

New Zealand government to re-open borders amid escalating Omicron outbreak

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After nearly two years of strict curbs on international travel in response to the coronavirus pandemic, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced last week that a phased reopening of borders will begin later this month.

Until last October, the Labour-Green Party government had a “zero-COVID” policy for much of the pandemic, meaning that, except for a brief “travel bubble” with Australia, most foreign travellers were banned from entering the country.

Thousands of citizens and visa holders desperate to return were forced to make emergency pleas to the government or join a lottery system in an attempt to secure a spot in limited Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) facilities at dedicated hotels.

The decision to re-open the border is in line with the government’s pro-business agenda, like those internationally, to “open up” the economy, forcing the population to “live with” the virus.

Ardern told her audience, assembled by the BusinessNZ lobby group: “With our community better protected we must turn to the importance of reconnection. Families and friends need to reunite. Our businesses need skills to grow. Exporters need to travel to make new connections. It’s time to move again.”

Far from being “better protected,” the country is experiencing an escalating Omicron outbreak, first detected in the community on January 23. The day of Ardern’s border announcement, the Ministry of Health reported 174 new cases. On Saturday there were 243, the highest number of daily cases since the pandemic began. Modelling expert Michael Plank noted that numbers had quadrupled within a week “and that’s pretty fast growth if that continues.”

However, the government has declared that it does not intend to eliminate Omicron, but to “slow the spread.” The country is operating under the “red” setting of the

three-tier “traffic light” system for managing COVID, which provides for minimal measures of mask wearing, social distancing and the use of vaccine certificates, but no lockdowns.

From 27 February, fully vaccinated New Zealanders will be allowed to return from Australia and self-isolate at home for 10 days, avoiding an MIQ facility. They will also be instructed to take two rapid antigen COVID tests.

A fortnight later, New Zealand citizens will be allowed to return from elsewhere in the world under the same conditions, as will their families. In response to growing pressure from employers over labour shortages, designated “skilled workers” will be able to enter while a working holiday scheme will resume in time for the horticulture harvest.

From April, non-citizens with visas and up to 5,000 fee-paying international students can enter and bypass quarantine. Tourists from the UK, US, Australia and other visa-free countries will be allowed to enter in July. Tourists from the rest of the world will be allowed to enter from October.

The system, based essentially on individual “self-responsibility,” is fraught with risks. The MIQ facilities, which have been directly responsible for keeping an estimated 2,000 cases out of the country, will only be used for non-vaccinated travellers. The self-isolation period will align with current settings for managing close contacts of cases. The government has indicated that as the outbreak expands, the isolation period will drop from 10 to 7 days.

Scientific experts gave guarded responses to the plans. Epidemiologist Michael Baker said the “big question” is around self-isolation, with its greatly reduced testing requirements, which requires “a high trust model.” Dr Emily Harvey told the Science Media Centre she was worried about the proposed self-testing regime. “Unfortunately the proposed testing regime (rapid antigen

tests on day 0/1 and day 5/6) is underpowered and is likely to miss a large number of infections,” she warned.

In fact, the border re-openings have not been determined by public health considerations but under pressure from within New Zealand and internationally to do away with any remaining restrictions on business and travel operations, to “reconnect to the world” and return life to “normal.” Demands to disestablish the MIQ system have been growing louder for months.

The clamour boiled over last month with the case of Charlotte Bellis—a five-month pregnant New Zealand journalist who had to approach the Taliban to stay in Afghanistan after her application for an emergency place in MIQ was rejected by authorities. The case received adverse publicity in the international media, generally implying the Taliban was being more “humane” than the New Zealand government.

Bellis, a former Al Jazeera journalist, wrote an open letter to the *New Zealand Herald* on January 29 drawing attention to her plight. Bellis’ case, based on her need for proper medical care, was completely legitimate. She was forced to leave Qatar, where she was usually based, because it is illegal to be pregnant and unmarried there. She and her partner, Jim Huylebroek, first moved to his native Belgium, but she was unable to stay there as she was not a resident.

Bellis’ claim was rejected by Immigration New Zealand because it was deemed to be outside the required time limits. In a bureaucratic run-around she was then told, including in a calculated public statement by COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins, to re-apply under different criteria.

Bellis made it clear that she was not opposed to the border control system as such, but wanted to use her profile to “try to move the dial towards a more empathetic response.” Only 29 emergency applications involving pregnancies were successful since last June, a 13 percent success rate. Another 30 cases involving pregnancies are currently pending. A lawyer representing these women says rejections are usually only overturned “once legal and/or media pressure” is applied.

Unsurprisingly, Bellis was suddenly offered a place in MIQ and a flight booking home by the government last week, as it sought to bury the controversy. Meanwhile, she had become the centre of a tug-of-war over the border quarantine system.

Defenders of the Ardern government moved swiftly to try to discredit Bellis. Former Labour MP Darien Fenton tweeted: “There is something deeply questionable about

this story. I don’t accept Afghanistan is the only place she could go.” *Daily Blog* editor Martyn Bradbury piled on, describing Bellis as a “grandstanding Karen,” and occasional *Guardian* contributor Morgan Godfrey tweeted that she was a “propaganda agent.”

The case was inevitably seized on by sections of the media and political establishment that had been demanding the borders be reopened and the MIQ system dismantled, regardless of the dangers. Far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour declared that MIQ “doesn’t work, ties up valuable resources, and is unimaginably cruel.” The National Party, which had been running an “end MIQ” petition prior to Christmas, differed only on the timing declaring, in the light of Omicron, that the government should announce “a clear plan to end the misery of MIQ.”

Media commentators fell into line. Radio NZ’s Jane Patterson described MIQ as a “festering political boil.” *Stuff* political editor Luke Malpass declared border controls had imposed a “severe limitation on personal liberties,” while simultaneously “crimping the economy.” The “elimination tune,” he cynically declared, has “had its swan song and the band won’t be getting back together.”

In fact, with tens of thousands of students being herded back into schools, workers into unsafe workplaces and the borders being reopened, a calamity is looming. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has projected cases peaking at 80,000 a day, with more than 400 dead by the middle of the year.

There is, meanwhile, growing anxiety and opposition among working people to the pro-business response to the pandemic. As the Socialist Equality Group (NZ) noted in its recent Open Letter, “Join the fight to stop the pandemic and save lives in 2022!” these emerging sentiments must be transformed into a political movement of the working class to eliminate COVID-19, directed against the government and the entire capitalist political establishment.



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