

Former Australian PM Tony Abbott: Let the elderly die for corporate profits

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In an address to the British Policy Exchange think tank earlier this week, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott branded any measures to tackle the spread of COVID-19 as a “health dictatorship” and called for the elderly to be left to die from the virus.

Abbott, who held the highest political office in Australia between 2013 and 2015, sketched out a homicidal program that would not have been out of place in Hitler’s Nazi Germany. Its essence was a call for governments to explicitly adopt a policy that would lead to tens or hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths and to remove any obstacles to corporate profit-making activities.

The former PM gave unvarnished expression to the socially-criminal response to the pandemic by governments internationally. He nevertheless complained that not enough politicians were “thinking like health economists trained to pose uncomfortable questions about the level of deaths we might have to live with.”

Abbott cited figures, for which he provided no evidence, claiming that the Australian government was spending up to \$200,000 to prolong the life of each elderly COVID-19 patient by as little as a year. The clear implication was that such basic health care was not a good investment. He repeated the familiar refrain of capitalist politicians throughout the pandemic, warning that the cure could not be worse than the disease.

Abbott couched his reactionary proposals in pseudo-philosophical musings: “In this climate of fear it was hard for governments to ask ‘how much is a life worth?’ Because every life is precious, and every death is sad, but that has never stopped families sometimes electing to make elderly relatives as comfortable as possible while nature takes its course.”

In this case, letting “nature take its course” means subjecting the elderly, and other vulnerable individuals considered surplus to the requirements of big business, to

an agonising death by denying them medical treatment.

Abbott was very explicit about the purpose of his statements. It was above all necessary, he insisted, for workers to return fully to their places of employment.

Abbott warned of “People once sturdily self-reliant looking to the government more than ever for support and sustenance, a something-for-nothing mindset, reinforced amongst young people spared the need of searching for jobs.” This, he said, risked “establishing a new normal,” where ordinary people expected governments to assist them.

In other words, the main issue is for workers to be on the job, so that surplus value can be pumped out of them, regardless of the danger to their lives. Even minimal unemployment benefits must be wound back, as part of a broader austerity offensive against the working class.

Abbott attempted to justify his proposals by concluding: “Fear of falling sick is stopping us from feeling fully alive.”

The limited media commentary on Abbott’s speech has focused on the undeniable right-wing proclivities of the former Liberal Party politician. He was a protégé of B.A. Santamaria, a reactionary ideologue who helped split Australia’s pro-capitalist Labor Party in the 1950s, declaring that it had been over-run by communists. Abbott’s entire political career has been associated with nationalist militarism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and anti-communism.

Others have noted the apparent hypocrisy of Abbott, a fervent Catholic who has invoked the “sanctity of life” to oppose abortion and euthanasia, coming out in favour of what amounts to state-enforced “euthanasia.” It is hardly a revelation, however, that Abbott, like his colleagues in official politics, secular and religious alike, worships first of all at the altar of profit.

Much of the coverage has missed the main point. What Abbott was outlining has already been carried out by

capitalist governments around the world, including in Britain, the US and Australia, whether they are led by establishment parties of the “right” or the supposed “left.”

Abbott, who is in line to become a trade envoy for the British government, has been promoted by that country’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The British government responded to the pandemic by adopting a policy of “herd immunity,” allowing COVID-19 to spread unchecked throughout the country, because of the impact on big business that lockdown measures would have. This included a mass culling of the elderly in aged-care homes, which Abbott now lauds and promotes.

The WSWS, moreover, has previously documented the fact that the Policy Exchange think tank where Abbott spoke is the scene of high-level discussions of the British state and the Conservative Party, along with its US ally.

It is notable that Abbott has come under fire from Britain’s “liberal” press, including the *Guardian*, who have denounced his putative position as a trade envoy.

Demonstrating the selfish concerns of the upper-middle class, they have passed over Abbott’s homicidal speech, instead condemning his record of misogyny and homophobia as incompatible with their fixation on individual identity. By this they have signalled that they have no fundamental opposition to the policy of “herd immunity.”

The implications of Abbott’s speech for domestic Australian politics have also received scant attention.

The entire Australian establishment, including the official media, the governing federal Liberal-Nationals and Labor opposition, and the various state administrations, have centred their response to the pandemic on the same back-to-work and “reopening of the economy” campaigns that have been carried out by their counterparts internationally.

While they did not explicitly adopt the program of “herd immunity,” all Australian governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, rejected expert medical advice in April which called for a policy aimed at eliminating coronavirus transmission. This, they claimed, would be too costly.

The financial press published “death calculuses,” along the lines of Abbott’s speech, weighing the cost of treatment against its impact on profits, and invariably concluding that the latter would need to take priority.

As has happened elsewhere, the premature lifting of lockdown measures beginning in May has resulted in a new surge of the pandemic, centred in the state of

Victoria. There, the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews rejected calls from epidemiologists for immediate workplace and school shutdowns as daily case numbers soared.

Mass outbreaks have occurred in aged-care homes. This is the direct outcome of the corporatisation of the sector by federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, over decades. Minimal health precautions were rejected by many of the private operators, while staff are primarily low-paid casuals without any medical expertise.

State Labor authorities prevented the hospitalisation of residents infected with COVID-19, instead consigning them to treatment that amounts to palliative care. Thousands have been infected and hundreds have tragically died.

It was only when Victoria’s hospital system threatened to be completely overwhelmed that Andrews implemented “Stage Four” restrictions, involving the closure of Melbourne’s retail sector, the resumption of online learning and some restrictions on other workplaces.

Those “Stage Four” measures are set to elapse in less than a fortnight. Abbott’s speech was a carefully-timed intervention. The former PM retains close ties to the federal Liberal-National government and the Murdoch press: the forces spearheading a stepped-up campaign for the lifting of virtually all remaining COVID-19 restrictions.

It was hardly a coincidence that the day before Abbott’s speech, Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg gave a series of interviews demanding that lockdown measures be overturned in Victoria, to provide businesses with “certainty.”

Signalling yet again the bipartisan character of the pro-business response to the pandemic, Andrews immediately promised to present a “road map” out of the restrictions this Sunday. Being worked out in secret with the representatives of ten industry groups, it will undoubtedly involve the sort of workplace and school reopenings that resulted in the last resurgence of the virus.



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