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CALL FOR ISOLATION OVERHAUL PILES PRESSURE ON STATES

# PM's plea: set the people free

JOE KELLY  
CANNBERRA BUREAU CHIEF

Tens of thousands of Australians would be freed from isolation under a major reset of pandemic rules to be considered by an emergency meeting of national cabinet on Thursday, where Scott Morrison will ask state and territory leaders to relax the definition of a Covid-19 close contact.

The Prime Minister said the nation was "going through a gear change" and a new approach was needed to ensure escalating Omicron infections did not result in "everybody just being taken out of circulation" and state health systems being crashed unnecessarily because of outmoded testing requirements.

Under the proposed shake-up, a close contact would be limited to those exposed to the virus within a household-like setting for more than four hours. The proposed redefinition would transfer the risk of individuals becoming close contacts from the workplace to family residences in a move hailed by business groups.

"We're talking about someone that they're living with. We're talking about someone like me and my family here (at Kirribilli House) who are living here together," Mr Morrison said. "If one of my kids - Abbey or Lily - got it, or if of course Jenny got it or any of the household staff here got it, then we would find ourselves in that situation and I would be a close contact."

"If I went down to a restaurant down the road and I happened to pop in and get some takeaway and there was a case there, I would not be a close contact."  
Close contacts would face a shortened week-long quarantine and be required take a rapid antigen test on day six as well as a second test on day 12.

Both NSW Premier Dominic Perrotet and WA Premier Mark McGowan backed Mr Morrison's push for an updated nationally consistent definition of a close contact.

"We are looking forward to a discussion in relation to changes to be made in relation to close contact definitions," Mr Perrotet said. "I certainly believe it would be best if we had a national approach."  
Mr McGowan said in Perth that a revision of close contact was "wise" and would protect critical sectors of the economy.

"What you don't want to do is have lots of people just leaving the workforce because they are in touch with someone who is positive... So you imagine in a power station

## Fewer Omicron patients needing intensive care

Intensive care admissions from the Omicron variant have been minuscule, with only 0.1 per cent of active cases in NSW and 0.3 per cent of active cases in Victoria needing urgent treatment.

Scott Morrison said on Wednesday that 126 Covid-positive people were in intensive care units and 55 needed ventilators out of more than 93,000 active cases.

As of Wednesday, only 61 of NSW's active 61,332 Covid-19 cases were in intensive care and 62 of Victoria's 19,994 active cases were in ICU.

There were 18,243 new cases of Covid-19 announced nationally on Wednesday.

Chief medical officer Paul Kelly said the low hospitalisation rate was due to a world-leading vaccination rate and the fact Omicron did not appear to lead to as serious illness as previous Covid-19 variants.

"In terms of the severity... we know now that it is very likely this is less severe than other forms of the virus," Professor Kelly said.

"How much less severe is still an open question. I've seen estimates from 15 per cent less severe to 80 per cent less severe."

But he warned the ICU wards were still dominated by the unvaccinated. "Boosters are important, but can I please - as I say at almost every press conference - implore anyone who has not yet had their

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Surestest medical director Peter Lewis and registered nurse On Hongsopha in Melbourne on Wednesday with rapid antigen tests

IAN CURRIE

## INSIDE

### Morrison has seized on the challenge of Omicron as an opportunity to overhaul the pandemic rule book and liberalise restrictions.

JOE KELLY P5



someone turns up to work who is positive and then everyone goes off work," Mr McGowan told Perth FM radio.

"The power station shuts down, or a hospital or an aged care facility. You can't have that happen. So the new definitions, the tighter

definition of close contacts is a good thing to do."

Under the proposed reset of pandemic rules, Mr Morrison said the bulk of Australians would be shifted from PCR tests to rapid tests, with chief medical officer Paul Kelly arguing the queues at testing centres were "not fulfilling any useful public health function".

Queensland on Wednesday announced it would accept rapid antigen tests for border entries from January 1, in a move likely to alleviate pressure on the NSW and Victorian health systems.

PCR tests would be prioritised for individuals displaying symptoms and high-priority groups

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## Floodgates thrown open for rapid tests

DAMON JOHNSTON  
JOSEPH LAM

The nation will be flooded with tens of millions of free rapid antigen tests within a week, with the Morrison and Andrews governments launching programs to distribute the DIY kits.

The move will relieve pressure on the state-based PCR testing sites, make it easier and quicker for close contacts of positive cases to obtain the 15-minute tests and save Australians from being stung between \$15 and \$20 per kit.

Demand for rapid tests has been outstripping supply, leading to sell-

outs at supermarkets and pharmacies in the past week as infection numbers soar and governments move to endorse the tests.

Victoria on Wednesday announced it had bought 34 million rapid tests. Within hours the federal government said it had approved \$375m to secure 50 million more, on top of 10 million it had already procured.

As cases soar and Australians rush to buy tests, Scott Morrison is coming under increasing attack from Labor and the states for the current shortages and was accused of leaving a testing policy vacuum.

The Prime Minister said the

states were responsible for securing their own rapid tests but the federal government was spending an extra \$375m to secure a further 50 million for the national medical stockpile, which is used as an emergency reserve and to meet federal responsibilities, including in aged-care centres.

So far, 1.6 million tests have been supplied to aged-care homes in NSW and 1.2 million in Victoria. One million tests remained in the national stockpile, with three million having already been used. Mr Morrison said a further six million were "arriving very soon".

Welcoming the announcements from NSW and Victoria

that they would secure their own supplies of rapid tests, Mr Morrison said: "That's their job, and I'm glad they're doing it."

