Australia's National Cabinet slashes COVID isolation time amid record deaths

Oscar Grenfell
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At a meeting yesterday, the National Cabinet agreed to reduce the mandated isolation time for COVID-positive individuals from seven to five days. The measure, which has no scientific justification whatsoever, is the latest stage in a protracted dismantling of any semblance of a coordinated public health response to the pandemic.

As a winter surge of the highly-infectious BA.5 variant continues, the measure will increase illness and death when they are already at record levels. Its clear intent is to force COVID-positive workers to remain on the job, so that they can continue to be exploited, whatever the consequences for their own health and that of their colleagues.

Notably, the National Cabinet met a little over two weeks after the revelation that former Prime Minister Scott Morrison had secretly assumed the health ministry and five other portfolios.

The National Cabinet was the other plank of the turn by the Australian ruling elite to extra-Constitutional forms of rule amid the pandemic. Both measures were aimed at blocking the health advice to enact the necessary restrictions to prevent COVID transmission, for fear of the impact they would have on profits, the stock market and business.

Established in March, 2020, the same time as Morrison's secret health appointment, the National Cabinet has ruled by decree and in secret throughout the pandemic. Always composed primarily of Labor state and territory leaders, the National Cabinet presided over the dismantling of limited safety measures and the open adoption of a "let it rip" program last December.

Yesterday's decision marks a deepening of this offensive. In announcing the measure, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet did not make any attempt to present the reduced isolation times as a health measure. Instead, it is dictated by the imperatives of big business, under conditions in which the mass transmission of COVID in Australia and internationally has resulted in acute labour shortages.

COVID would be "around for a considerable period of time," Albanese said. Now it was a question of individuals "looking after their own health, being responsible and making sure that they look after each other." This is the identical line to Morrison's insistence on "personal responsibility" when the disastrous "reopening" was carried out in December.

Perrottet told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation this morning: "I do believe we need to move away from public health orders and we need to move to a place where if you're sick you stay at home, and if you're not sick you go to work… Ultimately, the point we need to get to is a less reliance on public health orders and a greater reliance on people respecting each other.'

This is an attempt to preemptively blame working people for the inevitable outcome of the National Cabinet's own decision.

Concurrently with the reduced isolation time, the federal Labor government is slashing paid pandemic leave from the already meagre $750 currently provided, to just $540 on September 9. Labor has committed to abolishing the payment altogether at the end of the month.

That means workers will have no choice but to attend their places of employment, even if they are infected with the virus. Otherwise, under conditions of soaring inflation and a rampant casualisation of the workforce, leaving many with no sick leave entitlements at all, hundreds of thousands of workers would face the immediate prospect of homelessness and starvation.

At the same time, the National Cabinet removed any requirement for masks to be worn on domestic flights, one of the last such mandates. The twin measures are modelled directly on an announcement earlier this year by the US administration of President Joe Biden.

Like the American government, the Australian administrations are largely presenting the pandemic as a thing of the past. They are also justifying their lifting of the few remaining safety restrictions, on the basis of claims that the winter surge has "peaked."

In reality, the pandemic is inflicting a greater toll than ever before. Some 2,056 COVID deaths were reported in August, the most of any month in the pandemic to date in Australia. That compares with 82 deaths in the entirety of August, 2021.

According to the *Our World In Data* website, the seven-day rolling average of COVID fatalities skyrocketed from 42 on July 6, already a record for the country, to more than 97 on July 31. It remains at 54, higher than at any time in the first two years of the COVID crisis.

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There have been at least 5,880 coronavirus fatalities since the Labor government scraped into office in the May 21 federal election, continuing and deepening the "let it rip" agenda that it had previously backed in opposition. The deaths in the three months while Labor has been in government, are higher than the 5,838 fatalities in the four-and-a-half months of 2022 prior to the election.

The virus continues to sweep through the country's aged care facilities, which have been transformed into killing fields over the past two years. There are currently 466 separate outbreaks in the centres. This social devastation, afflicting society's most vulnerable, however, is scarcely ever mentioned by official politicians or in the media.

Those outbreaks are part of an avalanche of transmission. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey for July found that two in five Australians (42 percent) had a household member who had experienced cold, flu or COVID-19 symptoms in the previous four weeks.

Almost half (48 percent) reported a household member had a COVID-19 test in the past four weeks, down from 62 percent in April 2022. That reflects the dismantling of the testing system. When they adopted the "let it rip" program last December, governments deliberately crashed the more reliable Polymerase Chain Reaction system, and have since restricted access to it. Less accurate Rapid Antigen Tests are increasingly unavailable, unless an individual purchases and administers it themselves.

Despite the decrease in testing, however, the positivity rate among those who took a test increased from 23 percent in April to 27 percent in July. That indicates widespread undetected transmission that is not being reflected in the official case numbers.

When they lifted most safety measures in December, governments put forward lies about Omicron being "mild," which have been tragically refuted in the more than 11,000 deaths since. They were entirely silent, though, on the dangers of Long COVID, a set of debilitating and potentially lifetime health conditions that can result from even asymptomatic infection.

Estimates of the incidence of Long COVID vary. The proportion of infected individuals who become afflicted has been placed at anywhere from 5 to 40 percent. In any event, the more than nine million infections this year can only be described as a mass disabling event.

Last week, Labor Treasurer Jim Chalmers admitted that 31,000 people called in sick to work every day of June, because they were suffering the symptoms of Long COVID. According to News Corp, Long COVID has debilitated 12 percent of the national workforce.

In comments to the *Australian Financial Review*, University of South Australia epidemiologist Adrian Esterman estimated that 1.2 million Australians were suffering from Long COVID, out of almost 10 million officially-recorded infections. That would represent 4.8 percent of the entire national population.

Chalmers was not referencing the toll from the standpoint of reducing transmission to prevent further harm. Instead, he raised Long COVID from the standpoint of its impact on labour supply. The issue, he said, would be discussed at the tripartite summit of the Labor government, the major corporations and the trade unions, which began today and is mapping out the next stage in a pro-business onslaught against workers' conditions.

The reduction in the COVID isolation period is part of this broader offensive. Rather than preventing workers from becoming sick, the aim is to force sick workers to remain on the job.

Principled epidemiologists have issued sharp warnings. Professor Nancy Baxter, the Head of Melbourne School of Population & Global Health said, "If we have 13,000 cases of COVID today, that means 6,500 will continue to be infectious on day five and if they are going back to the workplace there is going to be increased transmission." She stated that this would render the country even less prepared for the next surge of the virus than it was for the winter wave.

But governments are simply not interested in such scientifically-grounded opinion. They are taking business, not health advice.

Albanese flagged that the National Cabinet is prepared to go further in the future. His remarks were made in reply to a question from a journalist, who cited the situation in Britain where there is no longer any requirement for COVID-infected individuals to isolate.

That is the position that was advanced by Health Services Union Secretary Gerard Hayes, who called for the National Cabinet to axe isolation requirements because of the impact they have on labour force participation. Hayes' comment summed up the role of the unions as the corporatised enforcers of the dictates of big business and the banks.

They underscore the fact that a fight for health and lives above profit requires a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves. A critical task of such a movement will be to fight for a complete repudiation of the homicidal "herd immunity" policies, and the adoption of an elimination strategy aimed at halting transmission and ending the pandemic.

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