

# One person's face mask is another's face covering — the double standard is irrational

Victoria's decision to make face masks mandatory has, for some, been a declaration of war. But is it about human rights or bigotry?

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You might think a face covering is just a mask, but it is in fact a human right. Or not. It depends on who's wearing it. Or not.

Allow me to explain.

From Thursday, Melbourne's population will be the first Australians since the time of the Spanish Flu required by law to wear a face mask. The response of most will be the same as for every other COVID-19 measure: unenthusiastic but willing compliance.

For a small but vocal number, it means war.

For some time in the United States, face masks have been not so much a public health matter as a statement of political allegiance. That clear divide — masks for liberals (and people who want to live), no masks for freedom warriors — has broken down in the face of medical reality. Even President Donald Trump (kind of) gave in

For the hard core, however, masks are still totemic of government oppression.

The mere suggestion of enforced mask-wearing ignites a reaction from some that appears to be deeply emotional. It makes people very, very angry, well beyond a passion that mere inconvenience or aesthetic discomfort could invoke. We're not talking practicality here, but rights.

US founding father Patrick Henry's call in 1775 — "Give me liberty or give me death" — has never been more literally true. The declared human right to not wear a mask is being held above not just the public good, but even personal safety. That is libertarianism at its extremity.

All good, if batty — but there is an oddity: many of the voices loudly insisting face masks are an unjustified impingement on human rights are the same voices who have a serious problem with facial coverings of a different kind.

For many cultures and religions, head and face coverings are a visual representation of allegiance or faith. For some reason those worn by Muslim women really piss some people off.

Their objections have had impact: in a significant number of European and African countries burqas, veils and other face coverings have been outlawed.

One of those countries is France, which has just placed itself in the mother of all contradictions as it introduces mandatory face masks.

Literally, it is both illegal to wear a face covering and illegal not to. It just depends on why you're wearing it.

That's not difficult logic: public order overrides the right to wear a veil by choice, forcing its removal, while public health dictates that it be put back on.

The SAD (Sky after dark) position is comfortably settled: Muslim face coverings are bad — social divisiveness, terrorists hiding under burqas, etc — but mandatory face masks are also bad — liberty, freedom, etc.

In one sense those positions do reconcile, being consistently in favour of an uncovered face. However, they are argued from opposed principles.

It's difficult to understand why it is asserted there is a human right to choose to not wear a face covering, but there is not also a human right to choose to wear one. According to SAD theorists, the choice to wear a face covering is so far removed from being a right that they have no problem with it being prohibited by law.

Clearly what's good for the goose is not good for the (Muslim) gander. It might be explained as basic bigotry, the usual fear of difference given voice. But I don't think that suffices.

Those who would prevent a Muslim woman from wearing a veil would not deny her the right to refuse to put it back on as a mask. So it's not quite black and white.

I think there's also something here about the human value of a face. We just like to see them. It's irrational but also completely understandable that when the state gestures towards masking our faces there is a discomfort.

It's not something I'm keen on doing, less so of being forced — although I'm more than happy to comply in the cause of public health. Others don't move past their discomfort, their preference, and that's easily converted to an assertion of right.

In that context, the double standard isn't hard to see and becomes a perfect case study of how bigotry defeats its own logic.

If our faces are sovereign to ourselves then the choice — to cover or not — is necessarily solely ours. If on the other hand you still think the state has the right to forcibly remove a person's veil, it must also be able to make you wear a mask.

Make your choice. You can't have it both ways.