to mask.

Paradis Sabeti, MD, Harvard School of Public Health said, "It would appear that regardless of the pathogen, the response is driven by overriding policies, or lack of them, rather than the science. If we see outbreaks as a political issue rather than a humanitarian one we're going to keep responding to them that way. Outbreak culture won't change without shifting to a culture of preparedness."

In 2007 Tony Abbott swung Australia into readiness of a global flu virus pandemic, spending \$600m on "pandemic preparedness" economically and even predicting "extreme fear" in the community.

He also suggested at the time the Federal Government might consider new powers to quarantine people in their own homes in the event of a flu pandemic.

Mr Abbott was not the prime minister at the time, but the federal health minister, and the flu in question was the avian or bird flu known as H5N1, not COVID-19.

Could we engage in a culture of preparedness for humanitarian issues with the same effort as preparedness for defending our national interests? This is an interesting question. After the current outbreak we will have clarity on what went wrong and what we can do better. But we have to acknowledge that during the next outbreak we will be making decisions without using the knowledge that was gained from the past, unless we develop a culture of preparedness.

Geoff