

Nearly 40,000 Australians still stranded overseas because of government indifference

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1 February 2021

A year after the COVID-19 crisis commenced, almost 40,000 Australian citizens are still registered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) seeking assistance to return home from overseas.

They have experienced extortionate airline ticket prices, endless delays and cancellations. Many face personal destitution and impoverishment, with the heightened risk of infection in countries severely affected by the pandemic. Among them, 4,800 have been classified as vulnerable.

For purely financial reasons—the refusal of Australian federal, state and territory governments to provide adequate quarantine facilities—these citizens are being denied their basic legal, constitutional and democratic right to enter and live in the country. They are also being offered little financial assistance.

Government caps limiting the number of returning passengers have resulted in airlines routinely favouring first class and business class tickets over economy passengers. A first-class air ticket from London to Sydney can be priced as high as \$36,895 and a business-class flight from Paris to Melbourne \$25,352. However, even these enormous prices do not guarantee a seat on a flight. Many people whose flights are cancelled have to wait 30 days for a refund so they can book a new ticket.

This situation has been exacerbated by the announcement on January 8, that the governments leaders, meeting as the bipartisan “national cabinet,” had further reduced the number of international arrivals. New South Wales (NSW), Queensland and Western Australia halved their numbers of arrivals until at least February 15. The number of people allowed to enter the country dropped from 6,700 a week to just 4,200.

There is no lack of air transport capacity. According to a Senate COVID-19 inquiry, the number of empty

airline seats coming into the country stood at 30,000 per week last November.

The governments cited the threat of the new highly contagious UK and South African variants of COVID-19 and fear that their quarantine systems would not cope with the levels of infectiousness. The UK strain, which is up to 70 percent more transmissible and possibly more lethal, was detected earlier this month in Australia, after a cleaner working in a quarantine hotel in Queensland’s capital, Brisbane, tested positive.

The decision to cut the caps was based on budgetary calculations, not the health and wellbeing of travellers. Upgrading the capacity of the quarantine system and providing the facilities free of charge would allow citizens to return from overseas. At present the governments charge \$3,000 per person for quarantining, further impeding the ability of ordinary people to return.

By contrast, in order to stage a highly profitable corporate event, the Victorian state Labor government has flown charter flights—with more than 1,200 international tennis players, their support staff and media crews—into Melbourne to participate in the Australian Open tennis tournament, scheduled to start on February 8.

Most of the tennis and broadcasting contingents arriving in Australia are from countries suffering large outbreaks of COVID-19, including the US and UK. Underlining the disregard for public health, nine passengers tested positive and 72 had to go into stricter quarantine after being identified as close contacts.

Some of those stuck overseas pointed to the double standard involved in helping the tennis event go ahead. Kym Bramley, who has been stranded in Mexico since March, told the *New Daily*: “They say ‘we don’t have

enough spots’ but they seem to be able to create them for celebrities, cricket teams [and] tennis players... They are allowing tennis players from the same countries we can’t get home from.” She added, “for us,” it costs “\$10,000 for a flight home—if you’re lucky.”

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews nakedly referred to the lucrative corporate and business interests at stake. He said other countries would lay claim to the billion-dollar tennis event if Melbourne failed to host it.

In a desperate attempt to quell the resulting public outrage, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government announced 20 charter flights to allow some stranded people back. That would only assist a fraction of those stranded.

Those returning on these repatriation flights are likely to be quarantined at the Howard Springs facility near Darwin in the Northern Territory and were expected to be charged commercial rates of up to \$15,000 for their seat because of the high demand for the very few spots.

Meanwhile, the federal government has set aside the totally inadequate amount of \$17 million to help those suffering financial hardship.

The hypocrisy of the 20-flight announcement is striking. The managing director of Melbourne-based travel company Gaura Travel, Abhishek Sonthalia, told the *New Daily* last week, he had sent multiple requests to the Department of Home Affairs since June asking if empty charter flights returning from India could be used to transport Australians stranded overseas.

“We have innumerable times applied for permission to do the same [for Australians, as for Indians] but have always been denied,” Sonthalia said. He added that the company could easily “convert our charters so that people can travel both ways.” He said there had been 35 charter flights back to India so far.

Prominent human rights barrister, Geoffrey Robertson told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” television program “no one should be arbitrarily deprived of their right to enter their own country,” a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

According to a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), of the 440,000 citizens whom the federal government claims have returned to Australia during the pandemic, it has assisted only 38,800. Moreover, Australian Border Force’s figures of 280,560 returned travellers are significantly lower, throwing doubt over

the government’s claims.

In contrast to the red-carpet treatment afforded to the professional tennis players and other tournament participants, those stranded abroad have had very different experiences. In one story, Justin Peck from Melbourne has been stranded in Thailand for 10 months. Peck told the SMH he had multiple flights cancelled. He was living off the small earnings of his girlfriend in Thailand and was running out of savings and superannuation funds.

Danushka Silva from Melbourne told the SMH he had been trying to get home from Britain before his and his partner’s visas and work contracts expired at the end of December. Silva said he was not surprised to see the harsh treatment of Australians abroad, saying it reflected the government’s approach toward asylum seekers. Both Silva and his partner had to register for emergency extensions to their visas with the British government after being bumped from their planned flight. They rebooked on a flight in February, but Silva said he feared they would be bumped also from that flight.

Amy Webster, and her fiancé who are also stuck in Britain, had their January 21 flight cancelled with Qatar airlines. She told the newspaper: “We feel abandoned. It feels like we aren’t wealthy or rich enough to get home, which I don’t think should be a factor in trying to get back to your own country.”



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