




Speech By
Linus Power

MEMBER FOR LOGAN

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COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr POWER** (Logan—ALP) (11.58 am): The public health and safety measures that the Palaszczuk government put in place through this bill continue to keep Queenslanders safe. Every member of this House knows that our nation has been unable to obtain sufficient supply of COVID-19 vaccine and that this legislation remains vital. We continue to live with the threat of COVID-19 and we will do so for some time. Steadily, though, as we are able to vaccinate those who are most vulnerable to death or serious long-term disease, this risk will change. We can reduce this risk, but let us be clear that it does not eliminate all risk. We can reduce risk to Queenslanders by vaccinating those who serve us in our hospitals, airports and quarantine accommodation. Because the vaccine does not eliminate the passing of the virus, we must also vaccinate the households of those people who take risks to keep us safe.

Even as we in the Economics and Governance Committee met to consider the bill and to conduct hearings, the state was once again reminded of the risk as we paused to deal with concerning cases of community transmission. I recognise and support what was described this morning as a surgical intervention to ensure we stopped the spread of COVID. Unfortunately, the member for Clayfield described such preventative measures as hammer blows.

I ask members of the House to cast their minds back to March 2020. If the Treasurer had suggested that from that time until now we would have been creating more jobs than New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania combined, we would have heard the member for Clayfield snigger and be supercilious about those facts. If we had heard—

Mr NICHOLLS: I rise to a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I take personal offence and ask the member to withdraw.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Bush): Member for Logan, personal offence has been taken and I ask you to withdraw.

Mr POWER: I withdraw. If the Treasurer had asserted then that Queensland would be creating not just more jobs than New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania combined but over 62,800 jobs—a record increase in jobs in Queensland in that period—we would have heard those opposite, including the member Clayfield, cast aspersions on that strong growth.

Mr NICHOLLS: I rise to a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take personal offence at that matter and I ask that the member withdraw. It seems that the member is trying to get around the previous Deputy Speaker's ruling about the withdrawal.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hart): Member for Logan, the member has taken personal offence. I ask you to withdraw.

Mr POWER: I withdraw. We saw that those opposite did not believe in the plan to keep Queensland safe and putting the necessary safeguards in place. If we had suggested that there would be an unemployment figure with a five in front of it then those opposite—and I will not mention any names—would have—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Logan, I draw you back to the long title of the bill.

Mr POWER: The COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill is about protecting our economy and the safety of Queenslanders. That is why I am talking about how important these measures have been in the last 12 months, including getting our unemployment figure down to one with a five in front of it. If we had suggested that 12 months ago, those opposite would have laughed at the suggestion. They did not want to support the plan we put in place which we knew would keep Queenslanders safe and also strengthen our economy.

We have, as the Treasurer said this morning, reacted with surgical precision to keep both our economy and our community safe. I have spoken before about the false choice that the opposition presented that we had to choose between either our economy or the health of our seniors. We know that the LNP's policy of pushing 64 times to open our borders would have risked the health of Queenslanders. It is absolutely clear now that it would also have done damage to our economy. We cannot have the confidence to travel, to buy or to invest if we cannot be sure that our health is also being looked after. As was said this morning, when it comes to protecting both our economy and our health, it is this government that is backing Queenslanders. The Economics and Governance Committee recommends that the bill be passed so that we can continue to protect Queenslanders.

The committee asked for written submissions and received 10 submissions, received a written briefing from departments, requested and received written advice on the submissions from departments and held a public hearing. As I said earlier, we were reminded of the threat of COVID-19 by the cases of community transmission coming from overseas returning travellers in our quarantine hotels so the committee made the decision to hold a socially distanced hearing, with submitters appearing via videoconference and teleconference. I thank the submitters for taking the time to do that and for setting up their systems. The submissions and transcripts are available on the EGC webpage.

The bill continues the ability of local governments to respond to COVID-19 by making extraordinary decisions for the 2021-22 financial year if needed. Although the provision has existed previously during the pandemic, our world-leading response to the pandemic by Queenslanders, including the response of many of our local governments, no local government has had to use these powers and is unlikely to do so. We acknowledge that the minister has oversight of these decisions. I note that local governments can also use the ordinary annual process to make these decisions. These provisions are cautious preparations for an unknown future. We also noted that these measures expire on 30 June 2021.

The bill contains measures for the ECQ to safely conduct local government elections if required. This gives Queenslanders the confidence to know that any required by-election could be held safely during the pandemic. We note the legitimate concerns that some of the activities and the transparency around the watching of the counting ballots is impacted to ensure the safety of voters, volunteers and election workers. We note that these measures are temporary. We hope that we can continue to keep Queenslanders safe and they will not be needed to be used.

We also noted the extension of exemptions relating to local government meeting provisions. While we note that these meetings must be conducted safely, it is also vital that the public has access, either in person or electronically. I urge all councils to ensure that they hold meetings in a larger than usual chamber so that they can put in place a COVID-safe plan and have members of the public observe. This should be done in addition to the live streaming of meetings. Councils have had sufficient time to put these measures in place so that this process can at all times have the transparency that ratepayers deserve.

The bill also extends the provisions of previously passed COVID-19 emergency response legislation. It is a credit to the ministers who put these measures in place that they have gained widespread community acceptance. In fact, the committee received feedback that there is some support from the Law Society and the CCIQ to consider making these changes permanent. The member for Clayfield said there was in principle support for some of these measures being made permanent. I urge the minister to do this carefully. For instance, I am sure the opposition would not support the measures around local government elections and local government meetings being made permanent. We want to see some of those things return to normal. No doubt the government will consider these submissions carefully in the future, but for now the provisions are only temporary and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keeping our state safe through the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic is essential and well supported by the people of Queensland. It has served us well and may be crucial in the future. I urge the House to pass the bill.