

Australian government accelerates border reopening despite soaring COVID-19 cases

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday announced Australia's international border will reopen next month for states that have reached 80 percent vaccination rates for people over 16, even as the country's COVID-19 infections hit new highs.

This may start within weeks for New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, where the current Delta outbreak began in June after the state government refused to implement even limited lockdown measures for 10 days.

Fully vaccinated Australians and permanent residents arriving in NSW will be able to home quarantine for just one week, instead of quarantining at a hotel for a fortnight, pending the supposed success of a brief state home quarantine trial.

Commercial flights out of Australia also will resume for vaccinated Australians. These moves will effectively end 18 months in which restrictions on international travel have limited the arrival of the virus, except for constant leaks from the inadequate quarantine hotels.

Morrison's announcement marks an acceleration by his Liberal-National Coalition government of a "roadmap" agreed by the bipartisan "National Cabinet" in July, which said international travel would gradually reopen once 80 percent of eligible people were vaccinated nationally and in the relevant state.

This speedup was effectively accepted by yesterday's meeting of the "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory government leaders, mostly from the opposition Labor Party. They collectively "noted" the "progress" being made on these fronts by Morrison's Liberal-National government.

Morrison portrayed the decision as a gain for ordinary people. "It's time to give Australians their lives back," he said. That is after denying entry to tens of thousands

of Australian citizens and residents for a year and a half by refusing to provide decent and sufficient quarantine facilities.

In reality, the acceleration is being undertaken to satisfy the demands of the corporate elite for a faster full reopening of the economy despite soaring Delta infections.

An article in the *Financial Times*, the London-based voice of international finance capital, this week declared: "Australia is making 'big mistakes' in failing to reopen to the world, with business leaders accusing the government of putting politics before science ahead of a looming general election."

"Increasingly fed up with COVID-19 lockdown policies, and a failure to rollout vaccines that would allow the economy to open up, the leaders of many of Australia's biggest companies—including BHP, Macquarie and Qantas—have said the nation will have to learn to 'live with the virus,' as many other countries have done."

This is a demand that Australian governments must suppress the widespread working-class opposition to being forced to return to unsafe workplaces and schools, under conditions in which hospitals are already unable to cope. Scientists and health experts are warning of rising infections in coming weeks as schools and workplaces reopen.

"It's time for corporate Australia to turn its disquiet and rumblings into a roar," Greg O'Neill, chief executive of Melbourne-based fund asset management company La Trobe Financial, told the *Financial Times*. "It's time for courage and honesty. Not politics."

"Living with the virus" means that infections must be allowed to spread in Australia, as globally, infecting thousands more people, killing hundreds and inflicting the still fully-unknown effects of "long COVID" on

many more.

Since the start of the pandemic, there have been over 108,000 confirmed cases in Australia and more than 1,300 people have died. These numbers are already rising quickly—over 2,350 cases and 12 deaths were reported today—as limited existing restrictions are lifted.

So far, the toll remains much lower than in other countries, such as the UK, where 59,000 children were infected with COVID-19 in the first two weeks of school reopenings and new cases have risen from 2,000 a day in May to nearly 35,000 a day over the past month. In the United States, more than 200,000 new pediatric infections each week have been reported over the past five weeks, mostly the result of school reopenings.

The September 29 *Financial Times* article featured a declaration by Graham Turner, chief executive of travel company Flight Centre. “The borders should have never been closed,” he told the newspaper. “We’re making some very big mistakes here.” Together with Qantas, the national air carrier, Flight Centre’s profits would be most directly boosted by open borders.

Turner accused Morrison of being “scared of making a wrong move.” Decisions were being made for “political reasons” and that was “the most frustrating thing for business.” Turner said he had spent five weeks working in London over July and August and “they’ve still got a lot of infections but they’re back to normal.”

Yesterday, Turner threatened to mount a legal challenge against internal border closures if state governments did not adopt “reasonable” plans to scrap them within weeks, accusing them of costing his company \$100 million a month.

Until now, border closures have confined COVID-19 cases to low figures in most states and territories—Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory—allowing their governments to posture as protecting their populations.

The *Financial Times* article seized upon, and inflated, a month-old “open letter” to Australia’s governments, dated September 1, by the Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest conglomerates operating in Australia. Signed by 79 companies, including the major banks, Uber, Credit Suisse, Bain, Boeing, Bupa and Shell, the letter

declared that it was “necessary to open up society and live with the virus.”

Governments had to “stay the course” in imposing a plan to end restrictions once vaccination rates reached 70 percent and 80 percent. However, the open letter did not use the phrase “big mistakes,” as the article suggested. That came from Turner, reflecting a stepping up of the corporate pressure on the federal and state governments.

Pointedly, the *Financial Times* article said “political pressure” was mounting on Morrison, “whose conservative coalition government has a threadbare majority, is trailing in the polls and is embroiled in multiple scandals.”

Two days later, on October 1, the BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott issued a new statement welcoming the Morrison government’s “rolling back” of restrictions as “critical” and citing “analysis” by the EY global consulting giant estimating the cost of international border closures to be around \$7.6 billion per month.

“This will help send the message to the world that Australia is open for new jobs and investment,” Westacott stated. She also insisted that the next step was to end all state and territory restrictions, including border closures. “Now, state and territory leaders must release their domestic reopening plans and stick to them,” Westacott said. At stake was “our international reputation as a good place to do business.”

As the interventions by the BCA and the *Financial Times* demonstrate, the ruling capitalist class is intent on driving up profits, regardless of the cost in terms of working-class health and lives.



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