



Blessed Virgin of Vladimir
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11 January 2021
Our Ref.: A/2101/1

From: Rev Alexander Borodin
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To: Committee Secretary
Health and Environment Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000
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**RE: Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions)
Amendment Bill 2020 CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

Dear Committee Members,

I write to you as the rector (priest) of Brisbane's largest Russian Orthodox Church, which stands in the working-class suburb of Rocklea, and which has been humbly serving a very large and diverse catchment of the Orthodox Christian community since 1956. My parishioners come from all walks of life and socio-economic levels. They hold a wide range of political views (i.e. supporting both major parties), and they do not shy away from expressing their views to me regularly.

Firstly, please know that I am unused to writing to Parliamentary Committees, and therefore I apologize in advance if what I write is not within the expected norms, but I write to you in good faith and with great respect to your important role as representatives of the people. I am grateful to you for opening the process at last to a level of public scrutiny, as no earlier attempts to consult with my community (or any of our sister Russian Orthodox parishes) have been undertaken to my knowledge on this or any other issue which directly impacts on our community.

MY COMMUNITY BEARS THE SCARS OF GOVERNMENT RESTRICTION

My parish's founding members (and the vast majority of subsequent members) fled communist rule in their homeland as refugees.

In their historical homeland, every aspect of their lives brought under government control. They were not permitted to go to Church to gather for communal prayer (which is a fundamental requirement of the Orthodox faith), or else they were restricted in doing so

(having to follow specific protocols, to gain permission, and to be surveilled when they did go). They were not permitted to trade openly. The ability of their parish churches and small business to financially support themselves was undermined. They had to register their whereabouts, and to apply for permission to travel outside of their local region. They were expected to participate in government-imposed programs that demonstrated their compliance with the regime. They were encouraged to “dob in” those friends and family members who they observed not complying with the regime’s expected set of behaviours. They were told that science is above all other fields of endeavour – that is higher than religion, art, literature, higher even than love – and that if you disagreed, you must be either insane, or an enemy of the state. Indeed, many of my own family’s and my parishioners’ immediate forebears, were indeed labelled as enemies of the state, and were removed from the general population into custody, execution, or at best, had to report to the authorities who they had spoken to, and who they associated with on a regular basis. Arguing in any way with the regime brought upon them a removal of their rights, and/or public ridicule.

It would be fair to say that there is not a family in my parish that does not bear the scars and of the Russian Revolution and its subsequent dysfunctional and malignant forms of government. They are people who were deeply traumatised.

The majority of the members of my community have expressed to me that they recognize strong similarities, and similar modes of operation in relation to the government control that has been imposed on Queenslanders through the emergency powers which were given to the office of the Chief Health Officer. In their historical experience, these government programs began at first slowly, based on ostensibly “good” and justifiable social causes, but later, they build momentum and enter into a phase that is far from beneficial. In such government regimes, usually a crisis would be found (or a public enemy) to justify them, and even if the people implementing the programs were, at heart good people, genuinely seeking to do good and are well-intentioned – nevertheless, the program would take over and drives them eventually to exert a level of control that is total. This is not good for those being controlled, but also it is not good in the long run for those doing the controlling.

Just as under totalitarianism, Queenslanders are now being expected to comply with a plethora of rules (many of which have been contradictory or just impossible to comply with) which have been suddenly sprung on them, and which limit their human rights such as freedom of religion (see Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) to gather in Church to pray, to associate, to exercise their freedom of speech. There are hotlines to report people who do not comply. There are numerous politically-reliable “bots” on public forums who seek to discredit and cyberbully those who question the restrictions into silence. Queenslanders are being told illogical, and contradictory things. One day, we hear that “masks will not help stop viruses”, the next “wear a mask in your car because you are likely not to remember to put it on after you finish your drive”. One day, we are told that gathering in Churches in numbers above 50 is very dangerous, but soon after we are told that gathering for the State of Origin in numbers of 50,000 is completely fine. In all of this, no objective and verifiable evidence has been presented – nothing but “expert opinion” which appears to have been hatched in an echo chamber of like-minded specialist experts rather than a diverse and balanced cross-section of key stakeholders. In the eyes of my community as expressed to me by my parishioners, this level of contradiction and double-speak does not appear to be about public health, but rather about the exercise of total control over the minds of the populace.

