



## Chasing Zero Covid Means Zero Hope

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In recent weeks, some have commented that it feels like Australia is back in March 2020. A year and a half have passed, and we have learned much about the virus, but it often seems as though this has amounted to nothing. And that's because it hasn't.

New data released from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on Aug. 5 confirms this. According to the data, the total number of private sector jobs in Australia in mid-July was just 1.3 percent above the March 14 benchmark last year when the 100th case of COVID was recorded.

There is a slight time lag in the data, but with the Greater Sydney lockdown extended into August and spreading into other areas of New South Wales (NSW), it is likely that the number of private sector jobs has now shrunk back to pre-pandemic levels.

In NSW itself, [214,400 jobs were destroyed](#) in the first four weeks of the Greater Sydney lockdown. That means that every single job restored in the 2020-21 financial year has been wiped out in less than a month.



There are now fewer people working in NSW than before the first Australia-wide lockdown.

Lockdowns destroy jobs, devastate small businesses, and deprive people of the human interaction that gives life meaning.

One of the most perverse effects is that loss of jobs and incomes is concentrated in the private sector. The ABS data shows that as of mid-July, while private sector employment was only just above the pre-pandemic level, the public sector workforce has swollen by 12 percent.

There is a serious moral hazard contained within. Those who make decisions about how strict lockdowns should be are insulated from the economic costs that occur.

In fact, politicians and public servants have received multiple pay rises since the beginning of the pandemic. The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) analysis revealed in June that the average Victorian public servant received an almost \$1,600 (US \$1,172) pay rise during the extended second lockdown in the state last year, while the average private-sector worker saw their pay cut by over \$1,200.

A few days before that analysis was released, Queensland's politicians and public servants were confirmed to have received three pay rises before September 2022.

And a few weeks later, it was revealed that Victorian politicians would receive a 2.5 percent pay rise. This is on top of an almost 12 percent pay rise they received last year, which 75 percent of Victorians condemned as "wrong," according to another IPA-commissioned poll.

Despite often claiming that we are "all in this together" it has been clear for some time that Australia's political class have detached themselves from the economic realities experienced by private-sector workers, small business owners, and young Australians—three groups particularly affected by lockdowns.

Australians are rightly frustrated that their political leaders have abandoned the sinking ship they are stuck on. In two further IPA-commissioned polls, one nationwide and one in NSW, Australians overwhelmingly agreed that politicians and senior bureaucrats earning over \$150,000 a year should take a pay cut of 20 percent while lockdowns are in effect.

As a result, we now have an extensive data set because Australians have endured so many lockdowns, and the result is always the same: private sector workers and small businesses are hit the hardest, while the public sector remains largely unscathed.

At the start of the pandemic, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that the political class was "not unconscious of the real impacts that these measures are having on the daily lives of Australians."

But the pandemic has demonstrated that they are unconscious at best, and uncaring at worst.

It would be simple for a politician to volunteer a 20 percent pay cut to share in the sacrifice



Australians have made. But they refuse to do so. That is a failure of leadership.

Some Australian leaders are now working on implementing restrictions aimed at achieving a “Zero COVID” outcome. For example, on Aug. 3, Morrison said that “short—hopefully—but strong lockdowns ... [are] now our first response when it comes to dealing with the Delta strain.”

If that is the case, then it’s time that our political leaders had some skin in the game.

The only reason politicians can make a vain commitment to Zero COVID—chased through lockdowns—is because it costs them nothing to do so.

On the same day, Morrison announced the official lockdown-first strategy, the suicide prevention hotline Lifeline Australia received its highest number of calls in the organisation’s history.

Ultimately, pursuit of a zero COVID outcome means zero hope for Australians.

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