Australian corporate elite calls for resumption of international travel even if “people may die”

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18 May 2021

Over the past week, government officials, health bureaucrats, prominent academics and the corporate media have launched a coordinated campaign demanding a hasty resumption of all international travel, regardless of its implications for the spread of the coronavirus, as well as the lifting of the few remaining domestic safety measures.

The calls have cynically been cast as a warning against Australia “turning into” a “hermit kingdom.” The campaign is being waged under the deceptive banner of reopening national borders, in a bid to tap into the widespread sympathy among ordinary people for Australian citizens and permanent residents stranded abroad, along with immigrants and refugees.

In reality, the push for the resumption of travel is being spearheaded by the most ruthless sections of finance capital. Their aim is to create the conditions for maximum profit-making activities, even if it worsens the pandemic in Australia and internationally and leads to increased illness and deaths.

The most prominent proponents have either presided over, or supported, the abandonment of Australian citizens abroad, the reactionary immigration restrictions of Liberal-National and Labor governments, and the failure of the ruling elite to develop effective quarantine facilities and a coordinated vaccine rollout.

The class issues were spelt out most bluntly in a statement earlier this week by Jayne Hrdlicka, the CEO of Virgin, one of Australia’s two largest airlines.

Hrdlicka declared her opposition to the federal government’s stated goal of resuming international travel in mid-2022. The country would need to “take a risk” and lift restrictions much sooner, otherwise it would be “left behind by the rest of the world.”

The Virgin CEO unapologetically acknowledged that the policies she is pushing will result in a spread of the coronavirus. “COVID will be part of the community, we will become sick with COVID,” she said, before touting the vaccine as a guarantee that mortality rates will be low, even though only a fraction of the Australian population has thus far been inoculated.

“Some people may die, but it will be way smaller than with the flu,” Hrdlicka stated. “We’re forgetting the fact that we’ve learnt how to live with lots of viruses and challenges over the years, and we’ve got to learn how to live with this.”

Many commentators on social media noted that Hrdlicka was not suggesting that CEOs and other members of the wealthy elite should face the risk of death. Instead, the lives of ordinary people would be gambled with, as so much collateral damage in the drive for profit.

The open calls for policies leading to death are a continuation of the role of the airline corporations, and their owners in the financial firms throughout the coronavirus crisis. They have functioned as first-rate pandemic profiteers.

Virgin is a case in point. In March 2020, it went into administration. In November, it was taken over by the private equity firm Bain Capital. More than 6,000 jobs have been destroyed at Virgin itself, while its low-cost carrier Tigerair has been scrapped altogether costing hundreds more positions.

At the same time as they slashed thousands of jobs and locked in wage freezes and cuts, with the support of the unions, Virgin and Qantas received $715 million in federal government subsidies last year, and a further $1.2 billion last March. The airlines have also engaged in blatant price gouging, contributing to the inability of almost 40,000 Australian citizens abroad to exercise their right of return.

Hrdlicka’s statements and Virgin’s role are only the most naked expression of a broader push, which has seen similar statements made by a host of state officials and corporate representatives over the past week.

The aim is to steamroll ordinary people into accepting the lifting of the travel restrictions, amid widespread concern. A Newspoll survey this week found that 73 percent of respondents opposed a resumption of travel prior to mid-next year.

The legitimate and healthy sentiments among ordinary people for a containment of the coronavirus have been exacerbated by the resurgence of the pandemic globally, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

At the same time, there is widespread anger that the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have

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refused to develop purpose-built quarantine centres, instead directing returnees to unsafe private hotels that have been the source of multiple outbreaks.

The Australian vaccine rollout, touted by the political establishment as the silver bullet justifying the lifting of all restrictions, has fallen apart. The federal government has abandoned any timetable for full inoculation, and fewer than three million adults have received their first of two jabs. This week the government revealed that less than a thousand of the 26,000 disability-care residents have been given a shot, even though they were supposed to be in the first cohort of the rollout.

In April, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that international borders would be fully reopened by October. He stated that the population would have to accept 1,000 cases a week and floated the idea of travellers self-isolating in private dwellings. The resulting opposition, from medical experts and ordinary people, as well as the shambles of the vaccine and quarantine programs, has compelled the government to temporarily change tack, extending its timetable for reopening until mid-next year.

The government, and prominent figures with close ties to it, however, are seeking to overcome the popular opposition to create the conditions for an earlier resumption of travel, regardless of inoculation rates.

Significantly, this campaign is being spearheaded by Dr Nick Coatsworth, the former federal deputy chief medical officer.

Coatsworth, who has close ties to the ruling Liberal Party, has for months sought to downplay the dangers of the pandemic. In February, he claimed that there was a "live debate about the extent to which COVID-19 is transmitted via the aerosol route," despite all scientific evidence to the contrary. These comments were in defence of the government's hotel quarantine program, which has seen widespread airborne transmission within the facilities themselves.

Over the past week, Coatsworth has transitioned from attempts to undermine the scientific consensus to explicit attacks on medical colleagues urging a cautious approach against coronavirus outbreaks.

In an opinion piece for Nine Media, Coatsworth condemned a "hardcore rump of activist doctors" who have raised questions about the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has a lower efficacy than other vaccines and can in rare cases result in blood-clotting complications. Instead, he declared, doctors should convince the public that "ultimately when we allow COVID-19 back on our shores and it circulates in our community, that we are prepared and comfortable for that to happen."

This line, that it will be necessary to "live with the virus," is bipartisan. Early in the pandemic, state governments, the majority of them Labor-led, rejected calls from medical experts for a strategy aimed at eliminating COVID-19 transmission, as did the federal government. Even though restrictions and the diligence of ordinary people have repeatedly resulted in low case numbers, they remain committed to allowing transmission.

Over the weekend, the *Age* published a report on comments by the Victorian Labor government's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton to a private meeting of medical professionals last April. He insisted on the need to abandon what he called "fortress Australia" at a certain point. It would be necessary, he said, to convince the public that officials would have to "make a call on letting it run," i.e., on allowing widespread coronavirus transmission.

The SEP opposes the entire framework of border controls and immigration restrictions. It upholds the right of ordinary people to live and work with the full entitlements of citizenship anywhere in the world, as part of its opposition to the capitalist nation-state system.

Socialists demand an end to the bipartisan violation of the right of refugees to seek asylum and call for the immediate repatriation of citizens and permanent residents who wish to return to Australia. Thousands are trapped overseas with no immediate prospect of returning.

Such a program, aimed at guaranteeing the rights of ordinary people, and ending the pandemic, requires scientifically-grounded public health measures, including such things as temporary restrictions on non-essential international travel and commercial activities.

To secure the social and democratic rights of ordinary people, including the right to movement, requires a coordinated, global campaign to tackle the pandemic, including through lockdowns and safety measures. Billions of dollars must be allocated to equitable vaccine distribution in Australia and around the world, and to the establishment of purpose-built, safe quarantine facilities.

This program is incompatible with the drive of national governments and ruling elites to prematurely "reopen" the economy, as well as the dominance of that economy by a tiny corporate and financial elite.

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