

Novak Djokovic deported by Australian government terrified of public opposition to its “let it rip” COVID policies

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Tennis star Novak Djokovic was deported from the country yesterday, ending a two-week saga over the status of his visa and his prospects of competing in the Australian Open tournament which begins today.

The federal Liberal-National government, which issued the deportation notice using the sweeping discretionary powers of the immigration minister, has trotted out its hardline “border protection” rhetoric.

“Rules are rules” government ministers have declared, and supposedly no one is above them. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has unleashed a COVID tsunami over the past month, has absurdly claimed that the decision was motivated by the need to “keep Australia safe.”

As is widely-recognised, all of this is nonsense. The government is engaged in transparent cover-up and misdirection. It is seeking to divert the concluding stages of the Djokovic affair, which was of its own making, into the reactionary channels of nationalism and a celebration of the authoritarian powers of the immigration minister.

The truth is, had Morrison and the government had their way, Djokovic would have been headlining the Australian Open, ensuring that the super-spreading event was as lucrative as possible. The government gave him a visa in November, knowing full well that he was an opponent of vaccination, and would fall foul of the strict ban on unvaccinated travellers entering the country.

The Victorian state Labor government and Tennis Australia then discovered the hitherto unknown need for two “independent review panels” to provide players with vaccine exemptions. These mysterious bodies, cobbled together overnight and with obscure legal standing, seemingly assumed powers normally limited to the federal government, without any opposition from Morrison, and included “prior infection” as grounds for exemption, despite it contradicting existing guidelines.

In the last of a string of rapid-fire coincidences, Djokovic caught COVID just after the independent panel’s deadline of review, but he was apparently provided with an exemption from that as well. The strange series of events, now presented

as “bumbles” and “misunderstandings,” could not have come together better if they were the result of an elaborate plot.

As the WSWs has repeatedly explained, all was going well, until Djokovic broadcast on Instagram that he had received the “exemption” and was departing for Australian shores. This touched off a groundswell of opposition, not only because of the special treatment of an ultra-wealthy celebrity, but because it was rightly seen as yet another flagrant example of the subordination of public health to corporate interests, amid a massive surge of the pandemic.

Then began the two-week circus that concluded last night. It is not necessary to review all the ins and outs again. Suffice it to say that within the space of 14 days, the federal government alternated between ridiculous declarations that “no one is above the rules,” shaking its fist at Djokovic, dodging the issue and treating the tennis player with kid gloves.

Late last week, it appeared that Djokovic would probably be able to remain in the country and play in the Open. Again, popular opposition got in the way. Revelations about the tennis player’s alleged conduct, especially his admission of knowingly exposing people to the virus in December, inflamed the sentiment.

It should be noted that this was not nationalistic hostility to a “foreign” tennis player. Certainly, there was no love lost on Djokovic, because of his actions and undeniable arrogance, but overwhelmingly, the sentiment was directed against the federal government.

The humane and sensitive comments of Spanish tennis player, Rafael Nadal, who noted the extraordinary hardships of ordinary people over the past two years, and the importance of vaccination, won as much popular support as Djokovic’s dangerous, anti-science record received condemnation. Polls, for what they are worth, showed 74 percent of the population was opposed to him playing in the Open.

For days, the federal government was paralysed. It became clear that the issue was not going away and threatened to deepen a political crisis of the government. The Labor Party, itself implicated in the affair through the involvement of its Victorian state government, found its voice a week-and-a-half

after the population, questioning why Djokovic had been granted a visa in the first place. Labor's objections were couched in the most right-wing terms. Australia would be viewed as a "banana republic" on the world stage if its laws could be dictated by a tennis player.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke then announced Friday night that he was cancelling Djokovic's visa, setting the stage for the last in a series of increasingly absurd spectacles.

With the Open beginning in a few days, justice put its speed skates, or maybe its tennis shoes, on. A full-bench hearing of the Federal Court was arranged for Sunday to adjudicate an appeal by Djokovic to his deportation.

As a Tweet from an astonished Brian Briggs of the Slater Gordon law firm declared: "Never in my 35 years in the law have I seen a Federal Court Appeal proceed so quickly and before a Full Bench and [on] a Sunday. Some serious strings have been pulled by someone for this to occur. Normally the wheels of justice turn slowly."

Hawke limited his reasoning on the visa cancellation to the narrowest grounds possible. The continued presence of Djokovic, an opponent of vaccination, could inflame the anti-vaccine movement, and contribute to "civil unrest."

Even here, the government could have been on a shaky footing. While it has fraudulently presented vaccination as a silver bullet, justifying the dangerous lifting of other safety measures, government ministers have flirted with the anti-vaccine movement to cultivate a right-wing base opposed to all pandemic restrictions.

The narrow grounds set the stage for bizarre arguments between lawyers for the government and Djokovic. They debated whether Djokovic remaining in the country or being thrown out was more likely to agitate the tiny and disoriented anti-vaccine movement. They also argued with one another over whether Djokovic, who has repeatedly denounced vaccination, really had anti-vaccine views.

The government evaded the obvious grounds for cancelling Djokovic's visa: his clear violations of public health and safety. After all, the tennis player had just days before admitted to deliberately exposing people to a deadly virus, without their knowledge, during a pandemic.

But the last thing the government wants is public discussion on who is responsible for the spread of COVID. Had they pursued this line of argument, Djokovic's lawyers could have noted that the tennis player may have exposed a few people to the virus, but the Morrison government, with the full support of Labor, has exposed millions as part of its homicidal and profit-driven "reopening" of the economy.

Even the fact that Djokovic may have been infected when he met with large groups of children could not be touched upon. The government is preparing the mass reopening of the schools at the end of this month and early next, solely so that parents can be kept in their unsafe workplaces. Djokovic may be a mini-spreader and a minor public health menace. Morrison and his

cronies are super-spreaders threatening the health and lives of masses of people.

The immigration minister's discretionary powers are almost unchallengeable. The sole grounds are if there have been procedural errors or the decision, as one legal expert explained, is "so unreasonable that no reasonable decision-maker could have made it." The Federal Court ruled that this was not the case, upholding Hawke's order.

One final point should be made on the grounds invoked by Hawke. Cancelling visas because of the political views of an individual and the assertion that they could contribute to "civil unrest" sets a very dangerous precedent. It is entirely conceivable that this could be wielded against socialist opponents of the criminal "let it rip" pandemic policies, and other left-wing opponents of the government.

Hawke's judgement has largely been hailed in the financial press, with an *Australian* editorial today declaring that it was an example of the government making "hard calls to defend the integrity of national borders."

The last word on that matter should go to Behrouz Boochani, the courageous Kurdish-Iranian refugee and author, who was caged by the Australian government for years before finding asylum in New Zealand. He wrote: "People's response to Djokovic's visa cancellation: 'No one is above the law' forgetting already that there is an individual who is above the law: the immigration minister. A dictator who's been playing with our lives."

Meanwhile, Morrison has informed the population that "It's now time to get on with the Australian Open and get back to enjoying tennis over the summer."

The gambling companies, just one of the corporate sectors set to make a fortune over the next fortnight, have had to furiously adjust their odds with the top seed's departure. Needless to say, they will not be taking bets on how many tennis players, coaches and workers are infected with the deadly virus at the tournament. Nor will the government or Tennis Australia be interested in an examination of how the event contributes to the massive surge of the pandemic.



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