

# COVID-19 tests for Chinese arrivals pose a wicked problem for Labor

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Australia has made great strides in mending relations with China, but [China's sudden about-face](#) on COVID-19 presented the government with a curve ball: to test or not to test Chinese arrivals.

Australia's initial decision a few days after Christmas was to [watch the situation carefully](#), but not impose any restrictions even though the US, Italy, Japan, India and Taiwan had done so.

On the first day of the new year, however, the government changed its mind. Health Minister Mark Butler announced that [travellers from China](#) would be required to undertake a COVID test within 48 hours before travelling, citing the potential for new variants and the World Health Organization's (WHO) concern about the [transparency of data](#) coming from China.

Was this decision discriminatory? Possibly. Some countries, such as India and Nigeria, also don't provide much decent COVID data, yet arrivals from there won't be tested. And if possible new variants are what the government is worried about, why not test arrivals from the US where [a new Omicron variant](#) is raging?

The Chinese government's announcement that [it would take countermeasures](#) was based on its view that China had been singled out. So far, only [Japan and Korea](#) have borne the brunt of such a measure.

Is such discrimination justified? It depends on who you speak to.

It's hard to gauge the response of all Chinese Australian communities, but there seems to be a general view that [Australia's decision was 'understandable'](#). This view is reinforced by the Mandarin-speaking Chinese Australians in my WeChat groups.

As one Sydney-based lawyer said, given that the world was witnessing a 'tsunami of infection of this magnitude and within such a short time ... taking a cautious approach was beyond reproach'.

Another person in the same WeChat group agreed: 'China has been imposing a strict and lengthy quarantine on all international arrivals for three years. They have no reason to cry foul over such a modest measure.'

Someone working in a hospital in Western Australia chimed in: 'Our hospitals are already under so much pressure. We can't afford to stretch our resources any further.' Quite a few people in these WeChat groups commented on Butler's sensitively worded announcement, and observed that his overall message was friendly and welcoming to Chinese travellers.

Most travellers from China also seem to be understanding. They have endured multiple daily PCR tests for three years. National president of the Australia China Business Council David Olsson has said that while the COVID surge in China is a cause for concern for Australian businesses and the economy, [Chinese travellers were mostly delighted](#) that they could travel freely overseas. Testing may be a small inconvenience, but it was not a deal breaker.

Although chief medical officer Paul Kelly openly disagreed with the government, and his colleague [Fiona Russell said the measure was discriminatory](#), they don't seem to have the unanimous support of all the health experts.

When asked to comment on the government's decision to ignore advice from the medical experts, Jane Halton, chair of the global Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and professor of health security at ANU, said: 'Well, I think we need to understand that [there is more in the world than just medical advice](#).' One thing to take into account, according to epidemiologist Robert Booy, is the [sheer scale of infection in China](#).

Yingjie Guo, a political scientist and professor of China studies at Sydney University, believes the government's decision may have been political, based on a simple cost-benefit calculus.

'More than anything else, it's probably meant to appease Australian voters at a time when there appears to be an internationally concerted responses and when the unknown, due in part to the Chinese government's lack of transparency, seems to pose a threat,' Guo said. 'After all, it's easier to go with the flow than against it.'

Guo presumed the government had decided there was more to gain than lose by requiring testing.

The response from the Coalition seems to have been clearly politically motivated. Liberal Leader [Peter Dutton demanded an explanation](#) for why Kelly's advice was ignored, and said: 'Chinese Australians ... need more certainty in their travel plans.'

The problem for the opposition is that it doesn't really have much goodwill among Chinese Australians, so Dutton's advocacy on their behalf seems disingenuous to many. This is particularly the case given that just a few days earlier, opposition spokesman on tourism Kevin Hogan had demanded that Labor explain [why the government was not following some other countries](#) in requiring tests of Chinese arrivals.

Similarly, criticising the government for not listening to health experts only jogged people's memories of the [Coalition's dubious track record of not listening to health experts](#).

To be sure, we are talking here about a very specific — and some may even say minor — issue. But it is a ['complex issue, with a variety of views'](#), in the words of one MP. And it is certainly one that tests the new government's capacity to handle Australia-China relations carefully and delicately, and to juggle competing and conflicted group interests and points of view adroitly.

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