A great number of parishioners in my community have concerns that, instead of representing the people, the elected representatives have handed-over control to an unelected bureaucrat who doesn’t answer to the people.

THE POSITION OF THE C.H.O. IS NOT IN A POSITION TO WEIGH SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC RISKS OBJECTIVELY ON ITS OWN.

Many of the concerns that I am hearing from the Russian Orthodox Community stem from the lack of transparent information being provided as to how decisions are being made. They are asking questions like: At what point was a risk management exercise undertaken by the Chief Risk Officer's office in line with ISO 31000 as is typically required in most other fields of endeavour when making major decisions? Did it involve a broad selection of key stakeholders besides just medical experts? Did it solicit a larger set of views from the broader community? Was it progressively updated and maintained throughout? They want to know why they have heard no such thing being undertaken and also whether the government is ignoring well-established risk management practice and instead handing over executive power to a narrow band of experts?

NON-EXTREME RISK OF FATALITY IS NOT IN-AND-OF-ITSELF A VALID REASON TO LIMIT HUMAN BEINGS FROM CONTINUING TO LIVE THEIR LIVES, TO WORK, TO GATHER FOR WORSHIP ETC.

While I'm not aware of anyone in my community who denies the existence of life-threatening diseases, including COVID-19, they have also observed and continually point out to me that the most dangerous effects of this (or any other respiratory disease) to be on those who are already aged and ill, and who are already at, or past the average human life-span. That is, the Infection Fatality Rate only reaches extreme levels for those who are likely at end-of-life anyway. These are people for whom (in any other circumstance) hospital staff will typically not intervene or attempt to resuscitate because they know that eventually everyone dies and beyond a certain point, there is no sense in artificially prolonging life.

To me as a priest, this is a very powerful point that they make.

I am not sure how often the committee members have been there for people who are in the process of dying, but as a priest, I can tell the committee that I have witnessed many people pass away. I have been there with them and their loved ones, administering their last rites, praying for their souls, and comforting those who are saying goodbye. Even prior to this pandemic, the pattern has been very similar in relation to those passing. Nearly all of them have reached ripe old age (e.g. 75 or older), and almost universally, they have had numerous other illnesses. Also, nearly all of them were passing away from some kind of respiratory infection which would barely touch those who are young and healthy. Almost universally, the hospital staff have not attempted to do very much for them beyond providing palliative care – and this appears to have been completely normal and accepted practice up until 2020. Now, suddenly, this new virus causes the CHO to shut down our state.

While saying goodbye to an aged or sick relative is never easy, the sense of relief that I witness on the face of the one such elderly and long-suffering person who is passing, to be free of all of their sicknesses, their suffering and their sorrows – this sense of relief is universal. Similarly, I see in the eyes of their loved ones, the knowledge that their passing at such a ripe old age is indeed a relief for them.

Please remember, that elimination of all risk to human life is objectively impossible, and is therefore not a rational thing to be aiming for.

Yes, for such old and ill people, the mathematical risks faced as a result of this pandemic are somewhat greater than without it, but in the bigger picture, they are not significantly more than what they would face anyway in the circumstances faced by those who are in the twilight years of life, and if we are to think in-line with the well-established principles of risk management, is it worth the chaos that has been imposed on everyone else? Is it worth the loss of work, the anxiety, the bankruptcies and other upheaval? In particular, the lack of ability to properly go to their place of worship and to pray for them? It patently is not.

Further, I have heard an argument being made that, it's not just the risk of fatality, but the long term effects of the virus for those who survive it. The problem with this assertion is that the

virus has only been around for a year, so no one knows what its long term effects are, how long-term they are, nor whether they are really significantly worse than many of the other diseases that we live with – such as Rheumatic Fever, Glandular Fever, Dengue Fever, Ross River Virus and many others. The CHO has not shut down the State due to any of these other diseases that are active in our community, and not should it.

NATURAL VS UNNATURAL DEATH – HOW THE PARLIAMENT IS EXHIBITING COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

I note that the present Queensland parliament has passed legislation to allow late-term abortion (which, in the eyes of Orthodox Christians regardless of their political affiliation is nothing more than infanticide). Similarly, the parliament sought, and still seeks to allow euthanasia. However, for some reason, being exposed to, and battling a virus like COVID-19 somehow triggers a health emergency and allows an unelected bureaucrat to dictate to the people how they can or can't live their lives.

