

# Puritanical rule in lockdown Australia

S [spectator.com.au/2021/09/puritanical-rule-in-lockdown-australia](https://spectator.com.au/2021/09/puritanical-rule-in-lockdown-australia)

Bella d'Abnera

September 11, 2021



Getty Images

Australians are currently being subjected to hitherto unprecedented control over, and incursions into, our lives by the state. We have been subjected to a seemingly inexhaustible and constantly changing supply of confusing, dehumanising and arbitrary edicts which are daily issued by a cabal of unelected health bureaucrats and their politician handlers. Our police forces have successfully cowed the citizenry into unquestioning obedience. Even more remarkable has been the willingness of many to become accessories to this political overreach by ‘ratting out’ our friends, families and neighbours.

The speed at which the state has assumed this power has been astonishing, and many Australians are naturally asking how we got here. In his book *Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe*, American sociologist, Philip S. Gorski, proposes a fascinating historical explanation. The seeds for what is unfolding, he posits, were planted 500 years ago during the Reformation.

Gorski’s thesis is that the Reformation ‘unleashed a profound and far-reaching process of disciplining that greatly enhanced the power of early modern states’. This disciplining revolution, created an ‘infrastructure of religious governance and social control that served as a model for the rest of Europe—and the world’.

To illustrate his point, Gorski focuses on Geneva in the sixteenth century. During the 1540s and 1550s, the city's residents found themselves living under the puritanical rule of reformer John Calvin and his loyal acolytes, who, through a quasi-tribunal known as the Consistory, sought to implement a utopian Protestant society. Calvin's radical re-engineering of society was made possible through discipline; a series of rules and regulations bolstered by the death penalty, exile, community surveillance and a system of ruinous fines.

Every aspect of life, down to the amount of food to be consumed, was policed by the ascendent puritanical class. The smallest of indiscretions, such as arriving late to sermon, held a fine of three *sous*, roughly a day's wages. Genevans were monitored in their own homes and were visited by Calvin's henchmen on a mission to ascertain the state of the family's morals. Houses were searched and drawers rifled through. Genevans learned to censor their own speech. No insult was too outrageous to be hurled at the Pope, but the slightest criticism of the Consistory, and especially Calvin, was one of the most serious offences a Genevan could commit. Sadly, Genevans could not say what they liked around the kitchen table.

Both dress and hairstyles were also strictly regulated. Calvin took particular umbrage at knee breeches and so the Consistory passed an edict which prohibited either making or wearing them, imposing a fine for those who refused to desist. One woman was fined for wearing a headdress of gold and silk, which was deemed too ornate.

One individual was subpoenaed for hunting too much, while another unfortunate found himself facing the Consistory for playing an overabundance of tennis. Meanwhile, a baker who dared to bake white bread was subject to a criminal prosecution because it was deemed a form of luxury. Declaring the baker 'incorrigible', judicial authorities deprived him of the use of his oven, which they then demolished.

Calvin transformed taverns into 'nurseries of righteousness', placing a bible on prominent display. All banter except for religious conversation was forbidden, as were excessive drinking, indecent songs, cursing, playing cards, rolling dice and dancing. These new 'evangelical refreshment places' were also subject to a curfew, closing at 9pm. Not that it would have made much difference because nobody went anyway. The failed experiment was halted after just three months.

The Consistory itself did not have the manpower to spy on every single Genevan, so it depended heavily upon the ready cooperation of the people and even recruited children to spy on their parents. People reported their fellow citizens for fornicating, gambling, praying to saints, and other activities that the Consistory had decided was sinful. They enthusiastically took it upon themselves to rebuke blasphemers, ordering them to immediately get on their knees and beg forgiveness from God. Residents of Calvin's Geneva were in effect practising a rather twisted form of neighbourhood watch.

The similarities between the methods used by the state in Calvin's Geneva and those used in Australia are stark. 'What steam did for the modern economy,' Gorski states, 'discipline did for the modern polity: by creating more obedient and industrious subjects with less

coercion and violence, discipline dramatically increased, not only the regulatory power of the state, but its extractive and coercive capacities as well’.

That Australians are being socially disciplined has been admitted by our state apparatchiks. In May, the Chief Health Officer of Queensland, Jeanette Young said that the decision to close schools was about messaging rather than health. Dan Andrews has said repeatedly that the onus is not on him to prove the efficacy of any one measure, such as curfews or the closing of playgrounds.

The police have also admitted as much. Mick Fuller, Commissioner of the NSW police, a public servant who is currently earning \$665,000 per annum, has increased on-the-spot fines for health disobedience to \$5,000. ‘We have to shape the behaviour of people’ he said to his subordinates. ‘If you write a ticket and get it wrong,’ Fuller added, ‘I won’t hold you to account for that.’ When the Victorian police opened the official snitching hotline in April 2020, a staggering 21,000 Victorians rang to report on each other. Even the police were surprised by the sheer number of informants. ‘I don’t think we understood the role it would play and how committed Victorians were to ensuring people followed the advice,’ Police Minister Lisa Neville said.

We have seen the state dramatically increase both its extractive and coercive powers over Australians, whose acquiescence has been astounding. So too has the willingness with which Australians have unquestionably handed over their freedoms and human rights. The country has been reshaped to such an extent that the rest of the world is having trouble recognising Australians as the freedom-loving ‘larrikins’ they imagined us to be. Some mainstream media commentators in the US are now asking if Australia can still legitimately continue to call itself a liberal democracy. I think the answer is no. We have been disciplined into authoritarianism. This may take decades to undo.

***Got something to add? Join the discussion and comment below.***

---

*Dr Bella d’Abrera is the Director, Foundations of Western Civilisation Program at the Institute of Public Affairs.*

You might disagree with half of it, but you’ll enjoy reading all of it. **Try your first 10 weeks for just \$10**

---