

Australian authorities revoke entry permit for anti-vaccine tennis player Novak Djokovic after public backlash

Oscar Grenfell
7 January 2022

Within the space of less than 48 hours, Australian authorities backtracked on an exemption for Novak Djokovic which would have permitted the top tennis player to enter the country and compete in this month's Australian Open tournament without providing proof of vaccination against COVID-19.

The incident, which has attracted global media attention, has highlighted the eagerness of governments to dispense with even the most minimal of public health measures when they threaten lucrative business interests. The massive public backlash to the exemption has demonstrated the widespread opposition of ordinary people to this subordination of health and safety to corporate profits, as well as mounting anger over social inequality.

Djokovic sparked the controversy on Tuesday night, Australian time, with a post on Instagram declaring that he was soon to depart for Australia, having received an unspecified "exemption permission."

On social media, many noted their surprise that the world's number one tennis player had been able to win twenty Grand Slams and dozens of other tournaments if he was afflicted with one of the handful of serious medical conditions allowing international travellers to enter Australia without having been vaccinated.

The listed grounds for such exemptions include "medically significant illness, potentially life-threatening events and/or persistent or significant disability." Djokovic had not publicly reported a recent "acute major medical condition" requiring significant surgery, another of the grounds.

It appeared unlikely that he had experienced a "serious adverse event attributed to a previous dose of a COVID-19 vaccine," given his statements against inoculation, and there was no indication that he fit the category of those who pose "a risk to themselves or others during the vaccination process" such that "they may warrant a temporary vaccine exemption."

Despite the mystery, the Australian political and sporting establishment insisted that the exemption was kosher.

Tennis Australia declared that the decision had been the subject of not one, but two "independent medical panels." The state Labor government in Victoria, where the Australian Open

is held, immediately backed up these assertions. It had worked closely with the sporting body to establish an "independent and rigorous process to assess requests for medical exemptions at the Australian Open," a statement on Tuesday night explained.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave his stamp of approval. Asked by reporters about the exemption, he stated: "Well, that is a matter for the Victorian government. They have provided him with an exemption to come to Australia, and so we then act in accordance with that decision."

The statements only intensified a backlash, with Djokovic's name trending on Twitter across multiple hashtags, including "DjokovicOut," "NovaxDjokovic," and several others.

Seeking an explanation for the exemption, commenters noted caustically that while he was likely one of the fittest men on the planet, the tennis player had a lengthy history of anti-vaccine statements.

In April 2020, half a year before COVID-19 vaccines were available, Djokovic said he was "opposed to vaccination." He later told fans that he "wouldn't want to be forced by someone to take a vaccine" even if it were required for travel and competition. Djokovic mused that he was instead "curious about wellbeing and how we can empower our metabolism to be in the best shape to defend against imposters like Covid-19."

Many noted the tennis player's track record in the pandemic. In June 2020, as the first wave was sweeping the world, Djokovic helped organise an exhibition tournament without social distancing or other basic safety measures. He, along with other participants and attendees, contracted the virus, with the event contributing to the spread of COVID in the Balkans. Footage of Djokovic dancing shirtless with other players at a party associated with the tournament went viral at the time.

Social media posts condemned the exemption as an attack on ordinary people committed to overcoming the pandemic. A typical Twitter post stated: "It is appalling that Djokovic is being permitted to enter Australia without being vaccinated. It is an insult to all those people who have been making tremendous sacrifices to conquer this pandemic."

Another declared: "It's a shame. It's a slap on the face of every doctor and people who fight this pandemic all around the

world. History may remember you as a great tennis player but will also never forget this.”

Many linked their opposition to the exemption to anger over the official response to an Omicron surge sweeping the country. Australia has recorded more infections in the past six days than in the previous two years, as the federal government and all of its state counterparts, including in Victoria, openly adopt the “herd immunity” program of letting the virus rip.

One commenter succinctly summed up the situation, writing: “We have nurses with #covid working in NSW hospitals because they’re so short-staffed as the virus sweeps through Aus. We can’t visit loved ones in aged care. We can’t access RAT [tests] but Djokovic sure will. The hypocrisy.”

Others noted the obvious class issues. Thousands of Australian citizens, including the fully vaccinated, remain stranded abroad. Unable to return home, they have been completely abandoned by the federal government. A satirical post, shared thousands of times, stated: “A rigorous process involving two separate independent panels has determined that Novak Djokovic is incredibly f***** rich.”

It was amid this outpouring of fury that things started to go wrong. Djokovic arrived at Melbourne Airport late on Wednesday night, with the federal government’s Border Force division suddenly discovering that there were problems with his exemption.

Prime Minister Morrison took to Twitter to announce that Djokovic’s visa was cancelled on Thursday morning.

Less than 24 hours after insisting that the exemption was above board, Morrison launched a nauseating volley against the tennis player, declaring “Rules are rules, especially when it comes to our borders. No one is above these rules.” This from a widely despised government that has handed hundreds of billions to the corporations during the pandemic, ensured the further immiseration of working people and is now presiding over the massive, uncontrolled spread of the virus.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* has since reported that Djokovic sought the exemption because he had a confirmed COVID-19 infection within the past six months. The tennis player is confined to a government hotel, with a federal court appeal against his deportation scheduled to be heard on Monday.

The government leaders who days ago boasted of the “rigorous process” involving the exemption now claim that it was nothing to do with them. Oddities abound. The Victorian government was instructed in November that prior infection was not a valid exemption ground for international entry. The federal government claims the Victorian government oversaw the exemption, but the international borders are a federal responsibility.

The inescapable impression is that all of the governments approved of the exemption and thought they could get around their own rules, until Djokovic’s unfortunately timed Instagram post alerted the public to what was afoot and provoked mass

hostility.

That sentiment reflects broader opposition to the homicidal “herd immunity” policies, the crashing of the hospital systems and the dangers to which workers and young people are being subjected.

The focus on Djokovic, however, should not obscure more fundamental issues. Chief among them is that the Australian Open should not be proceeding, whether he is there or not. It is a guaranteed super-spreader event, in a state where most people cannot get a timely COVID test and experts warn that, at the current pace, the hospital system will likely collapse by the end of the month.

The tournament is going ahead, despite this, as a focal point of the broader “live with the virus” program and because enormous interests are at stake. The Australian Open website claims that last year’s tournament generated economic activity equivalent to \$387.7 million.

The COVID-19 vaccines, moreover, are a crucial scientific advance in the fight against the coronavirus, and the widespread support for them underscores the commitment of working people to public health. But as epidemiologists have explained and the current surge demonstrates, vaccination alone is not sufficient to end the mass illness and death.

What is required is a global fight for the elimination of the virus. This must include lockdown measures such as the closure of non-essential workplaces and schools, an end to super-spreading events and a massive expansion of the public healthcare system. The experiences in China, as well as previously in New Zealand and a number of Australian jurisdictions, demonstrates that such policies can end transmission.

But this requires a political struggle against the capitalist governments that have adopted a program of mass illness and death to ensure corporate profits. It poses the need for new organisations of struggle, including independent workers’ rank-and-file committees, and a socialist perspective that prioritises health and lives, not the interests of a tiny financial oligarchy.



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