Amid fears about supply, Melbourne company Surestest said it had about 70,000 tests on hand, the majority of which were in a Sydney warehouse.

Company medical director Peter Lewis said he could access 14 times its current stock load each week should demand rise.

"We certainly have the ability to pivot very quickly. We've got factories overseas that we can get access to very large quantities of tests," he said. "We can bring in

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## Nuclear waste arrival sparks storage debate

### EXCLUSIVE

JACQUELIN MAGNAY

Australia is to receive a two-tonne shipment of nuclear waste from Britain that will arrive under tight security and amid high secrecy in the coming months.

The shipment of intermediate-level nuclear waste has been prepared for delivery to the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation facilities at Lucas Heights, in Sydney's south.

It will be just the second tranche of intermediate-level nuclear

waste returned to the country, and its arrival shines a spotlight on Australia's lack of a long-term storage plan for nuclear waste classified above low-level material. The radioactive uranium and plutonium waste has been vitrified in four glass containers and then encased in an outer container made of specialised steel, known as a TN81 cask.

ANSTO says its previous experience in receiving intermediate-level nuclear waste - which occurred in 2015 when a larger shipment was returned from France - will mitigate any risks.

In that shipment, all local roads

along the route were shut for more than five hours, and the operation involved the NSW Riot Squad and other police units to contain anti-nuclear protesters.

In the coming weeks, the nuclear waste will be moved by rail from the decommissioned nuclear plant at Sellafield in Cumbria to the British coast before being loaded onto a ship operated by Nuclear Transport Solutions.

It is expected to travel through Australian waters, including some maritime parks, before berthing.

The cargo is likely to be unloaded at Port Kembla in Wollongong under heavy guard, arriving

sometime before the middle of next year.

Wherever the ship berths, the container will be loaded onto a truck for transport through residential and industrial areas, as well as along the Princes Highway through the Royal National Park south of Sydney and on to the Lucas Heights facility.

ANSTO says the final route will be a closely guarded secret and will be decided in consultation with NSW authorities.

NTS confirmed that the return of the intermediate-level waste in the form of vitrified residue to

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## IBAC's evidence bungle

### EXCLUSIVE

DAMON JOHNSTON

Victoria's anti-corruption authority was forced to apologise after "indiscreet" and "inappropriate" actions by an agent resulted in seized items in a clear evidence bag returned to a person of interest at their workplace.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission apologised to the person, referred to only as X, over the incident that triggered changes to policies and procedures at the authority.

The bungle has been revealed by the Victorian Inspectorate - the body that monitors IBAC - as it confirmed it investigated 44 complaints against the authority in 2020-21. The inspectorate said it had investigated the complaint from X "about the indiscreet manner in which an IBAC technical officer returned property seized during an investigation".

It said the officer's "inappropriate actions" displayed a "lack of situational awareness" and indicated the "chain of custody process to be followed for seized property" was breached.

FULL REPORT P3

## Adani at full tilt 'within months'

India's Adani Group says its Carmichael coalmine is expected to reach full production within months, as anti-coal groups vow to keep up the fight to disrupt its operations.

Bravus Mining and Resources (the trading name of Adani Mining) said the first shipment from Carmichael was at the company's port facilities in Bowen, ready for loading.

"This is a big moment for everyone who has worked so diligently and passionately to build this mine," Bravus chief executive David Boshoff said.

FULL REPORT P4

## Top cop's fight to end grog mayhem

### EXCLUSIVE

PAIGE TAYLOR  
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS  
CORRESPONDENT

Secret police dossiers on alcohol-fuelled violence, crime and its effects on children across Australia's northwest reveal Western Australia's police commissioner has gone to extraordinary lengths to try to introduce take-away alcohol restrictions.

Commissioner Chris Dawson's proposed restrictions include closing bottle shops in the Kimberley and placing strict limits on what licensees can sell in some of the Pilbara's biggest towns.

His push for a ban on the sale of full-strength take-away alcohol in WA's far north Kimberley is confronting crime data and testimony from police, hospital workers and elders. However, his intervention defies the McGowan government's preference for a banned drinkers register that would allow Kimberley bottle shops to keep trading in full-strength beer, wine and spirits.

Many licensees are quietly relieved the WA director of liquor licensing has delayed a decision on Mr Dawson's requests until at least July 2022. They believe trials under way of a banned drinkers register in WA's Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfields regions should be completed and assessed before Mr Dawson's proposals for blanket alcohol restrictions are explored. However, the commissioner, whose pandemic powers have given him authority that rivals WA Premier Mark McGowan, is not resiling from almost three years of efforts to bring in uniform limits on the sale of take-away alcohol across the state's north.

He describes the Kimberley as a community in crisis. He links "pervasive" alcohol abuse to family violence, child neglect and abuse, and says uniform, non-negotiable liquor restrictions are required to aid the recovery of vulnerable people.

His May 2019 report on the effects of excessive alcohol consumption in the Kimberley, obtained by The Australian, details how alcohol-related violence and crime increased steeply during a five-year policy void.

Six months later, in November 2019, Mr Dawson lodged a similar report on alcohol-related crime in the region that lies immediately south of the Kimberley - the Pilbara.

That report includes a written submission from the women's shelter in the Pilbara town of Newman, which says chronic drinking is the most common cause of death for local Martu people who are clients or related to clients. Between 2006 and 2020, the shelter recorded 112 deaths, and 54 of those were from chronic drinking.

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EDITORIAL P8



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Watch Craig Kelly's New Years Message  
7.30pm New Years Eve on Seven, Nine, Ten and SBS.  
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Vote **1** United Australia Party and Craig Kelly as PM

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