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‘Get used to having more COVID-19 cases’: Government MPs rebel against border closures



By [Michael Koziol](#)

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A groundswell of opposition to Australia’s protracted border closure is brewing among Morrison government MPs, with city-based politicians leading a push to reopen faster and give vaccinated people more freedom to travel.

It comes amid lingering anger over the India travel ban and [the assumption in last week’s budget that borders will not reopen until mid-2022](#), despite the government aiming to offer everyone a vaccine by the end of 2021.



Pushing for Australia’s border to reopen sooner: Liberal MPs Jason Falinski, Tim Wilson and Dave Sharma.

Leaked audio recordings also reveal Victoria’s Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton told healthcare workers last month [the country must at some point abandon its Fortress Australia approach to COVID-19](#) and “make a call on letting it run” in order to reopen for tourists and international students.

Those comments echo remarks by former deputy chief medical officer Nick Coatsworth, [revealed yesterday by the *Herald*](#), who told doctors last week that eradicating COVID was a “false idol” and the nation must become “prepared and comfortable” for the virus to enter the community.

When asked by *The Sun-Herald* and *The Sunday Age*, Liberal MPs Dave Sharma, Tim Wilson and Jason Falinski said the border should be reopened faster than planned, and warned the public’s tolerance for border closures would wane as vaccination progressed.

“Like many measures, international border closures had a temporary place, but it is not sustainable and will turn us into a hermit outpost,” said Mr Wilson, the member for Goldstein in Melbourne.

“While public sentiment may still support closures now, it will change as people are vaccinated and business people need to travel, families need to be united and we come to realise how much it is costing our country.”

Mr Sharma, who holds the inner Sydney seat of Wentworth, said: “There are real and significant costs, economic and personal, to keeping our borders closed. I am keen to see us reopening our borders, likely in a staged and incremental fashion, as soon as it is safe. The vaccination program should allow us to do so.”

Mr Falinski, whose seat of Mackellar is on Sydney’s northern beaches, said the borders should reopen as an incentive for people to get vaccinated. He said Australians who get the jab should be able to travel overseas without restriction and self-isolate at home on their return.

“We’ll have to get used to having a lot more cases but of course the impact of those cases will be much lower,” Mr Falinski said. “The sooner we open up we’ll be ahead of the curve once again.”

He also said Australians should be given more incentives to get the jab, suggesting we copy the lottery on offer in Ohio. The US state is offering five \$1 million prizes for vaccinated people.



Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's budget assumes the Australian border won't be reopened until the middle of 2022. DOMINIC LORRIMER

Katie Allen, a doctor and federal Liberal MP for Higgins in Melbourne, said she agreed with Dr Coatsworth’s assessment of the futility of an elimination strategy. She said the litmus test for opening the border should be vaccinating the vulnerable, not necessarily the whole country.

“Once the vulnerable are sufficiently protected, then we can move to opening more quickly,” Dr Allen said. That could mean new protocols that incentivise vaccination for others, “which may include things like home quarantine [instead of hotel quarantine] if you get vaccinated”.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has always argued an elimination strategy is unrealistic, although in a Facebook post last Sunday he said the international border “will only open when it is safe to do so” and “we still have a long way to go”.

Last month he also said: “Australia is in no hurry to open those borders, I can assure you.”



“Your borders just don’t one day open up, it’s not that binary. It’s a step by step process,” Scott Morrison said on Friday. JAMES BRICKWOOD

There is growing frustration at various levels of government - and among some members of the medical fraternity, as the leaked recordings show - about the zero tolerance approach to COVID, including the level of media interest of single cases.

Professor Sutton - who helped enact one of the world’s harshest lockdowns last year in Melbourne - told an audience late last month the time to reopen borders was once every adult had been offered a COVID vaccine.

“Then we really need to say, ‘look, we can’t sit on our hands here’,” he said in the private seminar.

“We all need to step up to get vaccinated, in order to open up Australia to world travel and arrivals so that our education sector, tourism sector, all other kinds of compassionate reasons for us to see family and friends overseas can come to the fore.”

On Friday, Mr Morrison reiterated that talks were underway about opening a travel bubble with Singapore similar to the one currently operating with New Zealand.

“Your borders just don’t one day open up, it’s not that binary. It’s a step by step process,” he said.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian said the international border was a matter for Mr Morrison but she welcomed any discussion of this important issue.

“I look forward to the future where we can open up to other countries and allow our citizens to travel overseas,” she told *The Sun-Herald*. “But to make that possible, we need a large portion of the community to be vaccinated.

with Michael Fowler

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