

# Australian state government institutes five-day lockdown due to spread of new COVID-19 variant

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13 February 2021

The Victorian state Labor Party government of Daniel Andrews yesterday announced a five-day lockdown to contain a growing outbreak of COVID-19 infections from The Holiday Inn quarantine hotel near Melbourne's main airport.

As of this morning, 14 infections had been linked to the hotel cluster. The infection sites now include a busy café at Melbourne Airport. An infectious man worked there for eight hours, raising the possibility of further cases interstate, as well as across Victoria.

It is now being assumed, according to Victoria's deputy secretary of community engagement and testing Jeroen Weimar, that all the cases associated with the Holiday Inn hotel cluster are of the more transmissible UK variant.

Almost 1,000 people have been designated as close contacts or placed in isolation awaiting test results. Health authorities in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, are attempting to contact 7,000 people who visited infected venues before travelling to NSW.

"Stage four" restrictions were imposed from midnight Friday on the entire state of Victoria, not just metropolitan Melbourne. This includes school and university closures, no public gatherings or home visitors, a ban on leaving home except for work, exercise and essential purchases, and a five-kilometre radius restriction on such travel. Childcare and early childhood centres will remain open, however.

Despite the government declaring that only essential workplaces can open, the Australian Open tennis tournament, an initial source of infections of players and support staff, will proceed—just without spectators—in order to protect the lucrative profits

involved.

Ludicrously, the Andrews government declared professional athletes, including the Australian Open tennis players, as essential workers, and deemed Melbourne Park, the tennis venue, an essential workplace. Reportedly, there were "heated" discussions on Thursday night between tennis officials and government representatives regarding any restrictions on the tournament.

Most Australian states have closed their borders to Victoria or instituted travel restrictions and 14-day hotel quarantine requirements on people travelling from Victoria.

The short partial lockdown follows similar measures in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, also triggered by infections leaking from quarantine hotels. According to health officials, the infections were not the result of breaches of protocol by staff or travellers but due to the highly contagious nature of the new variant. All the mainland states have recorded such infections in recent weeks.

Hotels, which are not designed as health sites due in part to inadequate ventilation systems, are continuing to be used to quarantine people, despite this being identified as a serious weakness in infection control. Hotel air conditioning air change rates are well below the six per hour required for hospitals.

Epidemiologists have called for quarantine sites to be removed from city venues to areas where fresh air can be accessed. There is sharp resistance by the hotel companies to this proposal. Hotels that have lost their clientele due to border closures are using quarantining as a means of income.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has said

a ventilation audit for the Holiday Inn “does not exist.” Audits were stipulated last December in Victoria after almost 3,000 health care workers in hospitals and aged care facilities contracted the virus while at work. These audits were reportedly conducted on “hot” hotels—where guests had tested positive on arrival—but not “cold” hotels where no infected arrivals were detected.

Victorian health officials have identified a nebuliser used by a quarantining family as a source of transmission of the more virulent strain of the virus. The mist created by such devices can escape through hotel room doors or ventilation systems, infecting workers and other guests. The returned traveller who used the nebuliser, speaking from his hospital bed in Melbourne, disputed reports that he had failed to declare its use. He said he had been given authorisation twice from Victoria Health and the quarantine hotel.

Epidemiologists have raised concern that a five-day lockdown is not the most effective mechanism to contain the virus. Significantly, the lockdown was announced to allow contact tracers to catch up from a lag in informing close contacts of infections. This followed two meetings of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC)—the federal and state chief health officers—where it was revealed that almost half the close contacts of the Holiday Inn cluster were not contacted in the required 48 hours. It has been suggested that the infected café worker, who was a household contact of one of the Holiday Inn victims, was not contacted in time and worked a shift before testing positive.

This outbreak exposes the fact that the failures of the system of quarantine hotels and contact tracing during the outbreak in mid-2020, when some 800 people died in Victoria, have not been addressed. This is despite official inquiries and assurances by all the federal, state and territory governments that lessons have been learned and changes been made to ensure safety and permit the reopening of the economy.

The response of business and the media to the lockdown decision has been one of unbridled fury. The Murdoch media’s flagship publication, the *Australian*, declared: “Knee-jerk leaders are kicking us to the kerb.” It also blamed travel restrictions for a fatal truck crash on the Victorian-South Australian border and described the cancelling of the annual Anzac Day war

commemoration in April as a provocation.

The newspaper defended right-wing federal government MP Craig Kelly’s right to promote anti-vaxxer conspiracy theories, as well as ineffective and possibly dangerous treatments, along with his opposition to lockdowns.

Today’s *Australian* editorial featured comments by Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott, who denounced the lockdown, saying it would have “monumental social and economic costs,” voicing the demand of the largest companies for an end to safety restrictions that damage profits.

Unlike numerous other countries, no vaccination program has begun and the date of a vaccine rollout remains unclear. The demand of the major corporations for no curbs on business activity is a green light for the virus to spread. Given the increased contagiousness of the new COVID-19 variants, that scenario could result in rapid and fatal outbreaks.



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