

Australia: Bipartisan push to wind down COVID-19 contact tracing

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17 October 2021

A concerted bipartisan effort is underway in Australia to condition public opinion to accept the demise of an important weapon in science's anti-pandemic arsenal—an effective Test, Trace, Isolate and Quarantine (TTIQ) system.

Australia's political establishment is making clear that the population will have to accept mass COVID-19 infection and death, with some medical authorities being used to justify the wholesale removal of restrictions to prevent the deadly virus spreading. The target for the ruling elite is not the coronavirus but contact tracing itself.

The Labor government of Daniel Andrews in Victoria and the right-wing Coalition government led by newly-installed Dominic Perrottet in New South Wales (NSW)—the country's most populous states—are now waging a joint assault on proven measures to identify and trace the spread of the virus.

Both governments are responding to the demands of major corporations, particularly the airlines and giant retail supermarket chains, which have insisted that their staff be exempt from isolating after their workplace has been visited by anyone infected with COVID-19.

Coles, the country's second largest supermarket chain, has demanded the redefinition of a "close contact" and of a "Tier 1" site in order to change the current TTIQ measures.

Up to now workers at Tier 1 sites, where the risk of contracting the virus was high, were required to self-isolate for 14 days. Since mid-July, when Delta outbreaks began in Victoria, about 30,000 Coles workers have had to isolate. At the end of last month, Woolworths, Australia's largest supermarket retailer, had 1,000 staff isolating in Victoria.

These giant retailers want the Victorian government to align its TTIQ system with measures recently

enacted in NSW. In that state Woolworths demanded, and received, NSW Health approval for the redefinition of a close contact.

Previously anyone who had spent more than a minute within 1.5 metres of an infected person, even if both were wearing masks, was defined as a close contact. In NSW a close contact is now defined as a person within 1.5 metres of an infected person for more than five minutes while either was wearing their mask improperly.

One Woolworths worker explained to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) that he was ordered to isolate by NSW Health for 14 days as a close contact of an infected co-worker, only to be phoned and texted after four days and told to return to work.

In the stampede to dispense with restrictions, Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton announced on October 4 that the state's listing and reporting of Tier 2 sites, many of them supermarkets, would be progressively scaled back. "We have to focus our efforts on where we get most bang for our buck," he declared, adding that it was no longer "an effective use of energy" to capture all Tier-2 sites.

The process now underway in Victoria was initiated by the NSW government which scrapped the reporting of close contact sites and then ended daily health press conferences. Currently only transmission sites outside Sydney, the state capital, and its most populous city, are reported in any detail on the NSW Health site.

Victoria's contact tracing system had been plagued from the outset of the pandemic with inadequate resources. Justifying the roll-back of its efforts, Sutton claimed that so-called mystery cases, unlinked to any known outbreak, were just a feature of "widespread community transmission. It is just a phenomenon that happens when you have got thousands of cases per

day.”

The virtual scrapping of the TTIQ system is not confined to retail but is also being implemented in state schools which the Victorian government has begun to reopen despite opposition from educators, parents and students. Already, within a week of Year 12 students returning to in-person classes, infections have skyrocketed and schools closed.

Sutton’s perspective is that this will deepen. “We certainly won’t have the entire school quarantining for a full 14-day period” after infections are detected, he said.

Every arm of the corporate press, including the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has been engaged in a non-stop propaganda campaign to promote the lie that the pandemic is over.

As part of this barrage, “7.30,” ABC-TV’s flagship current affairs show, recently broadcast a program entitled “Close Contact,” subtitled, “How contact tracing could work in the months ahead as vaccine targets are met.”

The program approvingly referred to the situation in England. It noted that when it opened up in July, the country had so many COVID-19 infections that the UK Track and Trace system that alerts one’s smartphone with a ping was so frequent that it became known as a “pingdemic.” The ping alerted the phone’s owner that they had been into contact with a positive COVID-19 person and imposed 10-day self-isolation orders.

Rather than enact measures to stop the spread of the virus, the British government changed its advice so that fully vaccinated people were told to get tested, but not to isolate at all.

This is being replicated in Australia. The “7.30” program quoted Deakin University epidemiologist Professor Catherine Bennett, who said: “We don’t need to put everyone in isolation, but identify the key individuals who are most at risk.”

In NSW, Customer Service Minister Victor Dominello, responsible for the state’s check-in application as part of contact tracing, declared: “I think the QR codes should be retired once we get to the 90 percent mark, subject to Health advice, because this goes to trust.”

Similarly, the *Guardian* interviewed Professor Jodie McVernon of the Doherty Institute, which provided the modelling for the Morrison government’s “roadmap”

out of the pandemic. McVernon is currently working with governments to gradually de-escalate the public health responses to the pandemic, with the “necessary transition” from a pandemic to the virus “becoming endemic” in the community.

Despite the experiences of Israel, the UK and US, where high vaccination levels have not prevented mass outbreaks, McVernon justified the abandonment of all public health measures by the failure of the inadequate ones which led to the current outbreaks.

She said: “We’ve adapted and adapted and adapted and adapted—when you think about testing, tracking, isolating and quarantining, the idea that somebody who walked past you in a supermarket when you were there for half an hour would ever be called a contact—that was never in our minds.”

She asserted: “As we continue to adapt, we now have a vaccine in play that is actually lowering risks.”

Predicting future mass undetected infections, she continued: “But as we move into this new era, we will have a higher tolerance for saying, ‘OK, if we don’t test every single person who went to the supermarket, we might miss one, but if there are lots of infections in the community, that has a very different risk consequence.’”

The imperatives of the financial and corporate elite, such as the giant supermarket chains, are to be translated into the destruction of even the limited track and trace systems that have been put in place. With the opening up of the economy that they stridently demand and that the corporate media parrots faithfully, the COVID-19 pandemic will have unlimited sway, and infections and deaths will escalate accordingly.

The safety of workers and their families cannot be left in the hands of governments or the unions, who both speak and act on behalf of corporate interests of profit and production. Independent rank-and-file committees must urgently be formed to organise, coordinate and implement measures which will ensure the health and wellbeing of the working class.



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