

New Zealand government “complacent” over deepening COVID-19 danger

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Several New Zealand health experts have warned that Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-Greens coalition government has become “complacent” over COVID-19 and didn’t act fast enough to suspend travel with the Australian state of New South Wales after a positive case from Sydney surfaced in Wellington last week.

The New Zealand capital went from alert level 1 to 2, which mandates some social distancing measures, on June 23 after an Australian visitor who spent the previous weekend in the city tested positive on his return to Sydney. That city had been under limited restrictions following an outbreak that began on June 16.

Governments on both sides of the Tasman Sea ignored the dangers as the highly infectious Delta variant spread from a cluster in Sydney’s eastern suburbs throughout much of the city. Despite concerns among health experts, the New Zealand government took no action to suspend flights from Sydney after previously halting them from Melbourne during an upsurge in cases there.

Despite the Ardern government’s international reputation as a “success” story for its control of the spread of COVID-19, the country’s systems are severely compromised. Relatively low case numbers have been used to justify relaxing restrictions in the interests of “the economy.” In April, borders were recklessly opened for quarantine-free travel with Australia, at the expense of public health safety, after a clamour by the tourism industry and other businesses.

Auckland University Professor of Medicine Des Gorman told Radio NZ on June 23 that the government was tardy in “pausing” the travel “bubble,” even after the Delta variant was identified in the Wellington case. “What a shame they didn’t close the bubble several days earlier when it was clear Sydney was dealing with

a Delta outbreak and there were loose ends,” he said.

The tourist visited a series of restaurants, bars and tourist attractions over two days, leaving behind 20 “locations of interest” and 420 people identified as close contacts. At this point there are 950 people self-isolating but no further positive cases have been uncovered. The fact that the man had received his first vaccine shot prompted speculation that he may have been, somewhat fortuitously, less contagious.

The man reported feeling unwell on his return flight on the morning of June 21, indicating he had been infectious during the visit. However, it took most of last week before authorities confirmed that he had the highly virulent Delta variant. Last Sunday it was revealed that his partner had also tested positive, prompting NZ officials to impose a further 48 hours under Level 2 restrictions in the capital.

Warning that “we are not in the clear yet,” epidemiologist Michael Baker described the episode as “a close call.” With the visitor attending multiple indoor venues alongside hundreds of others his trip “could have turned into multiple super-spreading events,” Baker said.

The case had exposed “major gaps” in the system and New Zealand needed to upgrade its approach to dealing with COVID-19, Baker warned. “The virus has changed markedly and our response needs to change with it,” he added.

Public health Professor Nick Wilson also told Radio NZ “the government has missed things.” It had been a mistake not to make indoor mask-wearing mandatory as well as the use of QR scanning in higher-risk settings as Wellington went into alert level 2. A review of the trans-Tasman “travel bubble” settings was needed, and an urgent upgrade of New Zealand’s alert-level system.

Virologist Jemma Geoghegan emphasised that people who have not been vaccinated were “up to twice as likely to be hospitalised if they’ve been infected with the Delta variant, compared to the other variants.”

While the government claims its vaccine rollout is “ahead of schedule,” according to OECD figures New Zealand ranks with Australia among the slowest in the developed nations. As of June 24, among 4.2 million people aged 16 and older, just 9.08 percent were fully vaccinated and a further 6 percent had received one dose. The low numbers are attributed to “constrained” supply issues with the imported Pfizer vaccine, which will continue until late July.

Each of the 20 District Health Boards are left mostly to their own devices. In Wellington, a cohort of over 65-year-olds and people with underlying health conditions is still waiting for a call-up after previously being scheduled for vaccination in May. Had the Delta variant grabbed hold in the capital last week, thousands would have been left dangerously exposed.

When trans-Tasman travel was opened up on April 18, and with the Cook Islands in May, Ardern boasted that it was “a new chapter in our recovery.” “We are world-leading ... We are opening at exactly the right time,” she declared. COVID Response Minister Chris Hipkins falsely maintained that the risk of transmission between the two countries was deemed to be “low.”

In fact, the risk to public health was completely overridden. The policy was imposed in the midst of a renewed surge of the virus across South Asia and with Australia’s own vaccine rollout especially shambolic. Flights have repeatedly, but only reluctantly, been suspended as COVID-19 flare-ups have occurred in Australian cities. Many travellers have been left stranded due to sudden border closures, often being forced into quarantine at their own expense.

The last Wellington scare has proven how ill-prepared the authorities are for a major outbreak. Testing facilities in the capital were quickly overwhelmed as thousands of concerned people queued up over several days to get COVID tests. Healthline telephone enquiries were backed up for hours. Fewer than 10 percent of possible contacts could initially be found through the QR scanning system, which has not been made compulsory.

Microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles warned that New Zealand will have to take “different and more extreme

measures to stop it [the Delta variant] from taking off.” The earlier Alpha variant had “stress tested” the country’s systems and exposed “shortfalls” in several aspects, such as ventilation in hotels used as quarantine facilities and Delta is even more infectious, Wiles said.

Hipkins announced on Tuesday that the Level 2 restrictions in Wellington would be ended that evening. Gorman, however, insisted the city should stay in level 2 for another two weeks. “That gives you some confidence there’s not going to be a tail that’s going to come back and bite you,” he said. Business owners would not want to hear this, he added, but with “one or two smouldering cases” possible, an outbreak would require a return to level 3 or 4 restrictions.

Meanwhile flights to and from the states of Victoria, South Australia, ACT and Tasmania are set to resume on July 4, even though the Sydney cluster has spread across Australia. Pre-flight testing is now required, but Wiles has warned “it’s not the silver bullet.” She said this has been proved by travellers who tested negative before their flights but were later found to have COVID-19 while in quarantine.

The gathering crisis, which was preventable, is an indictment of the corporate profit-driven response of governments everywhere which have failed to implement effective lockdown, quarantine and vaccination measures. The entire Asia-Pacific region is now seeing a renewed surge of infections based on the Delta variant with Australia, Taiwan and Fiji, all previously considered “safe,” struggling to contain serious outbreaks.



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