

# Australia's state and federal governments lifting handful of remaining COVID restrictions

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As a two-month long Omicron surge continues to result in tens of thousands of infections a day and hundreds of deaths a week, Australia's governments, state, territory and federal, are lifting the handful of remaining COVID restrictions. The profit-driven program guarantees a further spread of the virus and the continuation of the pandemic crisis into the indefinite future.

Last week, the "National Cabinet" agreed to transition to the final stage of the "reopening" plan it adopted last July–August. The extra-constitutional body, composed of all Australia's governments, most of them Labor led, has thereby decreed that COVID "management" will be "consistent with influenza, or other infectious diseases."

In effect, the governments are declaring the pandemic over, as cases and fatalities remain higher than at any time during the previous two years. This is consistent with the global drive of the ruling elites to assert that COVID is "endemic," a misuse of that scientific term which in practice means that the population must live with a perpetual pandemic so that full corporate operations can resume.

As with the previous stages of the "reopening," the current campaign is being spearheaded by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his federal Liberal-National Coalition government, together with New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet and his Victorian Labor counterpart Daniel Andrews. All of the other state and territory administrations are on board with the agenda, including the Labor government in Western Australia, which retained COVID suppression measures longer than most, preventing an Omicron explosion there to date.

The international borders are fully reopening this Monday, February 21. Arrivals must have had two doses of a vaccine, but not a third booster shot, which is essential to providing some protection against Omicron. In all states but Western Australia, there is no requirement to isolate or quarantine.

This move, dictated in the first instance by the airlines and the major tourism companies, guarantees that any variants

circulating internationally as a result of the massive transmission of the past two months will be present in Australia. When they are welcomed in, the mutations will find fertile ground for further spread.

From today, all density restrictions in NSW, the most-populous state, have been scrapped. Singing and dancing are permitted in hospitality venues. QR check-in codes to register attendance at public venues will no longer be required, except for nightclubs and music festivals. The codes were already a cosmetic dead-letter because the state health authorities stopped using them for contact-tracing months ago.

Official directions for employees to work from home where possible have also been abolished. The decision will now be at the "employer's discretion." The previous policy was also tokenistic given that broad sections of the working-class, including in patently non-essential industries, have been kept on the job throughout the surge. This includes all retail and most hospitality.

Large numbers of office workers, however, have worked remotely. Business chiefs have declared in the financial press that March must be the month for a forced return to the offices, aimed at heightening workplace discipline, amid plans for stepped-up pro-business restructuring, and increasing economic activity to boost profits.

From February 25, in NSW masks will no longer be mandatory indoors, except on public transport and in hospitals. The 20,000 cap on music festivals will be lifted.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews responded to the changes by declaring that his state's "settings" would be "as close as they can be" to the policies in NSW. In an earlier stage of the pandemic, Andrews postured as a defender of public health and an opponent of unfettered "let it rip" measures. He has since become the most ardent exponent of the "live with the virus" line and collaborates closely with Perrottet, an extreme right-wing advocate of "herd immunity."

Victoria is similarly lifting all density restrictions, most QR-code requirements and the ban on dance floors in hospitality venues from today. Andrews has prevaricated on the question of the indoor mask-mandate, but both states are going in the same direction. So are all the other state and territory administrations, though some at a slightly slower pace.

The new measures are identical to those that were rolled out in December last year. Perrottet held a “freedom day” on December 15, while his government actively encouraged mass attendance at super-spreading events such as nightclubs and holiday gatherings. He did this, having been secretly warned by health authorities that it would likely result in a major Omicron surge. Andrews did the same, while the state and territories without COVID transmission opened their borders. At that point, in mid-December, daily national infections were around 2,000.

Within weeks there were more than 100,000 infections each day, hospital admissions in every state and territory exceeded the heights of a previous Delta wave by several times and more people lost their lives in the space of a month than in each of the previous two years of the pandemic.

Governments know that their policies will result in a further surge. NSW chief health officer Kerry Chant said there would be a spike in infections, even if a new variant did not enter the country. BA.2, a sub-variant of Omicron that is even more infectious, was detected in Australia at the beginning of the month, but it appears there is no official attempt to track its spread. The additional mutation has resulted in a surge on top of the initial Omicron surge in several countries, especially Denmark.

The reopening is based upon the misinformation of “endemic” COVID and claims that a “peak” has been long surpassed in the previous outbreak.

But each day, between 20,000 and 30,000 confirmed infections are being recorded across the country. In Victoria, there are around 7,000 daily cases, in NSW 10,000. In the first two years of the pandemic, daily cases numbers of more than 1,000 were rarely recorded.

The official numbers, moreover, are completely unreliable. When they created the conditions for the Omicron surge, governments deliberately crashed the Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system, to justify a shift to less reliable rapid antigen tests (RATs). There are now fewer than 100,000 PCR tests being conducted each day in the country, with a population of more than 25 million. Positive test rates are well over ten percent.

There were 1,519 COVID deaths reported in January, compared with 1,344 in all of 2021 and 909 in 2020. In the first seventeen days of February, 1,040 fatalities have been

reported. The virus is continuing to tear through aged care facilities, while a significant proportion of daily deaths are among the double-vaccinated, signalling the reduced efficacy of vaccines against Omicron and refuting official claims that inoculation alone could end serious illness and death.

But the deaths are scarcely noted in the media or by the politicians responsible.

What is being prepared is indicated by the situation in the schools, which resumed in-person teaching at the beginning of the month. In the first two weeks of term, more than 20,000 students contracted the virus in NSW. The patchwork figures that have been released indicate that the rate is the same in Victoria. Many cases are no doubt being missed due to a RATs testing regime primarily aimed at providing a false veneer of safety.

This agenda, enforced by the teacher unions, is encountering growing opposition. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) was informed that Verney Road School in Shepparton, Victoria began remote learning on Wednesday after mass infections accounting for at least 20 percent of students and staff. The shutdown appears to have been the result of demands from the school, in defiance of the state Labor government’s insistence that schools remain open even during mass outbreaks.

On Tuesday, NSW nurses held their first statewide strike since 2013, demanding safe patient-staff ratios, pay improvements and urgent measures to address the meltdown of the hospitals amid the COVID crisis.

In every instance, Labor and the unions, which have played the key role in enforcing the “live with the virus” program, are seeking to isolate workers and suppress their struggles. What is required is an independent political movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment, and its subordination of health and lives to profit. This struggle must be based on a perspective of fighting for the elimination of the virus. It raises the need for a socialist perspective that rejects the dominance of corporate profit over every aspect of society.



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