

Australian PM calls in premiers for support as vaccine debacle worsens

Mike Head
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Besieged by one political disaster after another, especially over the collapse of his government's COVID-19 vaccination program, Prime Minister Scott Morrison suddenly announced last week that the "National Cabinet" would meet twice-weekly from next Monday, supposedly to place the country on a vaccine "war footing."

Morrison's decision to call in the state premiers and territory government leaders for support points to the intensity of the crisis now wracking his unstable Liberal-National Coalition government and the entire political establishment. Its failure to vaccinate the population as the global pandemic resurges out of control is becoming ever-more evident.

The move is also a warning that Morrison is counting on the state and territory leaders, mostly from the Labor Party, to ramp up the "reopening" of the economy—including the resumption of international flights—demanded by big business, despite the vaccine debacle. By Morrison's own admission, that would mean scrapping all border and safety restrictions even though thousands of infectious cases would arrive in the country from October.

After months of sporadic meetings, this will be the first time that the unelected and unconstitutional "National Cabinet" has met so frequently since last May. It is a de facto bipartisan national coalition government, initially formed to prop up the widely-detested federal government when the pandemic erupted in March last year, triggering a healthcare crisis and mass unemployment.

Most significantly, five of the eight state and territory leaders are from the Labor Party. This underscores the dependence of the government and the ruling capitalist class on Labor and its affiliated trade union apparatuses to suppress working class opposition to the "reopening" and the associated offensive against workers' jobs, wages and working conditions.

Four of the five Labor government leaders—in Queensland, the Northern Territory, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia—have won reelection in recent months by posturing as strong defenders of COVID safety measures, including state border closures. Now, they are about to join twice-weekly meetings to discuss how to lift all remaining restrictions so that corporate profit-making can resume in full.

This is under conditions in which the pandemic has spiralled

out of control in India, Brazil and around the globe, with terrible death tolls and healthcare system breakdowns, new more transmissible and fatal coronavirus variants becoming dominant, and billions of people unlikely to be vaccinated for another year at the very least.

While Morrison and the state and territory leaders have claimed credit for keeping Australia's casualties low until now, they are about to embark on a course that epidemiologists warn will expose the country to the risk of similar suffering over the next few years.

The Labor leaders quickly agreed to Morrison's summons. They are fully aware of rising discontent over the disintegration of the government's vaccine promises, on top of its other political disasters, such as the 2019–20 bushfires, the collapse of its industrial relations bill and various sexual misconduct scandals.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk was "happy to go along with whatever the Prime Minister requests." She said: "The Australian public needs confidence that everybody is working together, that is what they need, and I think that is what the Prime Minister wants to get out of national cabinet."

Western Australian Premier Mark McGowan posed for photos with Morrison, both smiling together, just weeks after a state election in which Morrison's Liberal Party had been reduced to a rump of two members in the state parliament's lower house, largely because of McGowan's perceived resistance to Morrison's demands for the lifting of the state border. In a rather obvious bid to save face, Morrison said the voters had "rewarded the strong leadership of Premier McGowan."

Whatever reservations the state and territory Labor leaders might express, for public purposes, about Morrison's calls for an acceleration of the "reopening" drive, they will do everything they can to stabilise the political order and deliver the requirements of the financial elite. Each sent video greetings to the recent Labor Party national conference, which made a pitch for business backing as the only party historically able to enforce the sacrifices demanded from the working class in times of social crisis and war.

In calling for the twice-weekly national cabinet gatherings, Morrison claimed that the purpose was to get the vaccine

program “back on track” after last week’s collapse of his government’s plan to rely overwhelmingly on the AstraZeneca vaccine. But the real agenda became clear when he said his “first goal” was to start resuming international flights.

Morrison said vaccinated Australians would be permitted to go overseas “for important purposes”—like work, medical reasons or funerals—and return without having to undergo the present 14-day hotel quarantine. Instead, they could “home quarantine.”

Australians already abroad who had been “properly vaccinated” would also be able to come back in the same way, but it was unclear what brand of COVID-19 vaccine they would be required to have.

Such a system would be even more prone to infection leaks than the inadequate and poorly-designed hotel quarantine program, which has caused numerous outbreaks over the past year, including last year’s disaster in Victoria, in which more than 700 people died.

Morrison insisted that the states and territories could not shut domestic borders or even place new restrictions on events, such as football games, if community transmission returned when the international border reopened. “We’d have to open up with an agreement that if there were cases in Australia, the rest of Australia internally wouldn’t shut down because that would seriously damage our economy,” he said.

That was one of Morrison’s most explicit statements yet of the demand for the prioritising of “economic” interests, above all profits, over the health and lives of the population. This is, in fact, in line with the catastrophic “herd immunity” policy adopted by governments in the US, UK and across Europe.

Morrison told Nine Radio: “Australians would have to become used to dealing with 1,000 cases a week or more... I don’t think Australians ... would welcome restrictions and closures and border shutting and all of those things again.”

Even as Morrison spoke, his government’s vaccination promises fell apart even further. Australian Broadcasting Corporation health expert Norman Swan revealed that the government had delayed negotiating a contract for the Pfizer vaccine last June–July. As a result, it would not be able to obtain supplies until toward the end of this year, despite now relying on the Pfizer vaccine for everyone under the age of 50.

Dependence on the Pfizer vaccine, which requires storage at ultra-low temperatures, also throws into disarray the government’s use of private logistics contractors, corporate health companies and general practitioners to roll out vaccines. Morrison has had to reverse his vehement rejection of state and territory calls for mass vaccination hubs.

Moreover, at least 60 percent of aged care homes remain unprotected by vaccines, along with many disability facilities, and more than 300,000 aged and disability care staff still require vaccination. All inoculations, of even the most vulnerable people over 70, have slowed to a crawl. New South Wales (NSW), with a population of more than 8 million, is

currently averaging less than 4,500 jabs a day.

At the same time, there is no contract with Moderna, whose vaccine may be better at coping with COVID-19 mutants.

This is from a government that claimed last November to have placed the country at the “front of the queue,” then declared it would have four million doses in people’s arms by the end of March—falling short by 3.3 million—and the entire population inoculated by October.

Morrison’s vague talk of now working with the premiers to administer more than 10 million Pfizer doses “towards the end of this year” is no more credible.

University of NSW professor and World Health Organisation adviser Mary-Louise McLaws said it would be more likely that vaccinations would not be completed this year. She told the media: “If they can’t get the doses, we’re not going to get out of here until much later than the end of the 2022 or maybe even the following [year]. Watch this space for 2023.”

Having supplied the government with “constructive” support throughout the pandemic, Labor’s federal leaders have criticised the disintegration of the vaccine program, but only to echo the demands by big business for “certainty” about a new timeline, for the sake of “economic recovery” and “public confidence.”

Labor’s health spokesman Mark Butler said Morrison needed to “come clean” on a deadline. “Business needs that and Australians need it for confidence,” he said.

Working people need to draw the opposite conclusion. Rather than confidence in the government and its Labor accomplices, what is required is a unified struggle by the international working class to overturn this bankrupt capitalist order and build a socialist society, based on protecting lives and meeting social need, not corporate profit and wealth accumulation.



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