

## Our risk-averse society

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Now that we have entered the federal election, where voters are expected to "shop" for policies offered for "sale" by political parties, it is important to consider how, in this climate, problems are often exaggerated, fears played upon and solutions in the form of increased government intervention in our society offered too easily in response.

The trouble is that this is not just a reflection of the election-bidding bazaar.

Australian public policy has become increasingly characterised by governments exaggerating problems contrary to evidence and responding to the latest perceived policy problem overzealously with blanket and intrusive regulations on what often turns out to be a minor issue or one that posed low risk to citizens. Fear of litigation adds to the mix.

Australia has become not just an over-regulated society, but a risk averse one. Government rules increasingly seek to cover every exigency and thus limit individual judgment, responsibility and discretionary decision-making.

While public policy should respond to emerging issues, the year to stock up on food so as not to go out shopping! Another government agency suggested people "avoid crowds" too bad if you are a commuter.

Medical authorities urged people continual over-dramatisation of everything from apocalyptic climate change and tsunami threats to the latest flu outbreak, boat people, crime and now population increases is making Australian citizens unnecessarily fearful.

Such over-reactions waste public resources on problems that pose minimal risks to society. It causes policy fatigue among citizens and government agencies, which treat with growing indifference the latest issue wrapped up in the hyperbole of "crisis", even when it may be genuine.

It seems our political leaders are too eager to show activity rather than judgment. Former prime minister Kevin Rudd's comment that "swine flu" was a "serious problem" that was being treated "seriously" reflects this inability to give issues appropriate priority based on evidence rather than political exigencies.

Our senior public servants, now with limited tenure, are also eager to justify their positions and their agency's role and find it convenient to initiate a range of measures they once would have been more cautious to implement.

With the swine flu, one state chief medical officer advised people last with flu symptoms to see their doctors, though it was, after all, winter. Closing down university campuses was another option examined.

Similarly alarmist rhetoric and over-reactions by Australian governments took place in 2007 after an earthquake triggered a tsunami in the Solomon Islands.

Although thousands of kilometres away from Australia, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology's warnings even though it admitted it was "erring on the side of caution" caused authorities all down the eastern seaboard from Cooktown to Sydney to enact disaster plans and close beaches, schools, government offices, shops, hospitals and even the ferries in Sydney Harbour.

This was all unnecessary, costly, wasteful and stupid. The sea level only rose by 10cm. The tsunami had no effect on Australia.

Such risk-aversion activity and government intrusion infects our lives at work, home and play more and more.

Local clubs and schools are now required to have parental consent for children playing sport in case they are

photographed. Homemade cakes for local fetes must now be labelled with their ingredients lest they harm someone and result in subsequent legal action. Such home-made food will soon be banned.

It is risk aversion that causes doctors to order too many tests for patients, adding to medical costs.

It is risk aversion that pushes so many parents to drive their children to school, adding to traffic congestion.

It is risk aversion that explains why fewer children are allowed to play outside unsupervised, perhaps contributing to childhood obesity.

It is risk aversion that drives developers to want building covenants that control the style of housing design, which drives up costs and destroys any architectural innovation.

It is risk aversion that leads to our buildings being pasted with warning signs, directions and downright threats if we do not step carefully, close doors, wash hands and use tissues.

It is risk aversion and our litigious society that cause the repetition, ad nauseam, on plane flights about luggage removal, seat belts and not smoking.

Is it risk aversion that explains why, at Canberra Airport, you cannot buy chewing gum, unlike at most other airports?

That's the risk: being stuck to carpets? And look at all the nonsense about the danger of mobile phones at petrol stations. Everyone is covering their backs.

In our increasingly risk-averse society, individuals will soon be unable to exercise even a modicum of discretionary judgment, to learn from making their own mistakes or to be innovative in doing things better. Rather, every contingency and behaviour must be covered by codes, warnings and policies, and uniformity rules the day.

\\There will it end? Or is this just the beginning of more government control? But regulation cannot cover every exigency, to brook no failure or to prevent its citizens from taking risks. Certainly, serious policy issues and risks should be identified and strategies developed, but only in the context of probabilities, costs and society's needs.

Governments must forge better community understanding of the realities of government capacities.

And individuals must be allowed to make their own choices and to take responsibility accordingly. Too risky?

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