

Community in the face of insecurity [Andrew Hamilton](#) 09 July 2020

For Victorians this last week has been taxing. It began with rising numbers of COVID-19 infections, moved to the lock-down of housing commission towers enforced by hundreds of police and has continued with the lockdown of the whole Melbourne area for six weeks and exclusion from other States.

The challenge is to find compass bearings in such an unpredictable situation, and so how to respond to the flood of exhortation, complaint and blame that has accompanied it. Although it is notoriously difficult on a storm-tossed deck to take accurate readings, the attempt may encourage us to improve on our initial responses. It is important first to understand in broad terms the situation in which we find ourselves. To my mind — and this is true not just of Victoria but of the nation — we now live above all in insecurity. In coronavirus we are faced with a microbe that we do not fully understand, which threatens the life and health of those whom it infects, to which there is no antidote nor sure treatment, and to which our responses will affect unpredictably our economic and social life. In the face of this we cannot confidently predict or plan for our future as individuals nor as a society. For the foreseeable future insecurity is our home.

Insecurity takes many forms. Most obviously it expresses itself in anxiety and paralysis in the face of the uncertain choices we must make in everyday life. More subtly and perhaps commonly it leads to denial. The most blatant form of denial is to say that the virus won't affect me and that I can safely do what I choose without bothering about it. The more common form is to convince ourselves that the situation can be controlled if we only do this or that, and then we can all get on with life as before.

These voices can be heard loudly in the response to the Victorian situation. They shout that the outbreak was clearly someone's fault, could easily have been avoided and handled better. It was a failure of control. All we need to do is to avoid those mistakes and so get back to business as usual.

The vehemence and certainty with which those judgments are made betray inner insecurity. They silence the small voice that asks whether the armour with which we protect ourselves against the virus is like the Emperor's new clothes in the fairytale.

If not recognised, insecurity tends to isolate us. We look after ourselves and our own and see others as hostile. We look for people to blame, generally people who are different from us. That has been evident in one response to the spike in COVID-19 cases. It was the fault of people who live in suburbs far from our own, whose country of origin or religion is different from our own, who belong to a different age group than our own, and of governments whose political affiliation is not our own. Our unrecognised insecurity makes us want to control such people.

The alternative approach is to acknowledge our insecurity, to feel compassion for those who suffer from the virus, and to accompany them. In times of lockdown physical accompaniment can be difficult, but we can let our minds dwell on the images of people who translated and cooked for people in the towers, rang them up and saw them as friends. When we act in this way we find in the insecurity of the people to whom we act in solidarity a mirror and healing for own insecurities. To acknowledge our insecurity also leads us from dismissing people to trying to understand them. We might even empathise with government ministers who must make decisions in times of insecurity, uncertain

about the situation or the effectiveness of steps they might take to meet it, but realising that people's lives and livelihoods depend on them.

This approach also makes us put a high value on building community. In the face of insecurity we dig, deepening relationships with friends and fellow workers, and the ties that bind us to our wider community. We know that are in it together.

In this last week we have seen both these attitudes on display. The Victorian government appealed to power embodied in police and army to shut down the towers and to force people to stay inside. By doing so it implicitly guaranteed to provide a security beyond its reach. It also appealed to compassion and generosity, inviting us Victorians to recognise that those locked down are sacrificing themselves for our good, and affirming that we are all in this together.

Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of *Eureka Street*.