

Migrants, sport, tennis & pandemics: Novak Djokovic is no Spartacus

Wednesday 12 January 2022, by [KELLOWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2022).

None of the parties involved in the Djokovic visa affair comes out of it very well, writes Dave Kelloway.

At the time of writing it is still unclear whether Novak Djokovic will be able to defend his title in the Australian grand slam tennis event.

Djokovic himself has always been very cagey about his health or vaccination status. In the first phase of the pandemic he helped organise a tournament in Croatia which resulted in multiple infections including himself and other fellow tennis players. Recently, he has made no secret of his anti-vax position and consults with a notorious Serb nationalist who has new age ideas.

From his belief in purifying water with emotions, where he claimed to have met and seen “people who have used energy transformation, through the power of prayer and gratitude to turn even the most toxic food and water into water with curative powers,” to his visits to the pyramids in Visoko, Bosnia - a mountain in the town is the centre of well-documented hoax - where he goes to charge his body with positive ions, some of it comes off as quirky at best.

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Even his latest justification for exemption because of a December Covid infection is weakened when the press released pictures of him maskless in a public event a day or so after he is supposed to have been infected.

His mum was outraged that her darling son had to share a hotel with ‘illegal’ migrants and other unsavoury people and he was being crucified like Jesus Christ. His father says he is a victim of ‘Corona fascism’ and a ‘Spartacus’ of our age. The Serbian government rather grotesquely even called the Australian ambassador and complained that its favourite son was being maltreated.

The Australian Tennis organisers were clearly concerned with getting the star player into their tournament and helped him with the ‘exemption argument’. Losing the number one player in the world has an impact on the commercial potential of the tournament. As some of the tennis players implicitly pointed out at a press conference there seemed to be two weights and two measures when it came to which players were being given special treatment. Everybody else had to go through all the hoops that are now required for international sports tournaments in the time of pandemic.

Public opinion in Australia seemed to react in the same way as the British people when they heard about the Cummings road trip or the Downing Street parties. People in Melbourne had been through one of the longest lockdowns of the Covid period and now this millionaire tennis player was waltzing into their town making light of the importance of vaccination. Historically Australians are pretty

hostile to any sort of “Pommie” sense of entitlement, the Djokovic affair falls in the same sort of territory. [1]

Although he was not as harshly dealt with as an ordinary non-white immigrant the judge who overturned the government’s original visa refusal did point out that correct legal procedures were not followed. Basically it seems the government minister can personally decide who can and cannot come into Australia. This is used against many people who fully deserve to be able to settle there.

During a whole period in the 1950s and 1960s Australian governments were more or less openly in favour of a White Australia policy. Immigration from Britain was facilitated whereas it was very difficult from Asia. [2] Today things have moved on and in the 2016 census 12.6% of the population claimed an Asian heritage.

Treatment of the first people, the Aborigines has been a classic example of colonial settler racism. Aboriginal children were regularly taken away from their families in an attempt to erase their culture and forcefully assimilate them. See the 2002 film Rabbit proof fence for a brilliant exposition of this policy.

The one positive outcome of it all has been the light it has shown on the Australian government’s repressive immigration policy. Anti-racist demonstrators got out in front of the hotel Djokovic was held in to highlight the way migrants have been held for years in this place. Novak’s mum complained about the basic accommodation and food on offer to her son. This did allow migrants staying at the same hotel to speak out on the media denouncing the hell they had been living through for a lot longer than a couple of days!

There was an even worse feature of Australian anti-migrant policy, much admired by British Home secretary Priti Patel, which was the detention of migrants outside Australian borders in Papua New Guinea. Australia paid PNG for this which was only ended in 2021. The practice had been condemned internationally by many human rights organisations. The usual racist arguments about being full up and there being no more space is particularly ridiculous in the case of Australia as anyone who has looked at a map or visited the place.

This entire affair is grist to the mill of the anti-vaxers who are already erecting Novak into a Covid martyr. As socialists we encourage the priority of solidarity and public health over right wing or left wing libertarian arguments that people should be free to infect other people. It is one thing for a non-vaxer to live their refusal in isolation from other people. But for those who have to come into close contact with others, like professional tennis players, it is incumbent for them to accept they have to get a jab or face being scratched from tournaments.

You can have your right not to be vaccinated but that does not override the right of other players and staff not to be infected by you. The great champion Rafa Nadal has got it right: “People have suffered enough,” he said and encouraged people to follow the science.

Currently the Australian government has been wrong footed by the judge’s decision to allow Djokovic in. It is weighing up the implications of a ministerial decision to reverse this. It is aware that the government’s handling of the pandemic has been criticised in the past and there is a lot of evidence on social media that people are very angry about Djokovic’s exemption. On the other hand this would be a 3-year ban which then may have implications for Australia keeping the grand slam event. A ban might lead the international tennis governing bodies or players’ associations to call for a boycott.

Djokovic is unlikely to drop his irrational beliefs. The reason he is one of the greatest of all times is

his incredible resilience and stubborn mentality in matches. Recently he has won grand slam finals from two sets to love down. He is the anti-Federer in many ways. Roger is smooth, everybody's favourite and seems to win effortlessly and in style. Crowds love him while Djokovic thrives on antagonism. If they do let him play don't bet against him winning the thing since he will be angrier than ever to make a point.

Whatever happens we stand in solidarity with the migrants unfairly repressed by the Australian government and in favour of a zero tolerance policy on vaccination for players in such events.

10 January 2022

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/novak-djokovic-is-no-spartacus/>
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Footnotes

[1] "Pommie" is Australian slang for British.

[2] There was an assisted emigration scheme from Britain to Australia and later New Zealand. See [Ten Pound Poms](#).