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“Dear customers, if you are standing there reading this sign you are part of the problem. STAY THE FUCK HOME! Best, Sydney.” Note on store front, Sydney, [Twitter](#), July 10, 2021

It is proving to be an unfolding nightmare. For a government that had been beaming with pride at their COVID contract tracing for months, insisting that people could live, consume and move about with freedom as health professionals wrapped themselves round the virus, the tune has changed. The Delta variant of the disease has proved viciously wily in Sydney, New South Wales. Admissions to intensive care units are growing. The first death has just been reported. The number of infections recorded on July 10: 50; the number the next day: 77.

Of concern are the numbers of people who were moving in the community during all or part of their infectious phase. Of the 50 reported cases on Saturday, 37 of those qualified. “That is the number we need to get down to as close as zero as possible,” [stated](#) an alarmed Premier Gladys Berejiklian. “The only conclusion we can draw from this is that things are going to get worse before they get better.”

The 11am press conferences are proving grim affairs tinged by panic. The questions asked are the same as those in other states in Australia where outbreaks took place. What are essential shopping items? How many people are permitted in your home? On each successive occasion, the Premier seemed panicked, even shrill. “Zero means zero!” she has stated at various points. “No visits!”

The most telling element behind the surge of cases is the blithe approach taken to the health orders by the citizenry of Australia’s largest city. This is understandable, given the erratic changes in Berejiklian’s approach to communicating health orders. With an almost manic insistence on keeping areas of the city open, she has confused rather than clarified, hoping that the virus might be contained within various local government areas (LGAs). Erin O’Leary, manager of a café in Newtown, [noted](#) in late June the distinct irony of having the front of her store in lockdown, and the back, not. Andrea Chapman, owner of a design store, had a few [words of wisdom](#) that might well be ringing in the ears of the Premier. “Sometimes you’ve just got to hit everyone hard and everyone sucks it up, then we can

move on.”

The Premier has been the victim of her own success, telling Sydney residents and those in New South Wales that the state was that different from the rest of Australia. They were the “gold standard” to be emulated by all in terms of containing the pandemic. On June 1, the often fawning *Herald Sun* from the Murdoch press stable [praised](#) the Berejiklian government for getting everything right where its Victorian counterpart had failed. “One state is NSW, led by a competent woman who has displayed a sense of proportionality throughout the Covid crisis and has kept people safe while ensuring their livelihoods and liberties are not needlessly destroyed, the other is Victoria.”

Through that same month, as the Delta variant was starting to show heft, there was no reason to worry: sagacious Gladys had things under control, as did everybody else. Those in Sydney [could use](#) their highly attuned “common sense” and “make individual decisions based on their own circumstances.” On June 18, she cautioned against mass gatherings. “Unless you absolutely have to, our strong preference is that you do not engage in any activity.” Business owners were left to decide on how best to operate in the changing circumstances.

Even as the virus had harnessed itself and trotted through the city, the Premier resisted any reference to the “lockdown” term, opting for the softer, milder “stay-at-home” order. Lacking the necessary gravity to be persuaded, individuals moved about with liberty, dropping off children before heading to work, or continuing visits to family members.

Sounding at points comically maternal, Berejiklian has been telling those in Sydney to be honest about where they have been for reasons of contact tracing. Some accounts supplied to the tracers have been inaccurate. Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant [has admitted](#) “having difficulty getting ahead of [transmission] chains”. “We haven’t got time to waste unpicking stories, going back, cross-checking and verifying.” Her advice: “It’s critical that [people] tell the truth the first time.”

Parties and gatherings are being held and a [number of infringement notices](#) have been handed out by police (167 of them on Friday alone). On social media, the hashtag “SydneyMockdown” is trending. The man behind Australia’s punchy response to combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Bill Bowtell, has been regular in his scathing [assessments](#). “Nothing like lockdown lite. No outdoor mask mandate, retailing open and no kilometre radius restriction. Neither short nor sharp as in [Western Australia] or [Queensland].”

The haphazard approach to public health policy is also to be found in the government’s response to shopping and trading practices. The [decision](#) to keep non-essential shopping outlets open, including large retail centres ripe for transmission opportunities, has meant free movement of both people and the virus. Berejiklian “thinks people understand what is required”; a stricter enforcement of orders would produce unintentional “suffering” to those who “can’t access something they really need”. Simon Chapman, professor emeritus in public health at the University of Sydney, could only [express](#) his bemusement. “It’s not rocket science to show that a place with large numbers of people in it is going to be far more of a superspreading environment than a place with small numbers of people.”

Within the New South Wales cabinet are the business-as-usual types such as Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, who argued with colleagues that the lockdown should not be extended to July 16. He now concedes that the already extended lockdown may well have to move

beyond this coming Friday.

Looking wistfully at vaccination rates in the United Kingdom and the United States, Perrottet has this [message](#) for those in his state: "We've got to get to a point where those who want to have a vaccine, get access to one. And at that point, we've got to open up our society, and have the freedoms that we had operating prior to the pandemic." Few would demur from this; the problem lies in the former remark: access to vaccines. On that score, Australians continue to dream, supply continues to be short, and the federal government continues to bungle. Gold standards have, in the meantime, turned into rusted metal.

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