

Australian government's vaccine rollout falls apart

Oscar Grenfell
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In a Facebook post yesterday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted what had already become clear: his government has no plan on how to vaccinate the Australian population against COVID-19, even as the pandemic enters a dangerous “fourth wave” globally, and the political establishment moves to lift the few coronavirus safety restrictions that remain.

Morrison wrote that he would not provide any revised timetable on the vaccine rollout due to “many uncertainties,” after previous targets were abandoned.

The government initially stated that all Australians would be “fully vaccinated” by the end of October. Senior ministers and health officials walked this back last month, falsely claiming they had only been referring to the first of two doses. Now there is no timetable for the adult population to receive either dose, meaning the rollout will drag on into 2022.

By various global measures, Australia's progress is on a par with developing nations beleaguered by crisis-ridden public health systems and the hoarding of the vaccine by wealthier countries. Health expert Professor Bill Bowtell stated last week that Australia's vaccination rate was roughly 90th in the world, between Bolivia and Albania. The *Guardian* this morning cited a ranking of 104, behind Lebanon and ahead of Bangladesh.

The shambles is an indictment, not only of the Liberal-National Coalition government, but also the federal Labor opposition and the state administrations, most of them Labor-led, which have collaborated closely throughout the pandemic.

The crisis of the vaccine rollout further refutes their claims that Australia's relatively low COVID infections and deaths have been the result of far-sighted governance. It exposes the inability of the ruling elite to coordinate any mass public health initiative, after decades of funding cuts to the sector and amid the prioritisation of profit interests over all else.

As with other aspects of the official coronavirus response that have gone wrong, much of the information relating to the vaccine breakdown is being treated as a state secret.

It is clear, however, that the issues began early. While Morrison insisted that Australians would be at the “front of the queue” to be vaccinated, his government was still finalising procurement in December, when many other countries had already begun their inoculation programs. Talks with Moderna and other pharmaceutical giants broke down, and a University of Queensland vaccine was scuppered after trials registered false positives for HIV.

In the end, the government rejected calls for a diversified procurement program, settling on a rollout centred on AstraZeneca's Oxford vaccine, supplemented by 20 million Pfizer doses, and Novavax, which is still in trial stages. As numerous commentators have noted, AstraZeneca is the cheapest of the major vaccines.

The decision to effectively place all bets on the AstraZeneca vaccine came amid the winding down of pro-business stimulus measures, such as the JobKeeper wage subsidy, and demands from the dominant sections of the corporate elite for a shift to budget austerity.

This has rendered Australia vulnerable to supply shortages. The government claimed last week that as many as three million AstraZeneca doses had been withheld by the European Union, an assertion disputed by European officials. The company is behind on its delivery targets for a number of countries. Domestic manufacturing at the CSL plant in Melbourne only began last month. According to Health Minister Greg Hunt, just 1.3 million of a planned 2 million doses were produced there in March.

Now, all the government's calculations have been upended, after health authorities issued a recommendation last week that AstraZeneca not be administered to those under 50 years of age, due to suspected links with a rare

blood-clotting disorder. A day later, Morrison claimed to have secured an additional 20 million Pfizer doses, but was unable to say where they were coming from, and gave a vague arrival date of sometime toward the end of the year.

The shambles has extended beyond supply. This morning, the government claimed 1.1 million doses had been administered thus far, meaning that only around 5 percent of the population has received the first of two shots. A target of four million doses by the end of March fell short by roughly 3.3 million.

It is still not clear when all frontline health and quarantine workers will be fully vaccinated. At the end of March, 848 aged-care facilities had received doses, a figure that has only risen to 1,116 this month, still well below half the total. A number of homes for the disabled have received nothing, even though they are meant to be covered by the first 1A stage of the rollout.

For the broader population, there are no mass vaccination centres in any state or territory. General practitioners, who are supposed to fill the gap, have complained of insufficient and contradictory information.

The confusion and veil of secrecy is also bound up with the prevalence of private contractors. An article in today's *Guardian* today noted that the "government is funnelling millions of dollars to private contractors for its beleaguered Covid vaccine rollout using opaque deals." Details for some of the main tender contracts had not been published, so it remained unclear what some of the companies were doing and how much they were being paid.

The vaccine shambles has intensified a deep crisis of the Morrison government, which has already been under fire over its response to a series of sexual misconduct scandals and its failure to press ahead with a further pro-business restructuring of the economy demanded by the corporate elite.

For months, the vaccine has been invoked as the pretext for abandoning all coronavirus safety restrictions, so as to remove any impediments to corporate profit. The financial press has responded angrily to the rollout crisis, warning that Australian business risks "falling behind."

The most striking feature of a National Cabinet meeting last Friday, ostensibly called in response to the new health advice relating to AstraZeneca, is that the state and federal governments are determined to press ahead with the "reopening," even though the inoculation campaign has fallen apart in its earliest stages.

Morrison, together with the state and territory leaders,

most of them Labor, insisted that the key task of the country's official medical experts is to draw up plans for the reopening of the national border. Australia and New Zealand have already signed a deal for a "Tasman hub," allowing travel between the two countries without quarantine.

This was just the beginning, Morrison insisted, as he foreshadowed a resumption of international travel with Japan and other supposedly low-risk countries, before an opening up to "the entire world." The medical advice would supposedly enable Australia to develop a plan to treat COVID-19 "like the flu," and to end the economic damage resulting from border closures.

"The message from National Cabinet is we want to open up more, we want to do it safely, we want to ease restrictions," Morrison said. "We want to do that in a consistent way across the country and we want to do that because we know we are not just managing the health, but we are managing the economics."

The cabinet also agreed to abolish all limits on attendance at ticketed stadium events, and committed to a rule of one person per two square metres, rather than four square metres, for all indoor gatherings.

Business representatives welcomed the announcements, but insisted that the test would be how state and federal authorities responded to future outbreaks. It was necessary, they insisted, to end once and for all snap lockdowns, state border closures and other obstacles to corporate profit-making.

The extraordinary recklessness is clear. As the pandemic resurges, especially in the Indo-Pacific and Australian authorities abandon any timetable for full vaccination, they are preoccupied with lifting the handful of remaining restrictions that could protect against a rapid spread of the coronavirus. With ongoing questions about the safety of hotel quarantine programs, after recent outbreaks in Queensland and northern New South Wales, the political establishment is once again gambling with the health and lives of the population.



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