

Malcolm Watt

11 January 2021

Health and Environment Committee

Parliament House, Brisbane.

**RE: Submission regarding Public Health and Other Legislation
(Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2020**

The purpose of this submission is to provide the Committee with views held by not only myself but also the proverbial 'silent majority'. Whilst some remarks may reference particular Members of Parliament or political parties, this is done so purely to highlight a particular aspect or issue and is not intended as current political commentary or criticism.

Furthermore, remarks contained herein are not designed to undermine the Chief Health Officer, nor criticise her personal performance thus far. Whilst not all comments regarding Dr Young may be favourable justification will be provided for same and it is certainly acknowledged that she has been tasked with guiding Queenslanders through "uncharted waters" – and nobody should ever be expected to be 100% perfect in every step on such an unpredictable pathway. Whilst there are aspects I would have preferred to have seen handled differently, it is safe to say I do not know of anybody who would rather anyone but Dr Young in the position at the moment, let alone be able to name someone who could have done a better job !

For several decades now, Queensland has placed a high degree of importance and necessity on ensuring openness and transparency in government and by government-related bodies. What occurred under Former Premier Bjelke-Peterson and Former Police Commissioner Terry Lewis outraged Queenslanders so incessantly that The Fitzgerald Inquiry demanded changes be made to ensure transparency and accountability by government and government departments. Those very same mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability have been adhered to by multiple subsequent governments, Commissioners and Directors General almost constantly since the 1980s, and Queenslanders expect no less.

When any particular government, department or government-related person is charged with extraordinary powers Queenslanders (rightly) expect that person to be subject to accountability, checks and balances. It is irrefutable that Dr Young has been charged with such powers since the declaration of the pandemic, yet there appear to be absolutely no "checks and balances" or other accountability measures in place regarding decisions, decision-making, policy introduction or explanation. THAT very issue, I believe, is the primary catalyst in any community-held adverse comments regarding the Chief Health Officer.

THAT is also the very issue, I believe, this Committee/Inquiry MUST remedy.

I submit such mechanisms would have had the very strong potential of preventing the ‘public backlash’ caused by the Chief Health Officer’s/government’s granting of exemption/s to certain people, sports and/or industries based purely on economic issues. Comments expressed by Dr Young, Premier Palaszczuk and other Ministers at the time regarding exemptions granted to Tom Hanks, AFL, NRL, boxing and other actors/performers repeatedly relied upon economic grounds as justification – but at no time differentiated their level of risk. Naturally, all people are similarly susceptible to acquiring this virus through our respiratory process. It could even be argued that those ‘economically important’ people may, in fact, pose a higher risk of transmitting the virus as they are the people with the financial means to have numerous personal staff with whom they come into contact, whereas ordinary Queenslanders do not have such staff – thus that risk of transmission is not present. (I have not included direct quotes or references to those comments as they were so widespread, common and extensively broadcast and published that it could not possibly be ‘necessary’. Nor have I referenced Dr Young NOT being Chief Economic Officer.)

Around the time of the recent election the Opposition requested the Chief Health Officer release to them the reasoning, data or research upon which she relied in making various decisions such as the aforementioned exemptions. It was very extensively reported in the media that no such information was forthcoming.

Given the recent ALP Government Ministers’ and staff ‘integrity transgressions’ it would seem an appropriate time for this Committee, and the newly-formed government, to re-commit to the Fitzgerald values of adherence to ‘checks and balances’, transparency and accountability. A failure to do so will equate to endorsing secrecy, inconsistency and creating the potential for corruption or the perception thereof.

It is acknowledged that there, inevitably, must be someone who makes the decisions but that person should not hold complete and unfettered power, nor should they be beyond accountability – irrespective of who that person may be.

I do not seek to dilute the Chief Health Officer’s powers nor criticise the government’s handling of the pandemic. I do, however, strongly urge this Committee to adhere to the community standards that Mr Fitzgerald instilled into previous governments. It is incumbent upon this Committee to ensure mechanisms are put in place to demonstrate integrity, accountability and ultimately reinforce confidence in the Chief Health Officer, and the office in general.

As someone who joined the Queensland Police Service under The Fitzgerald Report’s ‘new training recommendations’ and then worked in an organisation that was under constant suspicion of wrongdoing and/or corruption, I cannot understate the importance of visible checks and balances, openness and accountability to the public. Only then can the public trust the office !

I would be happy to further discuss any of these issues further if required, so please feel free to contact me via the below details.

Yours truly,

Mal Watt

[REDACTED]

Ph [REDACTED]