In effect, the Parliament celebrates that fact that Queenslanders have a right to death in an unnatural manner e.g. to kill our unborn offspring against their will, or (eventually) to have oneself killed through euthanasia, but where is the right to stoically live a natural life, to face the normal, recurrent risks thereof which are sent our way? Why is the CHO allowed to cause so much anxiety and fear without (apparently) having undertaking a standard risk assessment exercise in line with ISO 31000? My parishioners and I wonder, why is Parliament not seriously asking such questions and requiring such exercises to be undertaken?

Orthodox Christians are overwhelmingly law-abiding citizens, supporters of good government and the common good. We respect the rule of law, we pray for all of the authorities of this land, and we show love to all in our community regardless of whether they happen to share our views. However, because of our tragic history, we also have a deep understanding of where the desire to do good in the world can easily become tyranny (even if unintended), and this is far worse than any virus because it attacks the very core of society, which is human beings freely living their lives. Irrational fear of death or suffering has been used as a means of implementing such tyranny in the past. It should not be allowed to brought into play now.

THE UNIVERSAL CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT 2019 (QLD) ARE BEING VIOLATED

The directions of the CHO have, over the past year, significantly, and adversely affected the ability of the members of my parish community to freely practice their religion. At times, all places of worship were arbitrarily forced to close. At other times, only small numbers of people were allowed to gather. Still further, social distancing and mask-wearing requirements have made it difficult, if not impossible to practice numerous aspects of our Russian Orthodox faith tradition. Our parish has seen a significant decrease in participation, and in income as a direct result of these restrictions. It has left many people, particularly the elderly, isolated. These things are, objectively an attack on the freedom to practice our religion.

The imposition of a health emergency that limits freedoms such as freedom of religion, freedom of travel, the right to participate in one's community's cultural life, to work, to peacefully take part in meetings, and even to express one's opinion - is objectively immoral and unethical. It contradicts multiple articles of the Universal Charter of Human Rights, as well as multiple sections of the Human Rights Act 2019 (Qld). I am sure that talented lawyers will attempt to argue that there is no violation of human rights, but that would be nothing more than legal sophistry. The fundamental intent and core principles are being violated.

Shutting the places of worship or limiting their operation is to be opposed in all places and all times under the principles of both the Universal Charter and the Human Rights Act.

However, it is on record that the Chief Health Officer has unilaterally, and multiple times in the past 12 months caused places of worship to be closed, or limited to such an extent that they have been bleeding financially, bleeding in terms of participation and bleeding in terms of being able to effectively and efficiently operate their physical infrastructure. My parishioners

have expressed to me that it's very similar to what the Bolsheviks did in Russia and Ukraine after the Russian Revolution.

Gathering to worship in an organized and peaceful way has always been understood by enlightened rulers to be essential to the human condition and to a stable society. No other institution or organization can provide the spiritual care needed by the human being. No mental health program can replace them. Therefore, the CHO should not have an extension of power to limit the operation of places of worship under any circumstance.

MENTAL HEALTH AND LIVELIHOOD

As a parish clergyman of 22 year, I have never before seen such level of anxiety, depression, confusion and anger in the community as I have in the past year, nor have I witnessed so many good and capable people lose their will to work and to be productive, contributing members of society. The loss of income, the loss of gainful employment that many in the community have faced, and are facing, businesses going broke – all this rests squarely in the shoulders of the office of the Chief Health Officer and those who gave that position free reign. Without objectively weighing the economic and societal risks of the state of emergency, without considering the cost to the majority, and without having to suffer any of the direct consequences (such as loss of livelihood), an unelected, privileged, highly-paid, elite official has been allowed to affect the livelihoods of Queensland families without any apparent reference to a broader risk management framework. With all due respect to the incumbent CHO, how is this fair? How does it represent social justice? How is it good for mental health?

Pouring money into creating and maintain hotlines for people to call is not a cure for a mental health crisis. The cure is for the Parliament to do the right thing, to stick to its core business of creating certainty and confidence for the people, and not to pass laws or emergency provisions that limit basic human freedoms.

CONCLUSION

With great respect for your difficult roles as elected representatives, I strongly oppose the extension of expiring provisions for the Chief Health Officer and I humbly beg the Committee to not proceed with it, or if they are to continue, to alter it so that it does not, in any way, impinge on the human rights of Queenslanders as it currently does.

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Alexander Borodin