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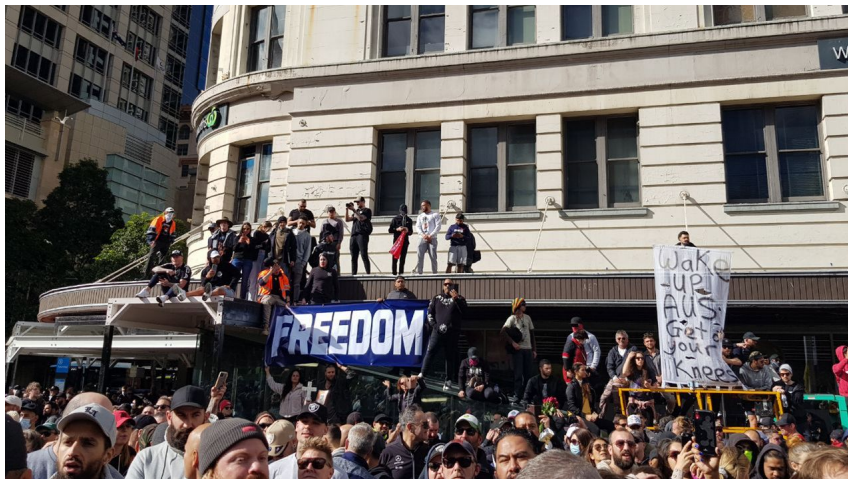
Oscar Grenfell
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Far-right anti-lockdown protests held amid Australian COVID crisis

On Saturday, far-right protesters marched through the city centres of Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane, while others gathered in regional towns and centres, to demand an end to the limited lockdown measures in place amid a surge of the coronavirus.

The demonstrators, who appear to have numbered fewer than 10,000 nationally, have been angrily condemned by broad sections of the population.

On social media, workers, students, youth and many middle-class people have expressed fears that the rallies, carried out in defiance of health orders prohibiting mass gatherings in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne, could become super-spreading events. At least one infection and multiple exposure sites have also been recorded in Brisbane, but there is no lockdown there.



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Anti-Lockdown protest in Sydney (Image Credit: Twitter/FallenAngelDeb)

The overwhelming popular sentiment is hostility to the limited and inadequate character of the lockdown measures currently in place, especially in Sydney. The New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government is widely despised, not because of the threadbare restrictions it belatedly introduced, but because its refusal to institute tougher measures has resulted in the Delta variant spreading out of control in Sydney and extending into other states.

Those who participated in the protests on Saturday comprised some of the most disoriented and reactionary segments of the population. They included anti-vaccine activists, conspiracy theorists who do not believe that the coronavirus is real, extreme libertarians who are opposed to any public health policies, and hardened far-right provocateurs.

The protests were billed as part of a “World Wide Rally for Freedom,” and timed to coincide with similar events internationally. They appear largely to have been organised through social media, including Facebook, as well as encrypted apps like Telegram.

The slogan of “freedom” was prominent in much of the promotion of the protests, being used to describe “freedom” from any health measures, depicted as a form of “tyranny.”

Posts by Anthony Khallouf, founder of the “Australians vs the Agenda” website and social media pages were typical. “We need to stop the spread of communism. If you’re not out at your capital city protest this Saturday, you may as well kiss Australia goodbye,” he wrote last week.

Khallouf has also expressed support for fascistic ex-US President Donald Trump and his lies about a stolen American election used to justify the attempted coup in Washington on January 6.

Melbourne programmer Harrison Mclean, who was reportedly involved in promoting the rallies, has been involved in previous right-wing gatherings against earlier lockdown measures in the state of Victoria. In March, an investigation by the *Guardian* uncovered discussions he had held with fascists about gradually introducing participants in the

broader anti-lockdown movement to extreme right-wing positions, including virulent anti-Semitism.

Members of the Proud Boys and other fascistic organisations reportedly also advertised the events.

According to police, around 3,500 people took part in the Sydney protest, with the other capital city rallies numbering in the low thousands. Footage of the gatherings shows the participants gathered tightly, the overwhelming majority without safety masks. In Sydney and Melbourne, there were violent clashes between some of the demonstrators and the police, and chaotic scenes of participants attempting to evade road blocks by running through back streets.

