

Australian governments rushing to reverse lockdown measures

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State and territory leaders are rushing to overturn lockdown measures introduced in response to the pandemic, even though their own modelling indicates that this will result in the more rapid spread of the coronavirus.

The Northern Territory is today lifting a raft of restrictions, while South Australia and other states have outlined “roadmaps” out of the crisis. This is despite continuing deaths and illness linked to at least four active COVID-19 clusters across the country, and ongoing community transmission.

The aim of all the governments is to create the conditions for broad sections of the working class to be herded back onto the job, so as to resume the flow of corporate profits.

The dangerous implications of this policy have already been demonstrated in sectors that have remained open throughout the crisis. In the construction industry, for instance, the unions and property developers have forced tens of thousands of workers to continue production despite the impossibility of social distancing and have refused to shut sites even when infections have occurred.

The state and territory announcements have been timed to coincide with a meeting today of the expanded national cabinet, composed of the federal government, along with premiers and chief ministers. Each of these gatherings, followed by a press conference of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy have been markers in the escalating “back to work” campaign.

In the lead-up to the meeting, Morrison has pressed for the state governments to plan for the reopening of restaurants, bars and clubs. The sector is clearly not “essential,” but accounts for at least \$20 billion in revenue per year.

At the same time, state and federal authorities are rapidly moving to resume face-to-face teaching in the

schools, despite widespread opposition, as a precondition for workers returning to their jobs.

The Northern Territory Labor government has thus far gone the furthest in reversing lockdown measures, announcing that from today outdoor activities involving pools and children’s playgrounds will reopen, while weddings and funerals can proceed with an unlimited number of attendees.

Beginning on May 15, indoor activities at cafes, gyms and food courts will be permitted and on June 5, all restrictions on mass sporting events, TAB gambling venues and cinemas will be abolished.

The territory is being used as a test case for broader measures, because its small population and isolation appear to have buffered it from the worst effects of the pandemic.

That the NT cannot be shut off from broader developments, however, as was shown this morning with the announcement that four Australian Defence Force personnel had been hospitalised in Darwin after reportedly contracting COVID-19 in the Middle East.

The territory is a hub of the Australian military, with Darwin hosting a major marine base directed against China. Some 2,500 US marines are set to arrive at the base in July, while an unknown number of US intelligence assets come and go from the spy base in Pine Gap near the town of Alice Springs, all year long. The US is currently one of the epicentres of the pandemic and there have already been large-scale outbreaks on board its naval vessels.

The move in the NT is particularly reckless, given that fewer than 5,000 tests have been conducted out of a population of some 250,000.

More than a quarter of Territorians are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. They suffer the health consequences of centuries of oppression and many continue to live in communities that lack the most basic

amenities. While for other demographics, individuals over the age of 60 are considered at risk of serious illness or death if they contract the coronavirus, among Aborigines, the warning age is just 50.

The South Australian state government is reportedly seeking to lift many of its restrictions within three weeks. The Victorian state of emergency concludes on May 11, which is the date that Morrison and state leaders have assigned for a review of all lockdown measures.

In New South Wales, the country's most populous state and the largest centre of infections, government claims that the worst of the crisis is over have been dealt a blow by a spate of tragic deaths at the Newmarch House aged care home in western Sydney and by ongoing reports of community transmission.

This morning state authorities announced the thirteenth death at the Newmarch facility. Family members have protested over several weeks that they have been denied information about the plight of their relatives and their health status.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian also revealed that there had been nine new confirmed infections over the previous 24 hours. At least four of them are a result of community transmission in the Penrith area.

The state is nevertheless proceeding with back to work measures, including the reopening of the schools.

This week, the *Daily Telegraph* published details of a previously secret "matrix," which the NSW government is using to plan the end of the lockdown. It appears to provide a cost versus health analysis of a series of measures.

For instance, it is noted that the removal of restrictions on large-scale outdoor gatherings would result in a "medium" risk of new COVID-19 infections, but this is counted against the "high" economic and "well-being" benefits that would result from such a measure. The reintroduction of widespread retail shopping would similarly result in a "medium" risk of a coronavirus outbreak, but would have "high" economic benefits.

According to the *Telegraph*, the NSW state government is hoping that its recently announced abolition of limits on family visits will have been normalised by mid-May, prior to the lifting of other restrictions.

The Murdoch press, however, claims that there is "a group of cabinet ministers in NSW pushing for a faster relaxation of lockdown laws, including Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, Deputy Premier John Barilaro and Customer Service Minister Victor Dominello." Two of those have portfolios that would receive a direct boost

from a rapid reopening of the economy.

Similar calculations are being made nationally. This week the media revealed modelling by the "Group of Eight" universities, commissioned by the government to advise a route "out of the crisis."

The academics presented two models. One would require the maintenance of most lockdown measures until at least June, aimed at the effective elimination of the spread of the virus. The other would involve the phased overturn of restrictions and a subsequent policy of "controlled adaptation" to COVID-19.

The proponents of the latter strategy bluntly stated that it would lead to a "slightly higher number of cases, hospitalisations and deaths." All of their modelling is predicated on untested assertions that the health system will be capable of dealing with a rapid spike in infections. Nevertheless Morrison and other government representatives immediately declared that they were not seeking to eliminate the virus, because to do so would have too great an effect on the economy.

Governments are touting a decline in cases to justify the removal of lockdown measures. The reduction, however, is clearly the result of the policies they are seeking to overturn. Within the corridors of power, it is openly discussed that the abolition of the social distancing measures will result in a rapid spike in infections, and inevitably, in deaths.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* has been among the most insistent advocates of a speedy return to work. Yesterday, its foreign editor Greg Sheridan spelt out what this would mean, declaring: "[B]ased on everything we know about COVID-19 there will likely be a second and a third wave of the pandemic. They could easily be worse than the first." He concluded: "Don't think the worst cannot come here."



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