




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (EXTENSION OF EXPIRING PROVISIONS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (2.13 pm): It is always interesting to follow the member for Mudgeeraba. I note that the opposition will not be opposing this bill, which is good to hear. The member talked about improved communication. I would think they should reflect on where the opposition was 12 months ago when they did not follow clinical advice and called 64 times for the borders to be opened.

I rise to support the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2020. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, on 29 January 2020 a public health emergency was declared under section 319 of the Public Health Act. Fast-forward a year; the numbers are stark. As at 1 February 2021 the World Health Organization reported over 102 million confirmed positive cases and a staggering 2.5 million deaths globally. Australia has experienced a far lesser burden from COVID-19 than other countries. In Queensland as at 1 February 2021 there were 1,310 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and six deaths relating to the virus.

We made one recommendation: that this bill be passed. Our committee invited stakeholders and subscribers to make written submissions on the bill. We received 124 submissions. On 18 December 2020 we also received a written briefing from Queensland Health in response to matters raised in submissions. The committee held a public hearing on 22 January this year. As stated in the explanatory notes—

The amendments made to Chapter 8 of the Public Health Act allowed for:

- the Governor-in-Council to extend the declared public health emergency for up to 90 days (*Public Health (Declared Public Health Emergencies) Amendment Act 2020*, which received assent on 7 February 2020;

I would like to thank all of the staff of Queensland Health, the director-general, Dr John Wakefield, and the Chief Health Officer, Dr Jeannette Young, who has only just given a caucus briefing on the vaccine rollout—

An opposition member: Caucus?

Mr HARPER: No, not caucus. I hope you learned. I hope you were all paying attention because it is very important.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gerber): Through the chair.

Mr HARPER:—for their incredible work and leadership as part of Queensland Health's response to COVID-19. I would also like to thank all allied health staff and emergency services for the work they have collectively done throughout COVID-19. Throughout 2020 they all worked incredibly hard to keep Queenslanders safe and allowed businesses to re-open in a COVID-safe way.

This bill will allow the current legislative response measures that have been implemented by our government to continue for a further six months until 30 September 2021. The bill will continue the amendments made by the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Act 2020. The provisions give emergency powers to the Chief Health Officer and

emergency officers to make directions to limit and respond to the spread of COVID-19 in Queensland. These powers have been absolutely critical and were core to the success of our government's health response. They allowed the implementation of requirements to restrict the movement of people and for people to enter hotel quarantine. The bill provides for the continuation of the amendments under the Mental Health Act.

Even as we start the vaccine rollout in Queensland we must never be complacent about the risks of COVID-19. Our health service must be able to respond quickly to any emerging risk of COVID-19 entering and spreading throughout Queensland. The extension of the current legislative framework will allow us to do just that. The Chief Health Officer has to be able to respond swiftly to any threat of COVID impacting our Queensland community. As at 1 February 2021 there were 19 public health directions in force in Queensland. Current public health directions relating to COVID-19 include some of the following: directions for aged care, border restrictions, COVID-19 testing for quarantine facility workers, declared hotspots, disability accommodation services, hospital visitors, mandatory face masks, movement and gathering, and quarantine and COVID-19 testing for international air crew.

I would like to share some positive comments from some of the submitters who wrote to us and appeared at our public hearing a month ago. Support for the bill was generally expressed on the basis that Queensland's Chief Health Officer, Dr Jeannette Young, was competent, professional, trustworthy and responsible for keeping Queenslanders safe from the COVID-19 pandemic. I am sure that all members would agree with those remarks. There was also recognition, particularly at the public hearing, that without a strong health response the economic impact would far exceed the current economic difficulties being experienced in Queensland. It is worth noting there are other jurisdictions in Australia that provide their Chief Health Officer the same level of responsibility. The Queensland Mental Health Commissioner, Ivan Frkovic, outlined the need for the emergency provisions. He said—

A pandemic of this nature requires special and sometimes urgent measures to ensure appropriate, quick and effective responses to ensure public health and safety. Such responses can have whole-of-life and whole-of-population mental health wellbeing impacts ... Queensland has managed the pandemic extremely well.

In addition, the Queensland Human Rights Commissioner, Scott McDougall, commented in relation to the CHO's emergency powers. He said—

Clearly, the Queensland government has taken its obligation to take positive steps to protect the right to life very seriously and in this regard we acknowledge the work of the CHO in making directions that have prioritised the preservation of life.

The bill was also supported by professional organisations in the health sector. The Australian Medical Association Queensland expressed overall support for extending the CHO's powers until 30 September 2021 and extending the amendments to the Mental Health Act and the Public Health Act with regard to hotel quarantine. The AMA also congratulated the Queensland government on the work done to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in Queensland, noting that—

... Queensland acted quickly in enforcing lockdown restrictions and closing borders to the states with high community transmission rates, leading to no community transmission ... to date.

We had some submitters objecting to this bill for their own reasons. I would like to respond with this observation to put it in perspective. We have over five million people in Queensland. I believe after speaking to thousands of my own constituents in Thuringowa over the last year that the bulk of our state supports the outstanding work done by our Chief Health Officer, who should be applauded for her work over the last year in dealing with COVID-19.

I thank the hardworking team in Queensland Health who worked over the Christmas period. Our committee did not stop either, and I would like to thank and acknowledge all of the committee members for doing that work over the December-January period. I also thank our secretariat. We did a lot of work in a very short time frame to get this important report before the House, and it was tabled on 12 February. I support the bill.