




Speech By
Hon. Grace Grace

MEMBER FOR MCCONNEL

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COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE BILL

 **Hon. G GRACE** (McConnel—ALP) (Minister for Education and Minister for Industrial Relations) (9.02 pm): I rise to support the COVID-19 Emergency Response Bill 2020 and all of the regulation-making powers that that bill contains. We have heard from many members about the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in at the moment with a worldwide pandemic. I congratulate the Premier and the ministers that I share the cabinet with on the work that we have been doing to ensure that Queensland is leading the nation in addressing COVID-19, not only its impact on the health and wellbeing of its citizens but also the manner in which we acted very quickly when this came to light. As a result, we find ourselves in a terrific situation at the moment where we are seeing a reduction in the number of positive cases and hopefully some light at the end of the tunnel.

This pandemic has had, without a doubt, a great impact on many citizens of Queensland and Australia. Compared to the country which my family came from—Italy—and the circumstances that they find themselves in, and compared to the US with its slowness to move, we moved very quickly here in Queensland. In some cases we took other states and leaders with us, kicking and screaming all the way. In hindsight we are all geniuses. I congratulate the Premier. We started the work here in Queensland. No-one can deny that. The record speaks for itself. We were the ones out there first saying this is an issue that must be addressed on a national basis, it will become a national crisis and it will affect the citizens not only of Queensland but of Australia.

Most of us would know people who have lost their jobs. My own daughter, who at the moment is in Melbourne working for the Malthouse Theatre, has not been paid for five weeks. Her flatmate, who works in the theatre, is in a similar situation. My nephew who moved from Sydney to take up a job with a limousine company here in Queensland has not had any work. Who is renting limousines at the moment? His girlfriend and her father, who also moved to the Gold Coast for the same company, have not been getting any work. My best friend's son, a pilot for Qantas, has been stood down and is not receiving any funding. I could go on and on about constituents in my area who have been stood down, are not working and are not receiving any money.

I welcome the regulations contained within the bill. In particular, I want to address the regulation amendments in relation to the rental relief framework, along with the commercial arrangements that we will be putting in place for commercial properties. We do not have a small business commissioner in Queensland and it will be great to establish one. I congratulate the minister on that. This will increase the likelihood of small business non-residential lease disputes being resolved earlier and avoid those protracted negotiations that often happen, the additional cost for small business and reduce strain on existing mediation and resolution services. That is fantastic for an area like my electorate that has many commercial businesses—small, medium and large. I know that they will welcome a much more streamlined process should they be having any issues with regard to this extraordinary situation we all find ourselves in.

In relation to the assistance that we have been giving to some of these businesses, I have some figures on the payroll tax rebates. The amount of \$300 million has already been paid out to 11,000 businesses. They will not pay any payroll tax for the rest of this year, which gives them a cash flow,

which is what has been affecting many of these businesses. This is a great saving for them. In the Brisbane inner city alone, around \$65 million has been paid back to around 1,500 businesses. I have had calls from people in those businesses saying to me how fantastic it has been that they have received this money which gives them cash flow during these difficult times. I commend the minister on those initiatives. In relation to the loans: \$200 million, 14,000 businesses, 18,000 jobs.

When it comes to the rental relief framework, nobody expected the situation owners and renters find themselves in today. In my electorate I probably have one of the highest percentages. The latest profile of my electorate had about 63 per cent of residents as renters. For that many renters we have just as many landlords. I want to declare an interest here. My register of interest includes properties that I have an interest in.

The majority of people in my electorate get on and do the right thing. No matter what it is in relation to COVID-19, the scare campaign coming from those opposite, the fearmongering, the absolute exaggeration and hysteria is breathtaking. One little thing happens and we hear whingeing, whining and carrying on. Those opposite are absolutely suffering from irrelevance. What a contrast that is to the federal area where both the opposition and government are getting on with it. Here all we have is a bunch of whingeing, whining, complaining, carping irrelevant nobodies. It is a shame that they put fear in people. I spoke to the minister in relation to the rental area and it was always going to be a balanced approach. How many of those opposite picked up the phone and spoke to the minister in relation to this matter? Not one of them would have. The whingeing, the fearmongering and the carping that went on is a disgrace at a time when both renters and tenants would be suffering because of this pandemic.

Both landlords and renters have found themselves in a difficult position. If a landlord loses a tenant, it is difficult to pick up a new one given the number of jobs lost. I know that landlords have been doing all they can to keep their renters, because as people are losing their jobs it is becoming more difficult to find new tenants. In turn, renters do not want to find themselves on the streets, so they will not do anything against their landlord. That covers the majority of cases.

The minister brings this legislation to the House following discussions and having listened to people, which is what we do. As a great Labor government we take a balanced approach. That is always the case when it comes to how we negotiate these requirements. Those opposite, with their whingeing and fearmongering, are making disgusting and outlandish statements. They salivate at the thought that there is something that they can exaggerate to bring about complete hysteria.

I congratulate the minister on the bill before us. It takes a balanced approach. It will determine which people are affected by COVID-19. Only those renters will be able to negotiate with the employer and demonstrate—it was always going to be demonstrated; that was always going to be the case—their situation. We will implement a freeze, because the national cabinet decided that they needed to do something to protect renters. No-one wants to see people out on the street during a pandemic. We are in a pandemic. It is not a walk in the park. It is not a merry-go-round. It is a pandemic crisis and we want to do the best for everyone. If people just calmed down and stopped the hysteria, we would get on with business in this state and we will get out of this much sooner—

Mr Hart interjected.

Ms GRACE:—despite those irrelevant comments from the member for Burleigh. The bill outlines how a tenancy can be extended in extreme hardship. It introduces protections for people experiencing domestic and family violence. Tonight we have heard from the minister about such situations. I feel sick when I hear that because people cannot leave their houses domestic violence is rising. It absolutely saddens me to hear that. This bill provides for those conditions in a balanced way, after listening to the circumstances.

The bill provides clarity about appropriate entry to property. You cannot just enter a property if someone tests positive for COVID-19. There has to be a balanced approach to how you do that. This regulation will enable that to happen. The bill introduces compulsory conciliation to allow parties to reach agreement around rent. Real estate friends have rung me. They know that we are a balanced and fair government. They say, 'Grace, surely this is not right?' They have even referred to the relevance of those opposite.

In addition, a regulation under the act gives the minister the power to publish guidelines. I know the guidelines give all the answers to the questions that those opposite have raised tonight and they do so in a balanced way, setting things out clearly and properly. If we pass the regulations, they will assist tenants and owners in reaching agreement. As I have said, most parties would reach agreement; most would do the right thing.

To ensure that these laws protect people, a COVID-19 housing security subcommittee will be established to oversee implementation and advise the government on any adjustments required. Even if unforeseen issues arise during this worldwide pandemic, we can always go back and look at it again. Nothing could be more balanced than that. I commend the changes. I commend the bill. I congratulate

the minister on working through these issues. The national cabinet decided that there will be no evictions in hardship cases. That came out of the Prime Minister's mouth and we are implementing it now. These regulations will ensure that people are protected.

Members opposite sound like a broken record. During these times I ask them to stop their whingeing, stop their whining and stop their fearmongering. These are worldwide serious pandemic health issues. I ask them to get on board and help Queensland get through this by looking after our community, as we have done from the word go. Ours was the only state that did that. Our Premier was the first one to come out about COVID-19. History will write itself in that regard. You cannot change what happened. You cannot change the books. The whole time I have been speaking, the member for Burleigh has not stopped making irrelevant, idiotic and absolutely baseless remarks. That describes the remarks of all of those on the opposition benches. I commend the bill to the House.