

Australia records cases of highly-infectious Delta variant as government demands end to lockdowns

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4 June 2021

While a coronavirus outbreak in Victoria, Australia's second-most populous state, continues to register new infections each day, governments and the corporate elite are intensifying the demand for an end to all lockdown measures, including if there are further surges of the disease.

The dangerous character of this profit-driven campaign was underscored yesterday, with the discovery of the first cases of the highly-infectious Delta variant of COVID-19. The Victorian outbreak, which began when two cases were detected on May 24, has resulted in 69 infections in less than two weeks, including five announced this morning. All but seven of them have been of the Kappa variant, another strain that originated in India.

When Victorian authorities announced on Wednesday that a seven-day lockdown of Melbourne would be extended for another week, but ended in the rest of the state, they warned that the Kappa variant had resulted in a more rapid spread than any previous Australian coronavirus outbreak. They drew attention to cases where transmission had occurred through fleeting contact in public places.

The Delta variant, however, is even more infectious. It is the strain that has laid waste to India, where, at its height, a massive outbreak resulted in over 400,000 confirmed infections per day and thousands of deaths. Delta has also been detected in South-East Asia, where a surge is hitting a host of countries, including those that had previously suppressed transmission, and is responsible for a growth of infections in Britain.

The Delta cases in Australia were identified when two members of a family tested positive after returning to Victoria from a holiday in the neighbouring state of New South Wales. Five other cases have since emerged, with a total of at least 300 primary close contacts. Genomic sequencing has determined that the infections are not related to a South Australian hotel quarantine breach that sparked the Victorian outbreak, or to a couple that tested positive in Sydney last month.

This means that the source of transmission is completely unknown. Delta, which scientists say is twice as contagious as the original iteration of COVID, may have been circulating more broadly without detection. The cases also raise the

likelihood of yet another "leak" from the inadequate quarantine system, in which international arrivals self-isolate in private hotels that are incapable of preventing airborne transmission.

Despite the clear risks, the ruling elite is stepping-up a drive for the scrapping of all safety measures. Yesterday, the Victorian Chamber of Commerce demanded an immediate end to the Melbourne lockdown, branding it as "disproportionate" and declaring that it was "driving a wedge through Victoria." The spurious basis for the call was a statement by Victorian authorities that two previously announced infections had been false positives.

A meeting yesterday of the national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders, most of them from Labor, and the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, marked a significant step towards the outlawing of lockdowns, even when outbreaks occur.

The cabinet registered its approval of a grossly inadequate federal support package for those who have been thrown out of work by the lockdown in Victoria. Under the plan, workers who have been left without pay will be eligible for \$500 per week, if they previously averaged more than 20 hours on the job or \$335 if they worked fewer.

The payment only applies for the second week of the lockdown. Workers who have \$10,000 or more in savings are not eligible and nor are those who receive welfare payments, including the sub-poverty level unemployment allowance. The funding is substantially lower than the federal government's JobKeeper wage subsidy, introduced at the start of the pandemic and abolished at the end of March.

While leaving thousands on the brink of destitution, the plan was explicitly linked to the state governments accepting the federal definition of a coronavirus hotspot. Under these guidelines, an outbreak is only declared after three days in which an area, which could be a suburb, a city or a state, records an average of more than ten infections per day over at least three days.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison also declared that the federal payments would only begin after the first week of a lockdown.

Taken together, the measures are effectively a decree against

lockdowns. Based on the federal definition, the current situation in Melbourne would likely not have qualified as an outbreak, given that the average over the past twelve days has been just above five cases per day. None of the previous clusters this year would have met the federal requirements.

Over the past six months, the state and territory governments have lifted virtually all safety restrictions, including previous limitations on mass gatherings and crowded indoor venues, in line with the demands of big business.

They have, however, on several occasions instituted limited “snap” lockdowns of several days duration when community infections have been detected. This has been prompted by fears that Australia’s crisis-ridden public health system is incapable of dealing with any mass outbreak, as well as the widespread opposition among ordinary people to the premature overturning of safety measures.

Morrison’s decree is aimed at ending these inadequate lockdowns. The state and territory leaders previously refused to recognise the federal definition of an outbreak but reversed their position at yesterday’s national cabinet. The decision means that henceforth, lockdowns will only be considered when COVID-19 is already circulating widely.

The prime minister stepped-up his efforts to force all workers back into their places of employment, regardless of the dangers. This is particularly directed at office workers, one of the only cohorts that continues to work remotely in substantial numbers. “It’s time to get back to the office,” Morrison declared. One of the major clusters in Victoria is among office workers at a financial firm.

Yesterday’s meeting has been hailed by business groups and the financial press. Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox said that its directives would help businesses to overcome “strong pockets of resistance from some workers” to the back-to-work campaign.

An article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper was headlined “Morrison’s line in the sand: funds with a catch.” Its author, Paul Kelly, declared that acceptance of the federal outbreak definition was an advance against “populist lockdowns and de facto elimination agendas,” aimed at eradicating coronavirus transmission. “Australia’s focus now must shift to living with Covid in recovery—not more emergency measures from the 2020 syndrome,” he wrote.

The national cabinet meeting also agreed to several measures, aimed at dampening down anger over the criminally negligent quarantine and vaccine programs.

The federal government and the Victorian Labor administration signed a “memorandum of understanding” for the establishment of a purpose-built quarantine centre. Epidemiologists have demanded the establishment of such facilities for over a year, given the manifest failure of the hotel quarantine program, which has resulted in most Australian outbreaks.

There is no date for the opening of the centre, however, and

the federal government previously stated that it would not be operational before Christmas. The Victorian deal also scuttled a proposal for a quarantine facility in the north-eastern state of Queensland.

The national cabinet stated that it was “leaning heavily” towards making vaccines mandatory for aged-care workers. This is a cynical attempt to deflect responsibility for the fact that as few as 10 percent of staff in the sector is inoculated. The real cause of the woefully low levels is that until last week, when two cases were detected among staff in Melbourne, the federal and state authorities had no plan whatsoever to vaccinate the aged-care workers.

Far from being a bureaucratic “bungle,” as it has been presented in the press, this was a policy decision, with an almost homicidal intent. The overwhelming majority of Australia’s COVID deaths have been among aged-care residents, so the urgency of vaccinating the workforce is well known. Half of Victoria’s paramedics have also not been vaccinated.

The same class policy has been demonstrated by statements from Melbourne’s public housing residents over the past days, revealing that they have received virtually no information on vaccination, despite being in a vulnerable cohort that was subjected to a discriminatory, police-enforced lockdown last July. Some of the primary close contacts of the Delta infections live in the inner-city public housing towers that were targeted.

Australia is often falsely depicted as an exception to the catastrophic policies that have resulted in mass infections and deaths internationally. The same profits-before-lives calculations, however, are present in the state and federal governments and the corporate elite they represent. Having failed to develop a functional quarantine system or an effective mass quarantine program, the ruling elite is moving to abolish all safety measures, under the banner that ordinary people must “learn to live” with the deadly virus.



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