Australian governments ending all “close contact” rules as COVID infections increase

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As COVID infections increase sharply, Australia’s state and federal governments are again responding by ending the token restrictions that remain.

Amid warnings that the BA.2 variant of Omicron will fuel a surge that could eclipse the COVID tsunami of December-January, the entire preoccupation of the political establishment is to continue the profit-driven “live with the virus” program, whatever the consequences in illness and death.

Having dispensed with almost all safety measures as Omicron entered the country in December, Australia’s governments are now ending any semblance of a coordinated, society-wide public health response to the pandemic. Their policies are the same as those of Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Britain and President Joe Biden in the US.

On Friday, the Labor Party-majority national cabinet held its latest meeting on COVID. The extra-constitutional body, composed of Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s Liberal-National government and the state and territory administrations, has dictated coronavirus policies by decree for most of the past two years.

Friday’s document declared as a priority “transition[ing] to no longer requiring quarantining of all close contacts as soon as possible.” During the height of the last Omicron wave, which has still not ended, governments neutered close contact rules, essentially excluding all workplace transmission.

Only individuals who lived with someone who had tested COVID-positive were deemed close contacts and required to isolate, in most jurisdictions for just seven days. Now, even they will be compelled to attend work and study, despite being likely to have the virus, given the transmissibility of Omicron BA.2.

The national cabinet requested “urgent advice” from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee on the proposal. This body has functioned as a hand-raising committee for government decisions. The only purpose of the “advice” will be to provide the policy with a veneer of medical authority.

The ending of close contact rules is the focal point of a push to keep COVID-positive workers on the job. The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system was allowed to crash during the last surge, to justify shifting to less reliable and self-administered rapid antigen tests.

National cabinet has now decided to “transition to not routinely undertaking PCR testing in otherwise healthy people with mild respiratory illness and promote voluntary self-isolation while symptomatic for this group.” In other words, people who almost certainly have the virus will not be able to get a reliable test and will be permitted to forgo any isolation.

The imperatives driving these policies were spelt out very bluntly. It was necessary to “reinforce business and individual responsibility for prevention, preparedness and response efforts.” As with the country’s ongoing flooding crisis, individuals are on their own and governments are responsible for nothing.

National cabinet said the priority was to “ensure health, economic and social measures are in place to address the impacts of a possible new COVID-19 wave, including workforce shortages, supply chain issues, and pressures on specific sectors and individuals.”

That is, the governments acknowledged that a new surge is likely already developing, which their policies will help fuel. The only issue is to make sure major businesses are not impacted by their workers having to isolate when they fall sick. In January, as many as half of all truck drivers were off at one time due to COVID. Treasury estimated total workforce shortages at 10 percent.

Morrison reinforced the message at a press conference on Saturday. After defending his government’s criminally negligent response to the floods, Morrison declared that

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the country was now "living with the virus like the flu." The likening of COVID to influenza, condemned by all principled epidemiologists as dangerous medical misinformation, is part of the official national cabinet program for the final "phase D" of the "reopening."

Morrison said "it makes a lot of sense" to "get rid of the close contact rule" because it was "starving businesses of staff."

The prime minister acknowledged that the mass reopening of face-to-face teaching in the schools had resulted in a greater spread of the virus. While the state and federal authorities are covering up the infection tolls, it is clear from reports to the Committee for Public Education that virtually every school in the country has probably been hit by infections.

Large clusters have emerged. At Castle Hill High School in northwestern Sydney, for instance, there are 650 confirmed active infections in a school population of roughly 2,000. In New South Wales (NSW), the twice-weekly provision of rapid tests to students was ended after the fourth week of term. The measure was largely cosmetic, but its termination means nobody knows how much COVID there is in the classrooms.

Mask requirements were also ended in the public schools, but a number of Sydney private schools are reintroducing a mandate due to rising infections.

Morrison's reference to the schools was not an expression of concern over children and teachers contracting a potentially deadly disease. Instead, he raised that kids were catching the virus at school and bringing it home to their parents, preventing them from going to work. The solution was to end close contact isolation!

The PM did not mention BA.2 by name but said, "We discussed the mutations of the existing variant with Omicron yesterday, but we're largely talking about the same virus. The difference with Omicron and Delta is like a completely different virus." The comment was made in response to a journalist who asked if there were any circumstances under which restrictions would be reintroduced. "Oh no, I can't see that," Morrison replied.

In reality, BA.1, the initial Omicron variant, has killed more people in Australia than any previous iteration of the virus. Some 3,351 deaths have been reported this year amid the Omicron spread, compared with 2,239 fatalities in the two years prior.

Medical experts, moreover, have stated that BA.2 is so different from BA.1 that it should be considered an entirely new variant. Initial studies have shown that BA.2 is both more transmissible and lethal than the initial Omicron strain. It is fuelling a massive surge in Hong Kong, that is claiming a greater number of lives, per capita, than any wave of the virus around the world.

Hardly any cases are genomically sequenced in Australia. According to the latest NSW Health surveillance report, however, BA.2 accounted for two-thirds of sequenced infections in the final fortnight of February.

University of NSW School of Population associate professor James Wood told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation he and other researchers forecast that BA.2 would account for 90 percent of infections in the state by the end of the month.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard predicted that cases could double in six weeks. But the NSW government rejected advice from the state health authorities for the reintroduction of indoor mask mandates and density limits on venues. All the other governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, hold the same position.

In Western Australia (WA), over 4,000 infections are being recorded nearly every day, after the state Labor government abandoned a suppression policy that had prevented an Omicron wave in December-January. At his Saturday press conference, Morrison congratulated WA Premier Mark McGowan on this "let it rip" program.

In five of the past seven days, daily national infections have exceeded 30,000, with more than 40,000 on one day. In NSW, cases are frequently above 13,000, after having been below 10,000 most days for several weeks. Given the dismantling of testing, the official numbers likely understate the true extent of transmission several times over.

Even as the politicians and corporate media present the pandemic as a thing of the past, it is entirely possible that current infections are comparable to those at the height of the Omicron wave, when more than 100,000 cases were being recorded each day. Now the governments are unleashing an even more deadly variant.

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