

# Daniel Andrews' government ordered John Armitage's QDOS to survey Victorians about what lockdown restrictions they could live with

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Cabinet documents reveal the Andrews government grilled Victorians about which pandemic restrictions they would “really like to see go” in the months before and after Daniel Andrews released his roadmap out of lockdown.

In revelations raising fresh questions about the former premier’s repeated claims that his government’s world-record 267 days of lockdown were guided by health advice and science, the documents confirm detailed “mood and concerns” research of Victorians was ordered. The Department of Premier and Cabinet has spent most of this year fighting to keep the key documents – draft discussion guides dated September and October 2021 for focus groups run by political intelligence and strategy consultant QDOS – secret from Victorians. The discussion guides make it clear that, as the government was preparing its roadmap to freedom, released by Mr Andrews on September 19, 2021, the DPC and QDOS launched a major behavioural research project aimed at providing a detailed insight into public thinking about which “restrictions/aspects are more challenging” and if they were “getting into rhythm of it (lockdown) or is it grinding you down”.

In a significant ruling, Victoria’s Information Commissioner dismissed DPC claims the September and October “cabinet in confidence – internal working documents” were exempt from Freedom of Information laws and ordered they be released to The Australian.

“Even after we get to 80 per cent (vaccination) there’ll probably be some rules in place,” the September draft discussion guide for focus groups states.

“Obviously governments have to follow health advice but in some cases it might be a trade-off where if we lift one restriction we’d better keep another in place.

“What are the sorts of restrictions that you’d really like to see go (e.g. seeing family again cafes and restaurants open again) and what are the sorts of things you could live with (e.g. QR codes or keeping masks for a bit longer).”

The draft guide also suggests the government was anxious about community perceptions of its decision to abandon its “Covid zero” elimination strategy.

“How do you feel about the idea that we’re now NOT going for total elimination? Why has this been done?”, the draft states.

The final version of the focus group discussion guides were not released to The Australian, but other documents suggest the focus groups proceeded.

The data and QDOS analysis of the research prepared for cabinet was also kept under wraps by the government.

QDOS is owned by veteran Labor political strategist and pollster John Armitage, who boasts about his firm’s ability to “squeeze, pump and stir” public opinion, and use analysis to - formulate persuasive language for clients.

“In the end we’ll find the language and ideas you can evoke to activate the right frames so you can shape public opinion,” the company says on its website.

As revealed by The Australian in multiple reports over the past three years, the firm was paid more than \$2m in taxpayer funds by Mr Andrews’ DPC to conduct secretive research into Victorians during the pandemic.

The large-scale behavioural research program was controlled by the Premier’s private office, documents have revealed.

The Allan government has defended the research program. “It is a common practice for governments, both in Australia and globally, to use data insights to inform policy development, effective decision-making and efficient service delivery,” a government spokesperson said.

“Research was crucial to ensuring the Victorian government could implement the best possible public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Premier Jacinta Allan’s office failed to respond when asked by The Australian if it would release all QDOS-related files in the spirit of transparency.

Mr Armitage did not respond to questions.



John Armitage at his home in 2021. Picture: Luis Enrique Ascui

The September 19 roadmap laid out a timeline for the removal of restrictions such as the curfew, travel limits, home visits and the reopening of the retail and hospitality industries as 80 per cent of the community had their second vaccination dose.

After its release, the government ordered QDOS to launch a fresh round of focus groups starting on October 25, just over a year before the next state election, aimed at probing “for concern based on continuing high case numbers” and what people were “planning to do that they couldn’t a week ago”.

The draft October guide attempted to tap the mood of the public about the looming freedoms after Victoria reached an 80 per cent double vaccination rate later that week.

“How do you feel about this? (retail and gyms etc. opening with one person per 4 square metres, no masks outdoors, metro and regional travel allowed, metro kids returning to school full time),” the document states.

“Are there any restrictions that you would really like to see go at 80 per cent that haven’t been announced or that you are not aware of changing?”

“Are there any restrictions that you think should stay to limit the spread of Covid?”

The government argued repeatedly during the lockdown that it was guided by health advice, and in February 2021, Mr Andrews said: “I’m just not in the business of ignoring advice, or shopping around for advice that suits me.”

The October draft discussion guide also reveals the government was focused on the public's views about what restrictions should be eased a month later in November when the 90 per cent double vaccination target was met.

“Probe for sentiment around some of the changes e.g. no density limits for indoor venues, large crowds at sporting and entertainment venues and no masks indoors apart from sensitive settings e.g. aged care and hospitals,” the guide said.

Daniel Andrews used taxpayer money for a ‘Labor Party polling job’

The Australian reported last March, based on documents the information commissioner ordered the DPC release to the public, that QDOS research was used to monitor Victorians' views about Mr Andrews' personal performance during Melbourne's 112-day lockdown, with Mr Armitage briefing cabinet on the research.

“The government, and the premier in particular, are seen as doing the right things to get on top of this spike,” Mr Armitage wrote in one briefing.

In another, research showed there was “strong support for Dan Andrews and a broad acknowledgment of the good job he had the government are doing in very difficult circumstances”.

A QDOS “cabinet in confidence” briefing note from August 5, 2020, stated: “Dan Andrews. Sentiment in these groups was similar to earlier rounds and these people were considerably more like to jump to the defence of the government and Dan Andrews.”

QDOS was paid \$786,500 by the DPC between 2016-18, and in December 2019 was handed a \$1.1m contract without a competitive tender process. The consultant has also pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars from various government agencies and departments for research work.

After The Australian revealed the QDOS research on his personal performance in March, Mr Andrews stood by his government's use of the consultant, saying: “You need to have a sense, do people think what you're doing is essentially necessary, proportionate, will they follow those rules? It's no good putting rules on if you haven't gone to check whether people are prepared to make those sacrifices, to make those difficult decisions.”

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