

Principles for Reopening Australia: The Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce summit, 23 August

Interim findings from the Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce summit, 23 August

Following the *A Roadmap to Reopening* report published in May 2021, the Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce convened an online summit with leaders from business, government, civil society and academia to explore the next phase of Australia's pandemic response, the lessons of international experiences, and the hidden costs of the strategy Australia has been pursuing.

In generating a dialogue between leaders and experts in epidemiology, infectious diseases, biomedical sciences, and human rights, the taskforce has identified some principles that can guide Australia's public conversation about how it can move towards reopening its society and mending its social fabric. These principles relate to the appropriate threshold of vaccinations for the ending of lockdowns and restrictions, the wellbeing of children and schooling, the design of public responses to the pandemic and a more proportionate public conversation about COVID-19.

Building on A Roadmap to Reopening

These principles build on the work of the Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce to date. Drawing upon advice from University of Sydney experts in infectious diseases and public health, as well as roundtable consultations with leaders from business and civil society (including young people), the taskforce stated in its *A Roadmap to Reopening* report that a 'zero Covid' strategy was not only unrealistic, but incompatible with Australia's character as an open and globally engaged society. The taskforce argued for reopening Australia in a controlled and staged way, enabled by the delivery of an effective vaccine program, a sensible regime of monitoring and isolating those with infection. In addition, Australia's political leaders need to build, within public debate, a 'psychological runway' for reopening.

Specifically, the taskforce proposed a five-part roadmap to how Australia could safely reopen its borders:

- a comprehensive and successful vaccination program;
- sector and place-specific pilot programs to reopen prior to the conclusion of the vaccination program, supporting industries critical to Australia's economy including tourism and creative industries, horticultural farming, and international education;
- a certification scheme across these programs, which permits only those with documented vaccination and/or SARS CoV-2 immunity to enter Australia or travel overseas;
- improved border protection measures involving rapid testing; and



- a range of new risk-weighted quarantine measures complementing the maintenance of hotel quarantine for those who come from high-risk countries, refuse testing, or test positive on arrival.

The taskforce also proposed a rebuilding of Australian society incorporating:

- a return to Australia's pre-COVID-19 embrace of immigration and multiculturalism, supported by a national anti-racism strategy;
- the creation of a fully integrated public community-based system of care, in response to the pandemic's implications on people's mental health;
- a strategy of inclusive prosperity that addresses the economic inequalities exposed by the pandemic;
- national cooperation, as exemplified by the success of the National Cabinet in overcoming the early challenges of the pandemic; and
- fulfilling Australia's moral duty to assist our Pacific neighbours to protect the health of their citizens and overcome the economic damage caused by the pandemic.

Since that initial statement by the taskforce, the debate about pandemic management has only intensified. The arrival of the Delta variant of the coronavirus to Australia prompted lockdowns that affected more than half of the Australian population, including its two largest cities Sydney and Melbourne. Meanwhile, national cabinet agreed on a plan to lift restrictions and move to reopen borders once 70 and 80 percent of the adult population was fully vaccinated.

There remains a need to build a public consensus about how Australia moves away from a 'zero Covid' approach simplistically based on eliminating SARS Cov-2 infection by keeping the virus out, to a 'responsibly living with COVID-19' approach that values all other aspects of personal and societal health. High vaccination rates should uncouple the infection from the disease, which means that we can live with some circulating virus, provided that we protect the vulnerable, and offer vaccination to all those aged 12 and over. Moreover, there remains the challenge of building that 'psychological runway' for the public to navigate this transition.

Principles for reopening Australia

At the summit of 23 August 2021, 50 leaders from business, government and civil society took part in a dialogue to develop a new consensus for how Australia can move into the next phase of its pandemic management.

The summit's dialogue has led to this communique – an initial statement of principles for how Australia can move decisively and safely to reopen its society. We hope these principles will guide leaders and organisations across Australia in supporting our return to an open, democratic society animated by national unity and a common purpose.

1. It is not sustainable for Australia to maintain a zero Covid stance and we should begin removing lockdown restrictions when 70-80 per cent of the adult population is fully vaccinated.
2. Australia needs a more proportionate public conversation about the risks and burdens of COVID-19, in order to build the psychological runway required for reopening the country.
3. The design of public responses to the pandemic must be informed by diverse perspectives, in particular those communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
4. Australia should consider mandatory vaccination for key workers and professions, including those in health, education, logistics and transportation.
5. Australia should have a national plan for schools to enable as much face-to-face learning for the fourth term of school in 2021 as is safely possible, and to stay open into 2022, preventing further deterioration in children's education and mental health.
6. Australia should increase investment in public health and mental health in the next stage of the pandemic and beyond.

Next Steps

Through this summit, the Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce has sought to build a new public consensus on how Australia should reopen during COVID-19.

The taskforce's co-sponsors at the University of Sydney, the Sydney Policy Lab and the Culture Strategy team, will continue to convene conversations and generate knowledge to support the principles of an open democratic Australian society engaged with the world. They welcome partners in future collaborations from business, government, civil society and academia. [Connect with us here.](#)