

Australian prime minister promises big business there will never be another lockdown

Oscar Grenfell
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In an address to the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry yesterday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison promised the corporate elite that there would never be lockdowns again, while presenting the previous COVID safety measures as a tragic burden that was imposed on his government.

The speech, along with a series of other appearances over the past week, had the character of an election pitch to big business, ahead of a national ballot which will be held next year.

Morrison touted his recently announced climate policies, which will do nothing to reduce emissions for decades to come, while providing the corporations with a bonanza through government investments and handouts. He similarly presented the Liberal-National Coalition as being best placed to impose the pro-business economic restructuring and “recovery” that is demanded in the financial press.

But Morrison made clear that the foundation of all these profit-driven policies was the abolition of lockdowns and other COVID safety measures. Morrison thanked the assembled business representatives, declaring, “You’re the ones who’ve managed the heartache, and the complexity and the frustration of extreme lockdowns and restrictions and keeping your people COVID safe.”

All but openly adopting the language of the extreme right-wing anti-lockdown movement, Morrison hailed the “freedoms” that were resulting from the rushed lifting of restrictions in Victoria and throughout the country. Those “freedoms,” he declared, “must never be taken from us again.”

Morrison linked the end of health measures to an unleashing of corporate profit-making and a “recovery” that would be dictated by and imposed on the working class for big business. He stated that his perspective was for, “‘Can do capitalism,’ not ‘don’t do governments.’ I think that’s a good motto for us to follow not just in this

area [of climate policy], but right across the spectrum of economic policy in this country. We’ve got a bit used to governments telling us what to do over the last couple of years. I think we have to break that habit.”

Amid a global pandemic and outbreaks that remain the worst Australia has experienced since the COVID crisis began, Morrison used the word health twice. Infections and hospitalisations went unmentioned, under conditions in which the state of Victoria, where he was speaking, continues to register over a thousand cases a day, and the hospitals are in an unprecedented crisis.

Morrison’s only concrete reference to the state of the pandemic was to again hail vaccination as a silver bullet, enabling the lifting of all restrictions. While he and the government have described the inoculation rate as one of the “highest in the world,” when children under 12 are included, the actual proportion of the total population that has received two doses is almost 70 percent. In countries such as Singapore, with over 90 percent eligible vaccination, the overturning of safety measures has been followed by major surges of illness and death.

Morrison likewise proclaimed that Australia has “one of the lowest fatality rates from COVID anywhere in the world.”

While it is true that deaths have not been on the scale of the US, Europe and countries such as Brazil and India, a not insignificant number of people have perished. That includes some 952 people who have died since July 11, as a direct consequence of the refusal of governments to implement the necessary lockdown measures, and their subsequent lifting of the inadequate restrictions since then. The deaths of 14 Victorians were announced just before Morrison’s speech, but their passing did not merit a mention.

The callous, pro-business drive to force the population to live with the virus is proceeding, because it is supported by the entire political establishment. The

federal Labor opposition fully supports the “reopening.” Its points of differentiation from the government are from the right, with Labor leader Anthony Albanese pitching his party as better placed to implement pro-business economic restructuring and Australia’s ever-greater alignment with the US confrontation with China.

And on the ground, it is the state and territory administrations, the majority of them Labor-led, that are dismantling public health policies and implementing the agenda that Morrison outlined. This is epitomised by Victoria. Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, who previously implemented the lockdowns Morrison bemoaned, now speaks in terms indistinguishable from the prime minister and other Liberal-National leaders. He insists on the need to “accept” death and illness for the foreseeable future in the interests of “economic recovery,” i.e., corporate profit.

The class character of this program is summed up by the full-resumption of in-person teaching, which has served as the spearhead for the broader lifting of most restrictions. According to the latest post from the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers’ group aligned with the SEP, fighting the reopening policies, since term four began on October 4, 514 Victorian schools have been hit by COVID infections. That included 20 new schools added to the list yesterday alone.

The CFPE is compiling the information from a patchwork official data, press reports and first-hand accounts from teachers and parents. Outside of its work, the extent of the spread among educators would be buried by the Labor government, the teacher unions and the corporate media. The suppression of information is motivated by fear over widespread hostility among educators, parents and students, and because the extent of the spread in educational institutions cuts across all of the lies used to justify the broader reopening drive.

In the space of only a handful of weeks since mass in-person teaching was resumed, education accounts for the largest number of clustered infections by industry, with well over three times more than the next worst affected sector, aged care. There are dozens of schools where more than one case has been reported.

In a bid to “normalise” the virus, the Victorian government is dispensing with the previous practice of closing a school when infections are detected. Instead, infected students will be sent home, as will those identified as the “close contacts.” But the isolation period for those contacts is to be reduced from fourteen to just

seven days. On their sixth day after exposure, they will take a rapid antigen test, and will be permitted to return to school if it is negative. Antigen tests are less reliable than PCR examinations, and the timing is far less than the potential two-week incubation period of infection.

The same policy is to be rolled out by the Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW), where the CFPE has tallied almost 300 school closures this term. Year 12 students in NSW began sitting their final Higher School Certificate exams this week, after widespread calls for the tests to be cancelled or postponed were ignored.

As is the case internationally, the government policies which are premised on continued mass infections are creating an unprecedented health crisis. In the first study of Long COVID in Australia, researchers at Monash University found that 70 percent of 200 critically-ill patients still had symptoms six months after they left hospital. This included almost 35 percent reporting shortness of breath, 22 percent loss of strength and 19 percent fatigue. Studies internationally have shown that as many as ten to fifteen percent of children who are infected will suffer from Long COVID.

The immediate hospital crisis, moreover, is far from over. Data released by the Victorian government last week showed that in this year’s September quarter, there were 80,000 more emergency department presentations in the state than over the same period in 2020. The breakdown has not been released. In addition to COVID patients, the pandemic has created a massive backlog of “elective” surgeries, and has stymied the treatment of other conditions because of the chronically-underfunded and crisis-ridden state of the hospital system.

Last week, it was revealed by the *Age* that dozens of seriously-ill Victorian patients were not included in the official figures of current COVID hospitalisations. Patients are removed from the tally, even if they remain critically ill, once they are deemed to no longer be infectious. The number of this cohort stands at over 200. The misleading figures inevitably raise questions about other official data, including on infections.



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