

# Australia's largest state holds "freedom day" amid Delta outbreak

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Residents of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's largest state, were subjected to a barrage of propaganda from the media and political establishment yesterday, informing them that they were experiencing a joyous "freedom day" that would mark a "return to normal" after months of limited lockdown measures.

The television stations, including the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, devoted hours of coverage to small numbers of people visiting pubs, cafes and gyms. Footage of New Year's-style countdowns to the easing of restrictions was played over and over again, with crowds of one or two dozen people, generally in the more affluent areas of Sydney, supposedly representative of popular sentiment.

Amid one of the most significant shifts in public health policy since the pandemic began, the official media by and large did not solicit comment from epidemiologists and medical experts. Instead, viewers were treated to innumerable interviews with hairdressers, other small-business people and representatives of various corporate lobbies, focused on commerce, not health, safety or the interests of working people.

The entire affair had a manufactured character to it. Broad sections of the population are aware that the coronavirus is still circulating widely, and the profit-driven "reopening of the economy" will exacerbate the pandemic crisis. There is intense hostility among healthcare workers to policies that threaten to crash the hospital system, and among teachers and students, to the prospect of being forced into overcrowded classrooms that will serve as incubators of the virus.

The official campaign is seeking to take advantage of the legitimate and wholly-understandable desire of ordinary people to see their friends and family, and to socially interact. It is also exploiting the fact that those who have lost work during the COVID crisis have been placed on poverty-level government assistance, capped at \$750 a week, resulting in ever-greater social misery.

The "freedom" being referred to, however, will only

intensify the hardships of working people. In the first place, tens or hundreds of thousands will be forced into unsafe workplaces. The miserly subsidies to those thrown out of work are being withdrawn, meaning many will face the choice between insecure, low-paid and unsafe work, or unemployment. And the supposed protagonists of the reopening, small-business people, also face reductions in assistance, with many confronting possible bankruptcy.

In reality, yesterday marked a major step in the ruling class drive to allow the virus to "freely" circulate. The lifting of the lockdown was dictated by the most powerful corporations, and is aimed at ensuring the full resumption of their profit-making activities, including through intensified workplace restructuring.

Yesterday summed-up why Dominic Perrottet, a representative of the Liberal Party's hard-right faction, and long-standing opponent of lockdown measures, was installed as premier of NSW last week. His predecessor, Gladys Berejiklian, was forced to resign at the beginning of the month, as the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) declared that it was investigating her over allegations that had been on the public record for over a year.

Whatever the precise details of the Byzantine intrigues, Perrottet's installation was aimed at accelerating the "reopening" drive. Berejiklian had committed to ending the lockdown at 70 percent adult vaccination, even though similar moves, in countries such as Singapore and Israel, have resulted in major surges of the virus. She nevertheless presented this as a "cautious" easing of restrictions, governed by health advice.

Perrottet's first act as premier was to turbo-charge the existing plan, and transform it into a "freedom day," modelled on the example set by British prime minister and herd immunity advocate Boris Johnson. Perrottet boosted the number of people allowed to gather in a home from five to ten, and outdoors, from 20 to 30. He increased the permitted size of ticketed events from 500 to 3,000, reopened indoor pools, sped up the reopening of schools from two to one

week, beginning October 18, and doubled caps on weddings and funerals from 50 to 100.

An even greater shift is being prepared for when the state reaches 80 percent adult vaccination. Indoor mask-mandates, which had been set to remain in place, will be lifted and nightclubs reopened, while international travel will likely resume.

In his media appearances yesterday, Perrottet sidelined medical experts, including the state's Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant, as he did last week. The premier had a haircut in the morning, nationally broadcast, before holding a press conference in a pub.

"I see it as a day of freedom, it's a freedom day," Perrottet declared, rejecting warnings that it was creating the conditions for a dangerous spread of the virus. "We are leading the nation out of this pandemic but this will be a challenge," he added, before re-emphasising that the "economy" and "business confidence" were decisive.

Nothing was said about the eight people who died of COVID yesterday. Their ages and where they were from were not even reported, overturning previous practice.

Epidemiologists and health experts, including the Australian Medical Association, have condemned the accelerated lifting of restrictions, warning it will result in a major increase in infections, with the hospitals already in an unprecedented crisis. NSW is continuing to record almost 500 infections a day, and the Delta variant is widely seeded throughout Sydney.

Deaths have increased, with about 90 percent of all NSW fatalities occurring during the current outbreak that began in June, half of them in the past month. Some 30 percent of infections have been among children and teenagers, even though most learning has been online. The reopening of the schools will result in a massive increase in children contracting the virus.

The corporate elite, however, has hailed Perrottet's program as the way forward. An article in the *Australian* by Nick Cater summed up the response, declaring: "Monday's small step for NSW is a giant leap for Australia. Every state will follow sooner or later because if the coronavirus cannot be eliminated there is no other choice."

Cater pointed to the motivation behind the media hype, which is aimed at steamrolling the concerns and opposition of ordinary people. He warned: "Freedom hesitancy is not hard to find, even in NSW, where there were unlikely to be exuberant celebrations, even if dancing had been allowed. The effects of the 18-month scare campaign will take some time to wear off, particularly given the near-inevitability of a spike in infections." Cater denounced the "laptop class," including medical experts, for this widespread concern.

The *Australian*'s editorial today continued the theme, yet

all but admitted the real reasons for Berejiklian's ouster. "Beyond the trauma of the circumstances surrounding Ms. Berejiklian's departure, however, for the citizens of NSW there is a powerfully redemptive quality to being able to usher in new freedoms with a fresh face and mindset at the helm," it stated.

The leadership change, moreover, was "an experience that carries a message for other jurisdictions that inevitably will follow NSW back to full engagement with other states and the rest of the world." In other words, it was a warning to other state and territory leaders of what will happen if they do not proceed rapidly enough with the reopening drive.

The message has been received. Daniel Andrews, the Labor premier of Victoria, is pressing ahead with his own "roadmap" to ending restrictions, even though daily infections are approaching 2,000 and the hospitals are on the brink of being overwhelmed. His government plans to lift the Melbourne lockdown on October 25, will permit a mass concert at the end of the month and up to 10,000 spectators at the lucrative Melbourne Cup horse race in early November.

A little over a week after the scandal surrounding Berejiklian was revived, allegations of misconduct have been levelled against the Andrews government. Public hearings are currently underway into Labor Party branch-stacking, compelling a minister in the Victorian government to resign yesterday. A separate two-year investigation into the government's handling of a deal with firefighting unions was leaked to the press last week.

The conditions are being created for Andrews to go the way of Berejiklian if he does not implement the policies being demanded by the corporate elite.

The working class must advance its own independent perspective, aimed at eradicating the virus. This means the formation of workplace rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight the reopening drive. It poses the need for a socialist program that places social needs, including to health and life, before the profit interests of big business.



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