

# Inside the Zero Covid campaign

The urge to eliminate the virus is understandable — but at what cost?

BY [Freddie Sayers](#)



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As I discovered last week, the first rule of ZeroCovid Club is: do not talk about ZeroCovid Club.

“ZeroCovid” is, after all, a term that elicits confusion and, sometimes, outright hostility. Perhaps that’s why, when leading members of the global ZeroCovid movement met for a three-day international conference last Wednesday, it had a far more innocuous title: the [“Covid Community Action Summit”](#).

But even though this increasingly popular school of thought — which holds that we must not return to normal until the virus is completely eliminated within a country — wasn’t explicitly on the billing, its presence was made clear from the outset. In her introductory remarks, the moderator confirmed to the more than 600 registrants and speakers from across the world that “we are here to end Covid through ZeroCovid and CovidZero policies”. More often at the event, held over Zoom and organised by American scientist Yaneer Bar-Yam, speakers preferred to refer to ZeroCovid as an “elimination strategy”.

Yet the purpose of the event was clear: to share evidence and political advice to help campaigners lobby Western governments to abandon any notion of living alongside the virus, and instead to follow the lead of Asia-Pacific nations in aiming to eliminate the disease entirely within their borders. This group is crucially distinct from people who support ongoing lockdown measures to suppress the virus to a level where it is safe to reopen — for ZeroCovid believers, we cannot rest until that level is zero.

On paper, this approach may sound rather sensible. After all, surely we’d all rather live in a world without Covid? Yet having attended last week’s conference, I keep returning to a question that didn’t seem to particularly trouble the speakers: at what cost?

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In the coming weeks, I suspect this is a question we will all be forced to answer. For make no mistake: this is no fringe movement. Their advocates are among the most regular faces in broadcast media; Professor [Devi Sridhar](#), one of its most outspoken advocates, has appeared on Channel 4 News 21 times during the pandemic — more than any other expert.

There’s a UK ZeroCovid [chapter](#), which last month hosted its own well-attended online [conference](#); the Scottish government is [committed](#) to their campaign, alongside Independent SAGE, British trade unions and Labour MPs such as Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott. Meanwhile, influential Tory MPs like Jeremy Hunt [advocate](#) a strategy of “zero infections and elimination of the disease” and routinely refer to the Asian model. Google search results in the UK and US for “ZeroCovid” are at an all-time high. The campaign has momentum.



Judging by last week's conference, it is easy to see why. The campaigners are, for the most part, an impressive, sincere and eloquent group. Many of them are young, telegenic and skilled communicators. But there was a mood — a unanimity of world view — that was unsettling; a fusion of overt progressive-Left politics with an ironclad certainty about their interpretation of the science. They referred to people who disagreed with them as needing to be "educated": "deniers", "right-wingers", "conspiracy theorists", or, perhaps lowest of all, "herd immunity apologists".

More striking, however, was the time given over to messaging, organising and communications. Alongside talks on subjects ranging from how to reduce transmission in universities to which technologies could purify the air in gyms, some sessions felt more like the War Room of a political campaign.

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By [Tom Chivers](#)

"You have to be playing with the theory of mind of your audience," said Tomás Ryan, a neuroscientist at Trinity College Dublin and co-founder of Ireland's "ISAG" group that hopes to persuade the Irish government to adopt a ZeroCovid policy, in a session on strategy. "We've made a lot of tactical errors. We didn't give enough time to selling the reward, which is so we can be like New Zealand." His ISAG colleague Aoife McLysaght, a professor in molecular evolution, agreed: "We were the merchants of doom for a while... we've had to change our messaging. So we are now saying: you can have hugs again. You can go to music festivals. That kind of thing."

The speakers all agreed on one central tactic: to be successful, ZeroCoviders must present themselves, counter-intuitively, as being *anti-lockdown*; it is only in order to quit today's cycle of restrictions, they say, that we need to eliminate the virus completely.

But how to convince Western governments? One place to start could be [two articles](#) written by Tomas Pueyo, a tech and marketing executive who explained during a session on "Communications Strategy & Policy" that his blogposts had garnered over 60 million views. They had even, he claimed, contributed to a global policy change on Covid. For him, it didn't matter that he wasn't an epidemiologist. His skill was in a different kind of viral transmission: online content. "I have experience in virals, in communication, in products that people like and share," he said. "So I designed them for that purpose. I put a narrative structure, and some tips to make them spread virally, and it succeeded." The outcome of the pandemic, he explained, hinges on winning the comms game: "The epidemics of the 21st century are going to be fought more in communication than they are in the lab."

