

# Australian governments respond to Delta outbreak by blocking repatriation of citizens

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At a meeting of the national cabinet today, Australia's federal, state and territory leaders agreed to slash the number of inbound arrivals to the country in half, effectively blocking the timely repatriation of most of the 34,000 citizens who remain stranded abroad some 16 months into the pandemic.

The decision is a confession of political failure. For more than 12 months, federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have failed to develop an effective quarantine system. They remain committed to using private hotels, located in the city centres, as the primary venues for international travellers to self-isolate.

The reduction in the arrival cap is an admission that the hotels are unsafe. COVID-19 leaks from them have resulted in the majority of Australia's outbreaks over the past six months, including those currently gripping the country. The hotels are unable to prevent airborne transmission, and epidemiologists have called, throughout the pandemic, for replacement by purpose-built facilities located outside the major urban centres.

Today's decision is an attempt by all of the governments to stave off a deepening political crisis, accelerated by the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant.

The outbreak began in Sydney on June 16. For a week-and-a-half, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government refused to implement any lockdown measures, in line with business demands for the economy to "remain open," allowing Delta to circulate throughout the city and more broadly. This, combined with other "leaks" related to the quarantine and hospital system in Queensland, resulted in four states and territories being under some form of lockdown this week, covering around 12 million people, or almost half the population.

The re-emergence of the virus, after months of Australia's political leaders falsely claiming credit for supposedly protecting the country from the COVID-19

disasters abroad, has fuelled widespread popular anger. In addition to the quarantine failures, Australian governments had lifted virtually all safety restrictions prior to the current outbreak, including caps on mass events, and have presided over one of the slowest vaccination programs of an advanced OECD country, with less than seven percent of the adult population fully-inoculated.

Amid the popular backlash, the government leaders have engaged in mutual recriminations this week to cover-up their own responsibility.

Queensland Labor authorities sharply criticised Prime Minister Scott Morrison's sudden declaration that people of all ages could request doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The statement contradicted existing health advice that AstraZeneca should only be administered to those over the age of 60 due to rare clotting risks. It was condemned by the Queensland government, as well as some doctors' groups, as a political manoeuvre, with the state's chief health officer branding it as dangerous.

At the same time, several state governments, including those led by Labor in Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria, called for an immediate reduction in the inbound travel cap. Those administrations have collaborated throughout the pandemic with the federal Liberal-National government, including in devising and implementing the private hotel quarantine program. Now, they are seeking to divert anger over its failure against citizens stranded abroad, and in the direction of reactionary nationalist isolationism.

In an apparent bid to patch over the political conflicts, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state leaders agreed today to reduce the weekly travel intake from 6,370 to 3,185. Morrison stated that while this would result in a reduction of commercial flights, his government would organise additional repatriation services. This assertion is worthless, given the

government's refusal to organise enough of such flights throughout the pandemic.

The reduction in the arrival cap comes amid the release of information highlighting the class character of Australia's border restrictions. While ordinary people have been stranded abroad, in some cases for more than a year, and citizens in countries overwhelmed by COVID, such as India, have been all but abandoned, a relatively small percentage of the population has been able to leave and enter Australia, seemingly at will.

Travel exemptions and visa approvals are shrouded in considerable secrecy. However, Australian Border Force data shows that between March 20, 2020 and April 20, 2021, some 13,762 citizens and permanent residents entered and left the country on more than one occasion. State leaders have reported that some individuals have gone through the hotel quarantine program up to six times. In addition to security and state personnel, some of the repeat returnees are businesspeople.

Separate data, quoted in the *Conversation*, found that approval rates for overseas citizens to enter Australia in the first months of the year, stood at 23.48 percent from the UK and 30.73 percent from South Africa, but just 7.17 percent from India, despite all three countries being hit by more contagious variants of the virus.

In addition to slamming the border shut for workers and the poor, the national cabinet today reaffirmed that lockdowns would only be considered as a "last resort." This declaration is in line with the demands of the corporate and financial elite for an end to any measures that impinge on profit-making activity, and their clamour against the limited safety measures currently in place.

The statement is extraordinary, however, given that the country is currently in the grip of a national outbreak that directly resulted from the refusal of the NSW Liberal government to implement a timely lockdown in Sydney.

Morrison outlined a four-phase plan for the lifting of all restrictions and a full reopening. The second phase, he said, would be declared when epidemiologists indicated that a sufficient percentage of the population had been vaccinated for greater risks to be taken. Restrictions, such as adherence to lockdowns and border closures, would be lifted for those who are vaccinated. Large cohorts of students and migrant workers would be brought into the country.

Under phase two, "Lockdowns would only occur in extreme circumstances to prevent escalating hospitalisation and fatality," Morrison said. Given the resurgence of the virus in countries such as Britain and

the US, whose vaccination rate is at least seven or eight times greater than Australia's, these comments are a warning of what the government is preparing. The extent to which vaccinated people can contract and transmit the virus, moreover, remains largely unknown.

Under phase three, COVID would be "treated" like "other infectious diseases," Morrison stated. "When it is like the flu, we should treat it like the flu and that means no lockdowns," he declared. The fourth phase would entail a "complete return to normal." The timetable for each was left hazy, but the discussion of an end to all restrictions, under conditions of an ongoing outbreak in Australia, minimal vaccination rates, and a failed quarantine program, is decidedly premature.

While Morrison may currently be constrained by mass concern over the virus, sections of the corporate elite and the financial press are effectively calling for an immediate transition to phase three or even four.

Meanwhile, the Sydney outbreak has continued to grow by around 20 cases per day, since city-wide "stay at home" orders were instituted last Saturday. The figure was highest yesterday, with 31 cases detected in the 24-hours to 8 p.m. At least 12 of them had been infectious while moving around in the community. Epidemiologists have warned that the lockdown may be insufficient to stem the spread, given its lax character. A large proportion of the workforce is being compelled to attend places of employment, and most non-essential shops remain open.

In Queensland, the state Labor government announced the scheduled lifting of a lockdown in several regional areas of the state, but its 24-hour extension in the capital city of Brisbane. Another three cases were revealed today. For two of them, the source of infection is not known, indicating ongoing community transmission.

Lockdowns are to be lifted in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, after no new cases were registered, but both have been exposed to the Delta strain resulting from the NSW and Queensland "leaks" respectively.



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