




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (9.04 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Public Health and Other Legislation (Public Health Emergency) Amendment Bill. We are in the midst of a declared global pandemic. We are also in the midst of a quadrennial local government election and two by-elections. In Australia, as of 18 March, there were 414 confirmed cases of COVID-19, five confirmed deaths, with 94 confirmed cases in Queensland. Unfortunately that number will increase.

We have heard from the government in the last two days that they have been working on the COVID-19 situation since January this year. Now we have a legislative response. We have been given the legislation for an hour and it has been truncated into a two-hour debate. Surely some of those things could have been identified. I know hindsight is a great thing, but it begs the question that, if you have been working on it since January and suddenly we get all these emergent things happen with just two hours of debate, it is a rather interesting situation.

Many members of the House will not have the opportunity to scrutinise this legislation fully. They will not have the opportunity to talk about it and how it affects their communities. At this unprecedented time when we have a pandemic, it does not instil confidence in the community when we see political expediency. We will all be here tomorrow and we could have debated this bill tomorrow.

As I stand here in this parliament, I represent an electorate where many communities and families live in isolation— isolation on properties and in isolated communities. They often feel the disadvantage due to isolation. However, as the seriousness of this situation starts to be fully comprehended, that isolation may become a blessing to them. However, they are concerned about the Queensland economy. They are concerned about jobs. They know there is a health crisis, but they are concerned that this will become an economic crisis, and we will feel it most in the regional areas. Today I had an email from Domino's Pizza in Dalby. They said—

We see the debate happening today around the deferment or freezing of payroll tax. Deferment, as the Labor Government is suggesting, offers nothing. It simply means that at some stage the small or medium business owners will have to come up with a double payment. It will crush businesses and encourage business owners to cut back on staff in the interim.

It is going to have the opposite effect. It is not going to help the economy; it is going to cost jobs. They wanted us to know what a critical policy decision this is for business owners, and they encouraged me to argue the case with the government. I do want to thank Sulay and Prakash, the franchisees at Domino's in Dalby, for pointing out what local businesspeople will face in relation to the Palaszczuk Labor government's payroll tax deferment.

This state is in the middle of local government elections. At this time we need to have local government representatives in place after that election on 28 March. Local government mayors are the heads of the disaster management committees across our state. Our state needs them at this time. We need their local leadership. We need their local knowledge and their workforces. Local government employs some 40,000 staff across Queensland. This may be a tough time for those newly elected

mayors and councillors—and I hope they will be elected on 28 March. This is a balancing act. We need to have local government in our state but we need to ensure that when we act we take into account the health of the wider community. It is a serious balancing act.

This bill seeks to make a number of urgent amendments. I specifically want to talk about those for the City of Brisbane Act, the local government acts and the Local Government Electoral Act. Local governments may be in caretaker mode, but it is disappointing that the LGAQ did not have more time to scrutinise this legislation because they, as the representative body of local governments in Queensland, are not actually in caretaker mode. The purpose of the amendments is to provide flexibility, if required—I emphasise ‘flexibility, if required’—for the election date for the 2020 quadrennial local government elections and the statutory processes for the conduct of the elections to help minimise the serious risks to the health and safety of persons caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The emphasis should be on the fact that there is power for flexibility if required. The measures are temporary and will only apply to the 2020 quadrennial local government elections; however, the government is giving itself significant powers, and I hope these powers will not have to be used. Hopefully, they are being provided as an option if the health advice specifically determines that a local government election has to be postponed or suspended. The bill allows for the suspension or termination of the 2020 quadrennial local government elections if needed—I think the important word there is ‘if’—and confirms the respective caretaker arrangements that apply during the period of suspension.

Many thousands of people have already voted in this election, so it is a difficult time. The bill allows the time frames for the receipt of postal vote applications to be extended for certain electors. I want to make something clear, because there has been a lot of discussion about the time frame for postal vote applications. I am advised that this provision will not allow the ECQ to reopen postal vote applications for the local government elections that are currently underway. It allows flexibility in deciding if a poll is to be conducted by postal ballot if there is a suspension or delay in a particular ballot in the future.

The bill also ensures there are no barriers to appropriately qualified persons being issuing officers, and that may be quite appropriate for some of our Indigenous communities. It also provides more flexible time frames for taking or resuming an adjourned poll. The bill allows the Electoral Commission to: give a direction about how, where and when how-to-vote cards may be distributed and displayed in a polling booth; prohibits the distribution and display of how-to-vote cards or other election material—I assume that includes booth wrap as well—at a polling booth; prohibits a person from canvassing votes in or near polling booths; and permits the display of political statements inside or within six metres of the inside of a polling booth. This will significantly impact the Brisbane City Council election that is underway, and it will impact all parties involved in that election. Basically, it stops the handing out of how-to-vote cards at the Brisbane City Council election.

The bill also allows the making of regulations under the City of Brisbane Act and the Local Government Act about matters that are not provided for sufficiently in these acts as a result of the 2020 quadrennial local government elections not being held in March 2020. That is a very wideranging power. The concerning thing is that, if those regulations are made and this parliament for whatever reason does not come back and sit, there may be no check and balance against those regulations because the only way to scrutinise those regulations is through debate in the parliament.

There is another provision in the bill that provides for flexibility in councillor vacancies that may arise in the election if it is not held in March 2020. I suggest to the government that, if they want to fill council vacancies in this manner in these uncertain times, then that should be done by bipartisan agreement between the government and opposition. Politics should be taken out of the filling of councillor vacancies, particularly at this uncertain time. We have a situation where the state needs local governments. They need mayors and leaders in local communities. They need them more now than ever, and they need them to help with this pandemic.