

Australian governments push for end to COVID restrictions as Sydney Delta outbreak grows

Oscar Grenfell
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An outbreak of the highly-infectious Delta variant of COVID-19, which resulted in four states with a combined population of almost 12 million being under limited lockdown measures last week, has continued to spread in Sydney.

Despite dozens of new cases each day in Australia's most populous city, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government, backed by its federal and state Coalition and Labor Party counterparts, is preparing to lift the inadequate restrictions currently in place.

Over the last several days, the NSW government has carried out an increasingly brazen campaign aimed at justifying the scheduled end of "stay-at-home" orders at midnight on Friday.

When 35 new infections in and near Sydney were announced on Saturday, a record high since the outbreak began, Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared repeatedly that the tally was "great news" and demonstrated the "green shoots of the lockdown."

No attempt was made to justify this upbeat assessment, or to explain what it meant. Berejiklian was widely criticised on social media for failing to mention that five people had been admitted to hospital intensive care units as a result of their infections.

Sunday's total of 16 cases was hailed as "very encouraging" because it was lower than the day before. Yesterday's tally of another 35 infections was again presented as positive news, because cases were not "doubling" or "tripling." A further 18 infections were reported this morning.

Each of the daily totals has included a significant number of people who were infectious while they were moving about the community, and cases of "unknown origin" continue to be detected, indicating unidentified transmissions. According to NSW Health, there are at least 23 such infections.

The NSW government has not provided any convincing assessment of the results of its "stay at home" orders, which were belatedly introduced on June 26 and have not led to a reduction in cases in the week-and-a-half since. Its representatives have instead increasingly sought to blame the population.

Government ministers hector ordinary people almost every day about "following the rules," while several breaches,

including a small house party of rugby league players, have been highly-publicised.

In reality, the measures in Sydney cannot be described as a lockdown, even by the lax standards of earlier ones implemented in Australia. Virtually all retail stores remain open. Mass shopping centres are in operation, with several now featuring on the list of COVID-exposure sites as a result.

Instead of restricting "non-essential" work, the government has stated that workers must go to their places of employment if they are unable to perform their duties at home. In practice, this means that hundreds of thousands of workers remain on the job, including in industries that could not be described as "essential."

Other restrictions are vague to the point of being meaningless. NSW Health's official guidelines, for instance, state: "If you want to visit another person, you'll need a reasonable excuse." There is no further elaboration.

It is increasingly evident that the existing measures are allowing for the continued spread of the virus throughout the city. COVID-19 has again entered the aged-care sector, with a nursing home in Baulkham Hills recording five infections among residents, four of them vaccinated.

Family members have given furious comments to the media over the fact that two-thirds of staff at the facility have not been inoculated. During an outbreak in the neighbouring state of Victoria in May, it was revealed that as few as 10 percent of aged care workers across the country were fully-vaccinated, despite the sector recording the highest number of deaths of any throughout the pandemic.

This morning, it was revealed that 600 Sydney nurses are in isolation after being potentially exposed to the virus. An unvaccinated student nurse had performed shifts at Fairfield Hospital, in the city's southwest, and North Shore Private Hospital while unknowingly infected. Both institutions have had to sharply curtail services. In each previous surge of the virus, health workers have accounted for a substantial proportion of infections.

Indicating the possible extent of the spread, over the weekend NSW authorities put out a general "call out" for all people who

had been in the Auburn town centre on June 27 to get tested, because at least one infectious individual had visited there on that day. Auburn, a Sydney working-class suburb, has population greater than 100,000.

As in previous outbreaks in Sydney, virus transmission has increasingly shifted from the relatively affluent eastern suburbs, where the outbreak began, to western and southwestern working-class areas, such as Auburn, which are more densely-populated.

During lockdowns in other states last year, governments insisted it was not safe to end the restrictions prior to 14 days of transmission near or at zero, in line with the maximum incubation period of the virus. Such concerns have been jettisoned. The NSW government is considering ending the “stay at home” orders, even though there is every likelihood that transmission will still be occurring.

The NSW government has already declared that face-to-face teaching will resume in schools next Monday when the term holiday ends. Teachers are to be forced into overcrowded classrooms, with large groups of unvaccinated children. The government has rejected teachers’ appeals to be recognised as “essential workers” and provided priority inoculation.

Epidemiologists have warned that a lifting of restrictions will result in a further surge. University of Melbourne Professor Tony Blakely told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “If we just open up restrictions at that point, [infections] will just take off again. That’s just how the virus behaves. It’s not just a situation for NSW, the virus can move around and get across borders, so it’s also an issue for the rest of Australia too.”

The reopening drive is not limited to the NSW government. The Queensland Labor government ended a limited lockdown on the weekend, despite ongoing community transmissions resulting in new infections each day.

This is in line with a growing push by the corporate elite for the ending of all lockdowns. Berejiklian said this morning her government is determined that this would be the last lockdown for NSW.

At a meeting of the “national cabinet” last Friday, the state and territory leaders, most of them from the Labor Party, agreed to a “roadmap” for the full reopening of the economy, presented by the federal Liberal-National government.

According to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, under phase two of the plan: “Lockdowns would only occur in extreme circumstances to prevent escalating hospitalisation and fatality.” Phase three would see the virus treated like the flu, and phase four a “return to normal.”

Morrison said the movement from one phase to the next would be based on vaccination rates, but he gave no concrete figures.

Australia’s vaccination effort remains the slowest of an advanced OECD country, with around 9 percent of the adult population fully-vaccinated, and another 21 percent having received a single dose.

There are ongoing supply shortages of the Pfizer vaccine, and warnings that when more doses arrive, there may be insufficient health staff to administer them. The official health advice remains that AstraZeneca, Australia’s main vaccine, should be provided only to people aged over 60. Despite this, Morrison last week declared that anyone could access AstraZeneca, creating widespread confusion.

The “roadmap” was hailed as a step forward in the financial press. But there is an increasing clamor for it to begin immediately. Corporate chiefs, such as Qantas CEO Alan Joyce, have said the movement from one phase to the next should not be tied to any vaccination rate.

Yesterday, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* featured comments by Deakin University’s chair in epidemiology Catherine Bennett, who said that a 30 percent vaccination rate would be enough for an end to lockdowns. The virus would continue to circulate, but inoculation would “probably [be] enough that it slows the spread of the virus and means contact tracers should be able to do their job.”

Today, the same newspaper reported that Liberal politicians are discussing a 50 percent vaccination rate or setting a benchmark of all adults having had the opportunity of a vaccine. Federal Liberal MP Jason Falinski said this would “build confidence in the community to ensure the health systems can handle it.”

In other words, governments are preparing to embark on policies that they know will result in a substantial increase in infections. As with the governments in Britain and the US, they want to invoke vaccination to end all other public health measures aimed at protecting the population. This has led to a surge of the Delta variant in both those countries. Such is the homicidal program of the ruling elite, which subordinates the health and lives of ordinary people to the profit interests of the major corporations.



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