

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 32

Still in lockdown

17 September

(The contents below are based upon the situation as of 8 September, when the original in Japanese was published)

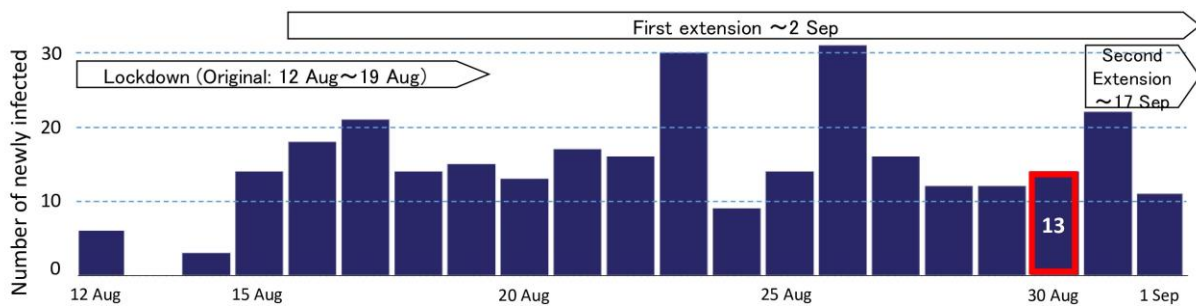


Canberra remains in lockdown

I was expecting that the lockdown in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) would end on 2 September, lifting the gloom and setting everyone free. So its extension came as a shock. Furthermore, it's been extended by another two weeks, up to midnight on 17 September. So what on earth happened?

1. **Shifting the goalposts**

Looking at the examples of New South Wales and Victoria, there are a lot of infected people there and so extending their lockdown periods is not unusual. Even in the ACT, there was some expectation that there would be an extension because the number of newly infected people had not really decreased. However, on the day before the announcement on the lockdown extension was made (31 August), the number of newly infected in the ACT totaled 13. Compared with Japan's experiences, the measures taken by relevant authorities remain strict.



Changes in the number of newly infected people in the ACT

As I was expecting “I will be able to freely go outside from the 3rd”, I needed to re-stock my refrigerator and freezer urgently. My hair is an absolute mess, and I look like an “*ochimusha*” (haha) (in Japanese, this refers to a defeated warrior whose hair is dishevelled and hanging loose – think of the opening scenes of the film “The Hidden Fortress”) but I’ve had to give up any thought of getting a haircut for the time being.

2. Some of the negative aspects of lockdown

It’s been pointed out that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Aussies have been adhering to a variety of regulations, such as restrictions on movement while under lockdown, to a greater degree than the Japanese are. However, recently attention has been drawn to various problems that have emerged while under lockdown.

One of the largest of these problems is unemployment. Business operators who have been hit hard by the pandemic are given financial assistance to the tune of AU\$1,000 – AU\$100,000 a week, while people who have taken a drop in salary are receiving individual payments between AU\$200 – AU\$750 a week. On the other hand, it’s been noted that the suspension of economic activity because of the pandemic has led to an increase in unemployment, the figures for which aren’t displayed in any statistics. The most recent statistical update for the unemployment rate (in July 2021) put it at the low level of 4.6%, however there are economists who believe that the actual unemployment rate, which has been accelerated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, is around 6%.

Another major problem is mental health. While under lockdown, as you are only allowed to meet with family members that reside in the same home as you or designated carers, that greatly reduces the amount of contact you can have with parents, children, and grandchildren living in separate accommodation. This results in an increase in people feeling alone and abandoned.



Examples of public service notices made by the Australian government, calling on people to pay attention to their mental health during the COVID pandemic (There are many of these which are available in over 30 different languages)

A problem perhaps peculiar to Australia has been the long-running issue of Australians residing abroad who want to return home to Australia but can't. It is said that the reasons for this dilemma stem from a steep rise in airfares and a dramatic drop in available flights, as well as the ability of designated quarantine stations to absorb arrivals returning from abroad, all of which have come with the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, figures reveal that there are 38,000 Australians (as of the end of July 2021) stuck abroad who want to return to Australia.

3. A rising backlash

In the background of these problems, there have been anti-lockdown demonstrations in Sydney and Melbourne, some of which have turned violent as also reported in Japan.

Up until now, there is no denying that Australia has handled the COVID-19 pandemic far more skillfully than most nations of the world and it has been able to keep infections and the damage to an extraordinarily low level. Yet the appearance of the Delta variant and its unstoppable ferociousness has opened up an entirely new chapter and seem to be changing the dynamic in Australia.

4. “COVID Zero” or “Living with COVID”?

A debate that is raging in Australia at the moment is whether or not to continue to crush COVID-19 and aim for zero new infections, the ‘whack-a-mole’ approach, or accept that “COVID Zero” is unrealistic and move towards “Living with COVID”.

There is a huge divergence in opinions between states such as New South Wales and Victoria, which harbor major cities and are still facing high infection rates, and states like Western Australia and Queensland, which have very few infections and have been particularly eager to restrict the movement of people between states.



Various newspapers featuring a mixture of federal government views and state and territory views

There are also large differences in opinion between the federal government, which wants to open up state and international borders to quickly bring about economic recovery, and some states which want to prioritise the health of their residents.

And so the debate continues to try and fill in the gap between these positions.

5. A ray of hope

A particularly interesting development amongst all of this has been the federal government’s decision, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, to shift towards “Living with COVID”. A series of lockdowns makes people downhearted and stagnates economic activities. In order to recover from this damage, the federal government aims to show Australians the specific details of future “exits” from the COVID pandemic. It’s a development that many countries could learn from.

As such, the National Cabinet (a conglomerate body consisting of the Prime Minister and the leaders of each of the states and territories) has agreed that vaccine rollout progress is the key to getting out of the

pandemic, and that once the vaccination rate for the population aged over 16 reaches between 70% to 80%, that will be a milestone for easing restrictions.

Reference: [The National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID Response \(The National Plan\)](#)



PM Morrison after receiving a vaccine shot (Source: Twitter @ScottMorrisonMP 14 March 2021)

According to this plan, once the vaccination rate hits 70%, some restrictions (anticipated to relax restrictions on the number of people allowed into the country, and relaxing quarantine conditions) will be lifted. And once it hits 80%, lockdowns to be lifted or will be introduced only in extremely limited circumstances.

6. The road ahead

Current forecasts are that Australia as a whole will hit the 80% mark sometime around the middle of November. As such, there are hopeful prognoses that by the time Christmas arrives, restrictions on travel will be removed and families that are living far apart will be able to visit each other.

However, other voices have been urging caution. They point out that as soon as restrictions are relaxed and lockdowns are lifted, the number of infected, along with deaths, will shoot up exponentially, which will then place a considerable burden on the healthcare system.

Just what developments the future holds remains unpredictable.

Actually, towards the end of this month I plan to invite guests who previously worked in the Australian Embassy in Tokyo to my Residence in order to hold a “*Hanami-kai*” (flower-viewing reception). Given

that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the cancellation of many events one after another, it's a last-ditch effort which will be held outdoors and with social distancing maintained. There's a strong sense of anticipation from the Australians invited to the event, and so I pray that the lockdown will be lifted and the cherry blossoms will be able to be loved by all.



Hoping that the '*Hanami-kaï*' can go ahead

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