Australia-New Zealand “travel bubble” to begin this month

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his New Zealand counterpart Jacinda Ardern announced on Tuesday that a trans-Tasman “travel bubble” between the two countries will begin on April 18, less than two weeks away.

Australians will now be able to fly into New Zealand with no COVID-19 quarantine restrictions for the first time in more than a year. Since October 16, New Zealanders have been able to travel to some Australian states without needing to isolate, but have still had to quarantine for a fortnight, at their own cost, when they arrive back in New Zealand.

Ardern said there are no countries in the world looking to keep COVID-free while opening up such a bubble. “We are world-leading ... We are opening at exactly the right time,” she declared. “Today is a new chapter in our recovery. This is an exciting day.”

New Zealand’s COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins claimed that “all the conditions” for the bubble have been met and said director-general of health, Ashely Bloomfield, deemed that the risk of transmission between the two countries was “low.”

Epidemiologist Michael Baker agreed that both countries “are pursuing elimination very effectively,” and with vaccines coming on-stream “we’ve got another line of defence.” In fact Australian governments have explicitly rejected elimination strategies throughout the pandemic, instead insisting that it will be necessary to “live with the virus,” and stating that further outbreaks are all but inevitable.

Auckland University modelling expert Shaun Hendy warned that travellers’ plans could be disrupted by new clusters on either side of the Tasman. “Both countries have had failures at MIQ [quarantine] facilities from time to time, and when this happens, travel restrictions may need to be brought back in,” he said.

While downplaying the health risks involved, Ardern said it was a “flyer beware” situation, with the government able to pause or suspend flights if an outbreak occurs. In that case, she noted, travellers could end up stuck in either country with no insurance coverage and faced with picking up quarantine costs.

Minimal precautions will be in place, such as a requirement to wear masks on flights, and no positive COVID-19 test result in the previous 14-day period. Australians travelling to New Zealand will have to book on a so-called “green zone” flight, meaning there will be no passengers who have come from anywhere but Australia in the previous 14 days. How this will be policed is unclear.

Morrison said New Zealand’s decision to open up two-way travel was “an important first step”, and that it was “tremendous” that the borders would be open before Anzac Day, the day the two countries commemorate their joint participation in last century’s wars.

Morrison emphasised the move is bound up with the drive by both governments to revive commercial activities regardless of the dangers. “This is the first of many more steps to come, I believe, as we get back to a more normal position, not only over the course of this year but beyond,” he declared, adding that there will be “more planes in the air, more jobs on the ground and in the air as well for our airlines.”

Coming in the midst of a renewed surge of the virus internationally, including across South Asia, the move is highly reckless. Both countries have experienced recent outbreaks of the new virulent coronavirus strains. In Australia, a partial shutdown of the city of Brisbane was imposed for just three days late last month in response to the spread of the highly infectious B117 “UK” variant, with 18 local cases confirmed. The

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lockdown was prematurely lifted in order to allow for travel and gatherings over Easter.

Even limited transmission of the strains can quickly mushroom into mass outbreaks. On February 28, Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, was placed on a week-long lockdown after 15 cases of the UK variant were found, centred in a school in working class South Auckland. The source was never identified, but the community spread was largely due to government negligence after an earlier lockdown was called off. The same day Ardern announced the travel bubble, 17 new infections were reported in NZ's quarantine facilities among passengers from India, England, USA, Ethiopia and the Philippines.

While a number of countries are accepting travellers who can prove they have been vaccinated, in both Australia and New Zealand vaccination programs have barely begun. In New Zealand as of 6 April, 71,013 people, or just 1.4 percent of the population had received their first dose. Just 19,273 people, 0.4 percent of the population, are fully vaccinated, mostly "front line" workers. Vaccinations for the general community are not due to begin until late May.

Australia's vaccine rollout is widely regarded as a complete "shambles."

Just 3.37 percent of the population, 854,983 people, have received at least one dose. The national plan to have administered four million vaccine doses during March fell short by 3.6 million with complaints about shortages of the vaccine in doctors' surgeries, aged care facilities and other critical places.

The border openings have been dictated, not by the requirements of public safety, but by the demands of big business. New Zealand's multi-million dollar tourism industry has lobbied relentlessly since the pandemic struck. Operators received massive financial assistance bailouts last year, including an industry-specific $400 million "recovery package." Despite this, thousands of jobs have been shed.

Business owners in the country's winter ski centre, Queenstown, have been especially vocal, demanding a "date" when international visits could resume. Australia is New Zealand's largest international visitor market, accounting for almost half of all international arrivals. Tourism NZ claims about 800,000 Australians will now visit the country in the next six months and will spend $NZ1 billion this year.

BusinessNZ chief executive Kirk Hope boasted the announcement was "a win for businesses on both sides of the ditch" and "great encouragement that there is light at the end of the tunnel." The Employers and Manufacturers Association said it was a "rope up the cliff" for its members who had been "holding on" for travel to resume. The Air Line Pilots Association, which last year collaborated with Air NZ to sack hundreds of its members, declared the union was "grateful" for the announcement.

The Morrison government is already looking to open Australia's border to more countries. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, authorities are currently exploring plans to resume travel to and from Singapore by August, followed by other nations with purportedly low COVID-19 numbers such as Fiji, Vietnam and Thailand, as well as Japan and South Korea, although their daily case numbers are higher.

New Zealand is similarly preparing to declare a "Pacific bubble," beginning with the Cook Islands next month. Employers have begun demanding an immediate re-start of the country's seasonal worker scheme, a highly exploitative program using temporary workers from the Pacific Islands to fill low-paid jobs in the horticulture and farming sectors.

Australia and New Zealand freeing up travel will inevitably set a precedent for governments across the globe as they accelerate their efforts to abandon measures to contain the deadly disease while proclaiming the necessity to "live with the virus."

The UK government has recently confirmed it is formalising a system for international travel, which classifies countries in terms of the degree of "risk" they are deemed to pose, based on criteria such as their vaccination programme, infection rates and access to genomic sequencing. People arriving from designated "green-list" countries will escape self-isolation requirements, though they may need a COVID test before departure and after arrival in the UK.

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