

# Australia: Highly infectious strain of COVID spreads in Queensland hotel quarantine

Oscar Grenfell  
14 January 2021

Over the past day, four new cases of the highly-infectious B117 variant of COVID-19 have been discovered among returned travelers in Brisbane hotels, sparking fears of a broader spread of the virus and again highlighting the inadequate character of the quarantine system in Queensland and across the country.

Last week, Queensland authorities revealed that a young cleaner who worked in the quarantine at Brisbane's Hotel Grand Chancellor had contracted the new iteration of the virus. B117 is up to 70 percent more infectious than other forms of COVID-19, and has driven the massive surge of cases and deaths in Britain that threatens to overwhelm that country's hospital system.

The Queensland Labor government responded to the emergence of B117 by instituting a three-day lockdown of greater Brisbane that spanned from Friday to Sunday evening.

Given that the coronavirus incubation period is 14 days, the measure was manifestly inadequate. It was timed not to include any business days, so as to ensure the minimum impact on profit-making operations. The lockdown was concluded as scheduled, even as medical experts warned that the new strain could be circulating in the community, without yet being detected.

Shortly after the minimal restrictions were lifted, the cleaner's partner tested positive, having previously returned a false negative. Then yesterday, a further four cases at the Hotel Grand Chancellor were identified among returned travelers.

While the numbers are low, chains of transmission have not been determined and hundreds have potentially been exposed. It is still not known how the cleaner initially contracted COVID-19. Health authorities have said it is likely there is a direct link between her infection and those of the returned travelers, but have been unable to definitively confirm this.

The result has been a shambles. People who had left the hotel since December 30 were suddenly instructed to get tested and to return to quarantine for another 14 days of

isolation. The figure of those affected was initially placed at 250 but was revised down today to 147.

At least ten of them had already returned to the neighbouring state of New South Wales, which has been hit by a series of clusters over the past month centred in Sydney. Another 18 had travelled to Victoria, which in July was struck by the largest surge of the pandemic in Australia to date, resulting in more than 750 deaths and a months-long lockdown.

Those who were set to leave the Hotel Grand Chancellor will also be compelled to begin their two-week period anew. Some 220 staff have also been sent into isolation as the facility has been closed for deep cleaning and its occupants moved to other hotels.

Travelers said that yesterday, before they were moved out of the Grand Chancellor, the hotel was surrounded by dozens of police officers. They told the media that they were provided with hardly any information ahead of time.

A further four cases were announced today by Queensland authorities among returned travelers from South Africa and the United States. Indicating the strain that is being placed on the broader quarantine system, they are reportedly not linked to the Grand Chancellor and were identified at other hotels.

The infections, and the possibility of broader transmission, have shown that a year into the pandemic, hotel quarantines continue to be grossly inadequate.

The quarantine program in Victoria was one of the drivers of the July outbreak. Its operation was outsourced to private security companies, who employed low-paid casual workers without any medical training or expertise.

While governments proclaimed that the lessons of that debacle would be learnt, it is clear that many of the practices that contributed to the Victorian wave persist. Today, it was confirmed that hotel quarantine staff in Queensland are permitted to work multiple jobs, meaning that infections can be spread between hotels and into the broader community. This is clearly not best medical practice. Its sole purpose is to ensure that contractors can employ workers on a

precarious contract or casual basis to slash their costs.

For months, epidemiologists have warned against placing private hotels, which are not equipped for major medical operations, on the frontlines of the pandemic.

In every state, the facilities chosen have been in the centre of the largest urban population centres, meaning that breaches threaten entire cities. The maintenance of the program has been dictated by the refusal of governments to devise safer alternatives because they would be more expensive. It has also ensured a continuous stream of income for major hotel chains that otherwise would have been hit by the decline in travel, first from government subsidies, and then for most of the past six months from returnees who have been compelled to pay for their own quarantine.

Moreover, only last Friday, at a meeting of the national cabinet, did state and federal government leaders institute basic safeguards, including a requirement for overseas travelers to be tested before departure and to wear a mask during their travel, and for hotel quarantine staff to be regularly tested.

Pointing to the limited character of infection controls in the hotels, Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said yesterday, regarding the source of the Grand Chancellor outbreak: “Was it in the air conditioning? Was it movement? Was it picking up something? We just don’t know those answers yet.”

The dangers of airborne transmission, compounded by inadequate ventilation, have been known about for months.

Professor Marylouise McLaws, an infectious disease expert at the University of New South Wales, told the *Australian Financial Review*, “Quarantine hotels are not designed as hospital wards, which demand high 100 percent hourly fresh airflow change at a World Health Organisation-recommended rate of 12 full changes per hour.” The rate in a hotel would likely be closer to four-to-six airflow changes an hour, “So this is low if there is a COVID-infected traveler in a room or several of them on a floor.”

Only now has the Queensland Labor government indicated that it is looking at alternatives, including a possible transfer of quarantines to work camps in regional and rural areas. Details, however, have still not been provided, meaning it is possible that nothing has been concretely planned.

At the same time, police are involved in the investigation into the Grand Chancellor outbreak. During each rapid spread of the virus, governments have sought to scapegoat ordinary people, by insinuating or openly claiming that guidelines have been breached, often without any evidence.

The quarantine crisis, and the potential spread of the new strain into New South Wales and Queensland, come as politicians and the corporate press again seek to minimise the dangers of the pandemic.

The New South Wales Liberal government has claimed that it is now “mopping up” the remnants of a cluster that originated in Sydney’s Northern Beaches, in an attempt to present the threat of last month’s outbreak as a thing of the past. New infections are continuing to be identified across Sydney’s working-class suburbs and in the inner-west, along with dozens of possible exposure sites.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, whose government has rejected calls for lockdowns amid the current outbreak, again denounced any strategy aimed at eliminating COVID-19 transmission in response to the new variant. Such attempts were “not realistic” for a “trading nation,” and it was necessary to “live with the virus.” Editorials in the financial press similarly railed against the “cult of elimination.”

Innes Willox, head of the Australian Industry Group, declared that “total elimination strategies only serve to crush and kill investment and job creation ... With many businesses now returning to full operations after the holidays, there is an urgent need for state governments to resist broad lockdown options.”

The comments, featured in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper, were directed against the Victorian government’s maintenance of some border restrictions, including an ongoing block on travel from Sydney to Melbourne, under a new “traffic light system.”

Those measures have been accompanied by calls from some premiers, including Western Australia Labor leader Mark McGowan, for a greater bid to prevent transmission in New South Wales, amid the emergence of the more virulent strain. McGowan and others who have echoed his calls are speaking for sections of the establishment fearful of the political and economic consequences of a possible mass outbreak, as in Europe or the US.

The response from Berejiklian and the business press again demonstrates that the dominant layers of the ruling elite are committed to preventing lockdown measures, however minimal and necessary, if they in any way impede the operations of the largest businesses. The same calculations that have led to disaster abroad, based on the subordination of workers’ safety and lives to corporate profit, are at work in Australia.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**