

Australian government fast-tracks review of lockdown measures

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After a meeting of the “national cabinet” yesterday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that his government, with the agreement of state and territory leaders, is bringing forward a review of lockdown measures introduced in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Previously slated for May 11, the review will now occur at next Friday’s national cabinet.

There is an increasingly frenzied campaign by the corporate and financial elite for social distancing measures to be abandoned, even though this will result in the further spread of COVID-19. The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper summed up the line in a lead article this morning, hailing Morrison for outlining a “seven day timetable to free a nation.”

Like their counterparts internationally, the Australian ruling class and its governments are seeking to force workers back onto the job as quickly as possible, including in unsafe conditions, to ensure the resumed flow of corporate profits, even as fresh clusters emerge.

Morrison sought to present the review as being aimed at improving the quality of life of ordinary people. “Australians deserve an early mark for the work that they’ve done,” Morrison declared. Despite infections nearing 7,000 and deaths reaching 95, he claimed: “We can’t keep Australia under the doona.”

The prime minister pointed to the government’s real concerns when he noted that its policies were being developed “so that we can open up the economy.” He said “restarting the economy” was as important as halting the virus.

Aside from providing an assurance to big business that its demands will be met, Morrison’s statements were part of a push to convince the population that the pandemic has been contained. He said 11 of 15 unspecified conditions for reversing the lockdowns had been met. Over the past several weeks, phrases such as

“the curve has been flattened” have taken on the character of an official mantra.

The dubious character of these assertions was summed up by Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy. Speaking alongside Morrison, he admitted that over the previous week federal authorities had only received sufficient data to track real rates of transmission from two of the country’s eight states and territories.

The government previously said it would introduce mass testing, including of asymptomatic individuals, while easing the lockdown. At yesterday’s press conference, Murphy appeared to backtrack on this, stating only that samples would be taken from some asymptomatic nurses, aged-care workers and others in vulnerable occupations.

All the government measures are predicated on a recognition that lifting social distancing will result in a spike in coronavirus transmissions. Morrison last week made clear that his government, along with its Labor and Liberal state counterparts, had rejected calls for a strategy aimed at the effective elimination of community transmission.

Instead the governments are planning to “manage the epidemic.” The centrepiece of this program is a “COVIDSafe” mobile phone app, which will supposedly allow the authorities to undertake rapid contact tracing when cases emerge.

Morrison declared yesterday that the lifting of restrictions depended on “millions more” downloading the app. Since it was released last Sunday, the app has been downloaded 3.5 million times, indicating a maximum coverage of 14 percent of the population.

Government officials have given conflicting estimates of the take-up rate for it to provide any benefit, ranging from 20 to 40 percent, while some commentators have suggested a figure closer to 70

percent.

The effectiveness of the app is completely unknown. It works by logging the phone numbers of anyone with whom an individual comes into close contact for 15 minutes or longer. This would do nothing to detect transmissions of the highly infectious virus caused by fleeting contact between individuals in shopping centres and other public places.

The government has refused to publicly release the app's source code, meaning that its supposed privacy provisions are effectively a state secret. The data will be stored by Amazon, which has close ties to the US intelligence agencies, and may be subpoenaed by American law enforcement forces because the company is registered in that country.

Previous government claims that the data would be accessible only to state health officials were exposed this week. People who downloaded the app noted a provision that the information could be used to "prosecute a breach of the law" under draconian biosecurity legislation. This confirms that at least some of the data will be accessible to the police and state prosecutors.

The official declarations that the country is on the cusp of removing many social-distancing restrictions have coincided with indications that community transmission is more widespread than officially acknowledged.

In New South Wales, a new cluster emerged yesterday in the western Sydney suburb of Penrith, with at least four infections of unknown origin. Premier Gladys Berejiklian, whose government has lifted some restrictions on individuals visiting other people's homes, openly stated that the "worst days may be yet to come." Overnight, another five cases were confirmed, including two of unknown origin and one under investigation.

Victorian authorities revealed this morning that eight workers had tested positive for the coronavirus at a single meat processing facility in Melbourne. This underscores the possibility of a rapid spread of the virus in workplaces where employees are forced to be in close quarters.

State Labor Health Minister Jenny Mikakos refused to name the plant, in a transparent bid to ensure that its operations can continue unhindered despite a major COVID-19 outbreak. Labor and the unions have played

the central role in ensuring that large sections of manufacturing have continued to function throughout the pandemic, including in non-essential sectors such as construction.

The *Age* reported yesterday that throughout Victoria, the origins of 17 clusters are still under investigation, indicating that the authorities do not know how widely transmission may have occurred. The clusters include aged-care homes, a psychiatric facility and hospitals.

Despite the dangers, the governments are pressing ahead with a so-called "return to normal." All of them are seeking to force teachers to resume mass face-to-face teaching, as a precondition for herding the workforce as a whole back onto the job.

This is creating the conditions for a similar crisis to those which hit a number of countries that prematurely reversed lockdown measures. Singapore, for instance, was previously touted as a model to be emulated, but experienced a major new spike in cases last month after hastily withdrawing social-distancing measures on the basis of equally dubious claims as those put forward by the Australian governments.



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