While the popular revulsion at the gatherings is entirely genuine and healthy, official condemnations of the rallies are thoroughly cynical. Media outlets that have agitated against lockdown measures throughout the pandemic, and politicians who have refused to implement the measures demanded by epidemiologists because of their impact on corporate profits, have expressed their outrage at the “reckless” and “selfish” protesters.

Much of this has focused on the violent altercations between protesters and the police. But official denunciations have also centred on the fact that the gatherings could result in further transmission and thereby interfere with plans for a lifting of the limited restrictions currently in place. Given that the governments have refused to implement much-needed measures required to halt transmission or even to reduce the explosion of cases, especially in Sydney, this is entirely hypocritical.

More fundamentally, the official condemnations are aimed at covering up the close alignment between the positions of the political and media establishment and those put forward at Saturday’s rallies.

Throughout the pandemic, the anti-lockdown movement has fed upon agitation against safety measures from the corporate and political elite itself. A series of protests were held in Melbourne last year opposing the belated introduction of lockdown measures by the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews as a serious COVID outbreak in Victoria spiralled out of control. At the time, representatives of the state Liberal Party

opposition, Murdoch media outlets and a broad array of right-wing pundits were denouncing Andrews as “dictator Dan” because of the lockdowns.

The situation is even more stark now. For the past six months, the federal Liberal-National government, along with the state and territory leaders, most of them Labor, have been focused on how to end lockdown measures for all time so as to “reopen the economy” and ensure unfettered business activities.

Together, in the “national cabinet” they agreed to a plan in June for the abolition of safety measures allowing the virus to spread. According to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, under phase two of the plan: “Lockdowns would only occur in extreme circumstances to prevent escalating hospitalisation and fatality.” Phase three would see the virus treated like the 'flu, and phase four a “return to normal.”

The stages are to be initiated based on vaccination rates that have yet to be specified. The discussion is proceeding, even though a chaotic, profit-driven rollout means that only around 15 percent of the adult-population is currently vaccinated.

The same anti-lockdown positions, evident throughout the pandemic, have dictated the response of the NSW government to the Sydney outbreak. For ten days after infections of the Delta variant were first identified, it refused to put in place any restrictions aside from extended mask-mandates. Since then, it has instituted measures that are a mockery of a genuine lockdown, allowing for widespread non-essential business activity.

This has allowed daily infections to soar above 150, and has resulted in eight deaths, including that of a 38-year-old woman announced yesterday. The tragic fatalities are predicted to grow, with 156 people currently in Sydney hospitals, 44 of them in intensive care units.

Still, the NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is rejecting demands from health experts for sharp lockdown measures, including widespread business closures. Senior cabinet members have expressed their dissatisfaction with the extension of even the limited measures in place, while discussions are reportedly underway in the government about easing restrictions in parts of Sydney with low-recorded transmission.

In the financial press, the primary complaint is that there are any restrictions at all. Every day columns are written which articulate positions similar to those voiced at Saturday's rallies.

Yesterday, for instance, the country's former foreign minister Alexander Downer wrote a column for the *Australian Financial Review* entitled "Democracy eliminated by leaving restrictions to the health experts."

Downer, who remains a prominent political figure in Australia and internationally, said current restrictions were prompting questions around the world about how "the once tough and resilient Aussies, the standard bearers of egalitarianism and democracy, have been reduced to quivering in their homes by unelected medical officers because of a handful of positive COVID-19 tests?"

It was necessary to dispense with any conception of eliminating the virus, Downer argued. He hailed the lifting of restrictions internationally and claims that states in the US which had resisted even minimal lockdown measures had provided citizens with a "better overall quality of life."

Downer, who was a minister in the right-wing Howard Coalition government that attacked democratic rights, including through the "war on terror" and the persecution of refugees, couched his arguments in terms of "civil liberties." Essentially though, this is the "freedom" for corporations to make profits without restriction, even if it means the preventable deaths of ordinary people. "One day, someone will tell the Australian people that no one is immortal," Downer wrote.

The connections between the political establishment and Saturday's rallies also took a more direct form, with right-wing populist federal government MP George Christensen attending one the protests in Mackay Queensland, and former government backbencher, now independent, Craig Kelly, delivering a telephone message to the Brisbane gathering.

On social media, Christensen posted footage of the Sydney protest with the caption: "Looks like thousands upon thousands of Sydneysiders are protesting against the removal of freedoms under the guise of the pandemic."

Prime Minister Morrison defended Christensen's participation in the Mackay rally as an exercise in "free speech," while criticising the Sydney protesters as "selfish."

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