

Newly-installed premier of NSW accelerates Australia's dangerous "reopening"

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In his first act as premier of New South Wales (NSW), the country's most-populous state, Dominic Perrottet on Thursday unveiled a dramatic acceleration of plans to "reopen the economy," even as the highly-infectious Delta variant continues to circulate widely.

The announcement underscores the motives behind Perrottet's rapid installation. His predecessor, Gladys Berejiklian, suddenly resigned on October 1, as it was revealed she was the subject of an Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC) investigation. Allegations that appear to fall far short of criminal conduct and have long been on the public record were effectively used to engineer her removal.

Berejiklian had outlined a "roadmap" for lifting restrictions beginning on October 11. But there had been persistent frustration in the corporate and financial elite that her government, and other state administrations, were not proceeding rapidly enough with a profit-driven campaign to force the population to live with the virus and dispense with safety measures for all time.

Perrottet, who has received widespread support in the financial press, immediately moved to allay those frustrations. In his Thursday announcement, he doubled many of the caps on attendance and gatherings, and lifted restrictions that were previously to remain in place until the end of the year.

No less significant was the form in which the changes were announced. Perrottet said the government's crisis cabinet, ostensibly established to focus on the health emergency, would be abolished. In its place would be a "COVID and economic recovery committee."

The premier emphasised that the new body would be advised by the state's chief economist and other financial policy specialists. Daily press conferences, focusing on infections, hospitalisations and deaths, would end immediately.

In a clear signal of a less prominent role for medical experts, Dr Kerry Chant, the state's chief health officer, was not present as Perrottet unveiled some of the most significant

changes to public health policy since the pandemic began.

A journalist asked Perrottet whether it was "a bit disrespectful" not to have invited Chant to one of his first press conferences. The premier rejected this, describing the chief health officer as one of his "favourite constituents" in his Sydney electorate. When the reporter replied: "If it's a health crisis, the chief health officer should be here," Perrottet snapped back: "It's also an economic crisis."

The same theme was repeatedly emphasised. "We must have a sharp focus on how we support businesses and ensure people return to work and give the NSW economy the best chance of bouncing back," Perrottet declared. His altered roadmap "provides the most certainty to industry and the business community."

Perrottet said nothing about the new roadmap's implications for the healthcare system. Previous modelling, commissioned by the Berejiklian government, found that without any sort of reopening, the state's hospitals were still likely to be "overwhelmed" by COVID patients in late October. An independent study by the OzSAGE group of epidemiologists predicted that Berejiklian's "roadmap" would result in patient demand exceeding maximum hospital capacity for five weeks in December–January.

This demonstrates the potentially catastrophic consequences of the new "roadmap," which will lift restrictions more rapidly. Under both plans, the lifting of the already partial lockdown was to occur next Monday, October 11, based on 70 percent of the state's adult population having received two doses of vaccine.

Compared with Berejiklian's roadmap, Perrottet has increased the number of adults permitted to gather in homes from five to ten and in public from twenty to thirty. As some commentators have noticed, while five adults may constitute a small gathering, ten is effectively a party. The change is notable, given that the Delta strain has spread rapidly throughout entire households during the current outbreak.

Indoor pools will reopen from Monday, caps on weddings and funerals will rise from 50 to 100 people, with a ban on singing at religious services lifted.

Perrottet has accelerated the reopening of the schools, the start day of which was brought forward under Berejiklian from October 25 to October 18. Now the supposed staggered return will be completed in just one week. This is under conditions in which a third of all infections in the current outbreak have been among teenagers and children, while learning has primarily been online.

An even greater easing will occur on October 25, once 80 percent of adults are vaccinated. Similar rates of inoculation, such as in Singapore and Israel, have failed to halt major outbreaks of the virus. Perrottet nevertheless announced that once the arbitrary figure is reached, nightclubs could open, without dancing, 3,000 people could attend ticketed events, and home gathering caps will rise from 10 to 20 and in outdoor areas from 20 to 50.

The wearing of face masks will become optional in offices. Previously, Chant and other officials had suggested that some mask mandates would remain in place for months or even years. The reversal is aimed at creating the conditions for the largest number of workers to be herded back to their places of employment. Similar measures in Britain and the US have contributed to a dramatic spread of the virus.

While much of the corporate press has hailed the announcement, and begun promoting “freedom day” on Monday, epidemiologists and health experts have condemned the changes.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) stated that it was “very concerned” by the changes and the “potential sidelining of health advice.” AMA president Omar Khorshid said: “The changes to the roadmap have occurred at the 11th hour without the presence of the Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant at the announcement.”

The association said it was “critical to observe the impact of each step on transmission and case numbers. Otherwise NSW may still see hospitals become completely overwhelmed despite high vaccination rates.” Cases would likely “skyrocket.”

The NSW government is able to proceed, despite widespread opposition, because its profit-driven program is supported by the entire political establishment. The state Labor opposition has maintained complete bipartisanship, working with the trade unions to suppress resistance.

Conscious of his reliance on Labor’s role, Perrottet named Michael Coutts-Trotter, husband of federal Labor frontbencher Tanya Plibersek, as secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the top position in the state’s public service. Commenting on the appointment, the *Australian* today noted that while Perrottet hails from the far-right faction of the Liberal Party, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating is “one of his most trusted mentors.”

More broadly, the same reopening program is being

implemented by Labor governments, especially in the neighbouring state of Victoria. Today, 1,965 new infections were reported there, the highest of any Australian jurisdiction since the pandemic began.

The Victorian Labor government marked the grim milestone by announcing that secondary close contacts of infected individuals would no longer be required to self-isolate. The measure is connected to a winding-back of contact-tracing. Deputy Health Secretary Kate Matson commented: “We are no longer chasing Covid zero in Victoria, and we have 17,000 active cases in Victoria at this point in time.”

Under that Labor administration’s own “roadmap,” a phased reopening of the schools began this week, and the state lockdown is scheduled to end on October 25.

Professor Mary Baxter from the University of Melbourne told news.com.au that “people will die” under Labor’s plan. Baxter said it was a “terrible time” to lift restrictions, when cases were soaring and hospital admissions increasing. Baxter warned that hospitals could be “overwhelmed” and “we could potentially see some shocking things.” The Labor government, however, has insisted that it will press ahead.

The open adoption by Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National, of policies of allowing the virus to circulate demonstrates that the fight against the pandemic requires an independent movement of the working class. It must reject the subordination of health and lives to private profit, and fight for a scientifically-grounded program to eradicate COVID-19.



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