Such a pithy remark is, of course, typical of communications professionals. But why are they now such a central part of the ZeroCovid campaign? Part of the reason might be the sustained vilification aimed at their opposing fringe group — the so-called "Covid deniers". The ZeroCoviders are determined to avoid the same fate. As Tomás Ryan says: "unfortunately we have been presented as the extreme end of the Overton window — the other end being herd immunity and denialist people."

More importantly, I suspect it also stems from the realisation that the implications of a country committing to ZeroCovid are highly political. At the moment, the fundamental offer in Western democracies is: accept these awful restrictions now, and the vaccines will soon offer a

way out. This means that once deaths and the pressure on the health service are reduced to acceptable levels, people will expect to be able to resume their previous way of life.

But for the ZeroCovid, at that point we would need to do the opposite of relax. Instead, we would need to use ongoing “interventions” and test and trace protocols to drive virus levels even lower — even at a time when there is hardly any Covid about. It would need very talented comms professionals to successfully sell this to the British public.

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By Jennie Bristow

At that point, even if — and that’s a very big *if* — Britain was able to reach ZeroCovid within our borders, what then? Most people accept the need for sensible border controls to defend against new variants while the vaccine is still being rolled out. But if our goal is an entirely Covid-free land, why would we ever relax border restrictions? You’d have to wait until the disease were eradicated on a global scale, which even the most committed activists don’t think is possible for years. As Irish minister and former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar [said last](#) week, ZeroCovid is “a promise you could never fulfil”; if you cut off the country, “when do you ever unseal, because then inevitably, you let the virus back in again”?

Still, perhaps the thorniest question is what life would be like *inside* our theoretical ZeroCovid fortress. At last week’s conference, speakers explained that they prefer to use Australia and New Zealand as good examples because they garner a more positive response than when they mention Asian countries.

But the country that invented the approach, one which may be a better guide of a large nation pursuing the strategy after a severe outbreak, is China. Despite the footage of people celebrating in Wuhan on New Year’s Eve — provided by the CCP and obediently carried on global networks such as [CBS](#) and the [BBC](#) — the reality of life in ZeroCovid China is anything but normal. Constantly fearful at the prospect of another outbreak, the country’s already expansive surveillance state has ramped up a gear, ready to withdraw liberty at the slightest sign of Covid. Last month, all 11 million inhabitants of Shijiazhuang [were thrown into lockdown](#) after a local outbreak; one week later, a further 5 million people outside Beijing were [put into lockdown](#) on the basis of a single case. Only this week, Hong Kong launched a policy of “[ambush lockdowns](#)” where residential blocks are sealed off at a moment’s notice.

David Rennie, Beijing bureau chief of *The Economist*, recently gave an astonishingly [candid account](#) of current ZeroCovid life in the Chinese capital:

“China’s strategy, from the start, was to have no infections at all... Still in Beijing, where we have hardly any cases, every time you step outside your door you have to use a smartphone to scan a QR code — every shop, every taxi, every bus, every metro station. You have no privacy at all — it’s all built around this electronic system of contact tracing. To leave Beijing you have to have a Covid test, to come back in you have to have a Covid test.... We basically don’t have the virus here, but the flip side is that they are keeping this place locked down as tight as a drum... It’s very hard to know where Covid containment starts and a Communist police state with an obsession with control kicks in.”

Surely that is the most powerful objection to the approach: that in reality it would require a long-term illiberal regime to achieve and maintain it. ZeroCovid is a totalitarian aim, best delivered by a totalitarian state. Even in Australia, last weekend there was panic buying in Perth as the city [re-entered lockdown in response to a single positive test result](#). So far at least, British voters have not chosen to reject liberal democracy, no matter what the epidemiological allure of a ZeroCovid regime.

For now, the British Government has resisted the campaign's logic, and the Prime Minister continues to make encouraging signals about [easing restrictions](#) and even [summer holidays](#). But as the impact of the vaccine is felt and the number of cases continues to fall, the politically difficult question of what constitutes an [acceptable level of infection](#) will have to be addressed.

Whatever that level is, expect well-spoken ZeroCovid campaigners to say it is too high. At each hesitant step towards opening up society, expect it to be called irresponsible and short-termist. No doubt ZeroCoviders sincerely believe their campaign for a Covid-free world is a noble one. But how successful they are at influencing policy will affect the shape of our society for years to come.

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