

Australia's "National Cabinet" sets course for mass Omicron infections

Mike Head

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Yesterday's meeting of Australia's bipartisan "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory government leaders essentially decided to let the highly-transmissible Omicron rip through the population.

"Living with COVID-19 means living with COVID-variants," the communiqué declared, effectively extending the policy to future mutations.

Having previously refused to take the measures necessary to halt the pandemic and the soaring Omicron infections, these governments—both Liberal-National and Labor—are moving to scrap most of the remaining limited protections.

In fact, the National Cabinet is exploiting the unfolding Omicron-fuelled disaster that it has created as a pretext to further abolish or water down essential measures such as testing and contact tracing, leaving the population even more exposed to mass infection.

With testing stations swamped, forcing people to wait for hours in long queues, only to be often turned away, the meeting proposed ending testing requirements for cross-border travel, and redefining "close" and "casual" contacts so that most potentially-infected people no longer need to get tested and isolate.

These measures are being dismantled even though double-vaccination provides little protection against Omicron infection and less than 7 percent of the population is triple-vaccinated.

The meeting tried to reassure the public that governments would ramp up the vaccine booster program in the new year. But such jabs take up to two weeks to provide protection and it is likely to be May 2022 at least before an 80 percent booster rate is achieved.

In effect, without saying so, the National Cabinet has adopted the "herd immunity" program being imposed by the US and UK governments, on the unproven claim that Omicron is "milder" and therefore less deadly, even if the sheer volume of infections overwhelms health systems.

That policy was laid out by federal Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly when he said on November 29 that Omicron could be the "greatest Christmas present" if it turned out to be less fatal than the Delta mutation. It was reiterated this week by Queensland state Chief Medical Officer Gerrard who told a media conference: "This virus ultimately needs to become

endemic in the community."

Today's statistics confirmed that as a result of the collective "live with the virus" campaign, infections are rising exponentially.

For now, the Omicron epicentre remains New South Wales, the most populous state, where 5,715 new cases were officially announced today, breaking all previous records in Australia. That was a leap from the 3,763 new cases reported yesterday, which was a 23 percent increase from the record of 3,057 set the day before.

Neighbouring Victoria announced 2,005 new cases, up from 1,503 the day before.

As a consequence of the National Cabinet decisions, a tidal wave of infection will surge across the entire country, including to states and territories that had previously largely suppressed the pandemic. In Queensland, 369 new infections were recorded, more than quadrupling the record set two days earlier.

Leaked modelling from the Doherty Institute has shown that on the current trajectory, if nothing is done to stem the tide, new infections will surge to 200,000 a day nationally by late next month. At that rate, most of the population would soon be infected.

According to this modelling, hospitalisation rates would soar to 4,000 a day and between 8,000 and 10,000 patients would be in intensive care units (ICUs). That far exceeds the capacity of the chronically-underfunded and under-staffed hospital system, which is being overwhelmed already.

Although official hospitalisation and ICU numbers have not yet risen dramatically, they are lagging indicators. In NSW, the true picture is being camouflaged by the fact that, as of 20 December, 8,356 of the state's 16,344 active cases were being "cared for outside of hospital setting." That is, they were ill enough to require hospital care but were being kept at home.

After summing up the outcome of yesterday's meeting, Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison was so pleased that he told a media conference: "And so that was a positive and constructive meeting today."

That remark epitomises the role that the Labor Party leaders—who form a majority of the National Cabinet—have played throughout the pandemic, acting as a de facto coalition government to prop up Morrison's increasingly detested and

unstable government.

More than ever before, the meeting blatantly dismissed official health advice. It rejected a December 22 recommendation from its own health sub-committee, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), to require masks in all indoor settings to attempt to slow the spread of Omicron.

In trying to justify that repudiation of medical advice, Morrison gave some of the most explicit statements yet of the underlying political agenda—which is to shift all responsibility from governments onto individuals, and blame and punish those who allegedly fail to take their own precautions.

At the media conference, the prime minister drew a ludicrous analogy. He said mask wearing in indoor spaces, in public areas, was “of course, highly recommended,” but so was wearing hats and using sunscreen in summer, and there was “no rule or requirement to do that.”

Obviously, sunburn and the ultimate danger of skin cancer, is not infectious! Protecting oneself from such outcomes may be largely an individual issue, although it can have wider public health consequences. It is not a social responsibility in the same way as shielding one’s contacts, other people and society as a whole from the imminent danger of illness, hospitalisation and death or ongoing long-COVID health damage.

As numbers of outraged doctors objected, a more appropriate analogy is car seatbelt-wearing. That has long been compulsory, in the interests of saving lives in vehicle accidents.

Likewise, Morrison said people should buy rapid antigen testing kits to avoid getting full PCR tests. When a journalist objected that “not everyone can afford rapid antigen tests,” Morrison replied: “Some people can, and some can’t.”

Morrison went further, expanding this “individual responsibility” to every aspect of the pandemic. “There will be a much more greater level of self-regulation when we deal with the volume of cases that will, are likely to occur in the weeks and months ahead,” he stated.

Comments yesterday by NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard further pointed to the deeply reactionary implications of this. He suggested that unvaccinated patients who fell victim to COVID-19 should be made to pay for their own treatment. That is despite the confusion caused by anti-vaccination agitation and government misinformation.

This proposition, which defies medical ethics, and undercuts the very principle of a free public hospital system, could be extended across-the-board, financially punishing or blocking treatment to people who suffer any illness supposedly due to their own conduct or lifestyle.

Liberal-National leaders can make such statements only because they know they have the backing of their Labor counterparts. The Labor governments are not just collaborating in the National Cabinet; they are helping to spearhead the profit-driven reopening offensive. Victoria’s Labor government, for example, yesterday announced that two lucrative but potential

super-spreader events, the Boxing Day cricket and the Australian Open tennis tournament, would proceed with full crowds.

Above all, the government leaders are determined to have no further economic shutdowns, regardless of the extent of the resulting catastrophe. Yesterday’s communiqué stated: “National Cabinet agreed that no jurisdiction wants to return to lockdowns.”

Ever-more nakedly, big business is laying out the mercenary calculations behind the “let it rip” agenda. It will not tolerate any measures that impinge on profits.

The Murdoch media’s *Australian* today hosted an op-ed by Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott, in which she welcomed the National Cabinet outcome and insisted: “Australia must resist the temptation to halt reopening plans in the face of emerging variants. If we lose our nerve and once again pull up the drawbridge, we will restrict growth.”

Alarmed and disgusted health workers, scientists, epidemiologists, doctors and other health experts are increasingly speaking out to denounce the overturning of essential health measures and warning of the dire consequences. In a widely-watched social media video and television interview, Sydney immunologist Dr Dan Suan urged people to take public safety into their own hands because governments had “left the field.”

In a bid by the NSW government yesterday to cover its tracks in the face of mounting public concern and outrage, it reinstated a requirement for QR codes at retail and hospitality premises. But such codes are meaningless if the contact tracing and testing systems are rendered inoperative.

Elimination of COVID-19 is essential, but that requires a global movement of the working class, informed by the best medical and scientific advice. The *World Socialist Web Site* has initiated the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to answer the official misinformation and outline an opposed program based on human health, not the demands of the corporate elite.



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