

Australian governments respond to Omicron with homicidal “herd immunity” policies

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Yesterday’s meeting of Australia’s “National Cabinet”—representing all the state, territory and federal governments—unanimously agreed to do nothing to stop the Omicron variant from spreading, despite epidemiologists warning that the new strain of the COVID-19 virus is potentially the most infectious and dangerous yet.

The government leaders, the majority from the Labor Party, pledged to continue with a breakneck “reopening” of the economy, as mass Delta infections are recorded every day and more cases of the new variant are detected. They openly based this upon the demands of the corporate elite for a resumption of full profit-making, especially over the lucrative holiday season.

Since Omicron was first detected last week, the Australian ruling elite has not just emulated the criminally-negligent policies of its counterparts internationally. It has staked out one of the most aggressive “herd immunity” positions. Government ministers, senior officials and sections of the corporate media have proclaimed their desire for the new variant to spread.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government’s Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly set the tone. In media conferences and interviews, he declared his hope that Omicron is more transmissible, but less severe. If this were the case, and there were mass infections, that would be his “number one Christmas present.”

Nick Coatsworth, the former deputy chief medical officer, similarly proclaimed: “If this is milder than Delta, you actually want it to spread within your community.”

Senior politicians, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Health Minister Greg Hunt, likewise touted sketchy and unconfirmed suggestions that Omicron may be less lethal.

The line of the corporate press was summed up by yesterday’s front page of the Murdoch-owned *Courier Mail*. It had three headlines on the same theme:

“FRIENDLY MUTANT,” “XMAS HOPE ‘Milder Omicron variant may replace deadly Delta,’ and “IS OMICRON A GODSEND?”

A *Sydney Morning Herald* article on Monday asked: “Could the emergence of Omicron, possibly a more infectious, less virulent variant of coronavirus, be a good thing for public health?”

Proponents of this line are using conditionals—might, could, would—because their assertions are based on precisely nothing. There is no scientific evidence whatsoever that Omicron is less deadly than other variants.

Kelly admitted at a press conference on Monday that the government did not have “any further information” on the transmissibility or lethality of the virus, or how it may interact with vaccines. He said that the “information from South Africa is mixed,” conceding there were “more hospitalisations.”

According to noted US epidemiologist Dr Eric Feigl-Ding, COVID hospital admissions in Gauteng Province, South Africa’s Omicron epicentre, have increased five-fold over the past fortnight.

Experts have warned of the potential implications of Omicron for vaccination, because of its 50 mutations, including 32 on the spike protein that is used to bind to human cells. Kelly has repeatedly dodged that issue, stating that without positive proof that the variant is vaccine-resistant, it can be assumed “that the vaccines work.”

All this is an assault on the precautionary principle that is supposed to govern public health, according to which governments should not expose the population to a hazard when they do not know its potential outcome.

That essential principle is being discarded. Prior to the national cabinet meeting, Morrison declared: “We’re not going back to lockdowns, none of us want that. None of us want to go back to those long quarantines and all of

those sorts of issues.”

Morrison said the meeting would ensure that all the states and territories were “on the same page.” And the leaders were. They all agreed to keep state borders open, no matter what. They would proceed with the lifting of the few restrictions that remain in place, including in Victoria and New South Wales where there is mass Delta transmission, and prioritise the “economy” i.e., big business interests.

The federal government belatedly closed the border to southern Africa on Saturday, well after several other countries had taken that step. NSW and Victoria, which are the centres of the resumption of international travel, are allowing arrivals to go straight to their homes or hotels, with only a 72-hour “self-isolation” requirement, well under the potential 14-day incubation period. A mass return of international students, who are treated as cash cows by the governments and universities, and migrant workers, frequently subjected to super-exploitation, has been postponed only by a fortnight, to December 15.

Caps on attendance at venues, gatherings and almost all other restrictions are set to be lifted in NSW on that date. Victoria also has resumed mass events and wound back even most mask mandates. Both states have reopened the schools, hundreds of which have been hit by the virus.

A statement after the meeting declared: “National Cabinet noted that on the basis of advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer, there was no immediate need to change current settings.” It concluded that the “objective is to limit the rate of Omicron incursions into Australia, rather than eliminate it at the border.” In other words, the governments decided to allow the variant into the community.

According to media reports, the cabinet took a report on the number of domestic and international flights already booked, with the clear implication being that these money-making opportunities must proceed. Last month, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce personally announced the international border reopening policy, with Morrison and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet standing behind him.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews is playing a key political role. He was previously identified with lockdown measures instituted at times by his government under pressure from the working class and for fear that the underfunded health system would collapse. Now he is at the forefront of the reopening drive. Last month, he ended a limited lockdown, amid more than a thousand infections a day, and has since rapidly overturned minimal safety measures.

Yesterday Andrews held a private meeting with Joyce, after which he declared there would be no increased isolation requirements for arrivals. “We know and understand what the consequences of that would be. It would be very, very significant,” Andrews said.

Already there are six confirmed Omicron cases in Australia. One is an international traveller at the only purpose-built quarantine centre in the country, Howard Springs in the Northern Territory. There are five confirmed cases in NSW. They and other passengers are in apartment blocks and private hotels billed as “Special Medical Accommodation.”

An unknown number of people travelled from southern Africa to NSW in the weeks before the border closure. The authorities today said they were “rechecking” test results from this cohort and had so far processed 300.

Yesterday, it was revealed that the fifth NSW case had been infectious in the community, travelling in Sydney and to the state’s Central Coast, resulting in a host of potential exposure sites. Today, another probable case was identified, with the infected person also having been in the community.

In other words, the Omicron variant is likely already circulating. The exposures thus far are greater than those associated with two Sydney infections of the Delta variant in mid-June. Those cases have spiralled into the worst outbreak the country has seen, with well over 100,000 infections and more than 1,000 deaths.

Delta’s spread was a product of the inadequate safety measures implemented by the governments and their determination to begin the “reopening.” Now, with Omicron’s arrival, they are declaring that even the limited mitigation measures taken in response to Delta are off the table.



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