




Speech By
Hon. Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Record of Proceedings, 20 April 2021

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities) (4.44 pm): I rise to support the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up a myriad of challenges for Queenslanders and all levels of government across our state and across the nation. I would like to commend the members of the Economics and Governance Committee for their diligence, their consultation and their constructive approach to this legislation. In particular, I would like to thank the chair of the committee, the member for Logan, for his dedication to the detail of this important legislation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown just how important it is to move in a quick and timely fashion, and local governments have been great partners with us in doing just that. In situations like this when governments need to act swiftly and decisively to meet an urgent and emerging need, the right legislative framework is vital. That is why a year ago we acted to put the right framework in place with the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act 2020. This was later updated with the passing of the Justice and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Emergency Response) Amendment Act 2020, providing the extension of a range of measures to the end of April this year to allow proper consideration of a range of pandemic impacts, not least the impact and effect of border and other restrictions that have helped us keep Queenslanders safe.

The flexibility we have built into our management of the pandemic has meant we can adapt quickly to evolving needs and emerging issues as we have done through our agriculture coordination group in making sure we could respond quickly and appropriately while helping the agriculture sector deal with pandemic related issues. The legislation we are debating today ensures that the legislative framework continues to evolve to meet the evolving challenges that COVID-19 presents our state and extends the expiry dates of many of the provisions of the previous act to ensure the Queensland government can continue to respond appropriately.

The integrity of elections is of critical importance in any democracy, so ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place to facilitate just, accurate and accessible election processes for our local councils is vital to ensure Queensland communities continue to have responsible local representation. That is why extending the arrangements putting some flexibility around the holding of local government elections and by-elections is so important, and this is another key function of this bill. That flexibility can include the ability of the local government minister to delay the date of a local government election by more than two months if this is deemed necessary for the smooth running of the election and for community safety when it comes to COVID-19. These arrangements ensure that the impacts and risks associated with COVID-19 do not force impossible timetables on local governments or the Electoral Commission while also maintaining the democratic right of voters to take part.

The pandemic has put unprecedented pressures on federal, state and local government budgets, and we have quite rightly invested heavily in the economic drivers that will grow our economy now and long into the future. These economic pressures have been particularly difficult for local governments, so it is sensible to extend the arrangements that allow councils to make financial and revenue-raising decisions outside of the constraints of a meeting fixed at a single point in the calendar. Today's bill extends the emergency arrangements through to the end of September for many of the provisions of the emergency legislation.

One thing this pandemic has done is create an environment where all levels of government need to work together, both with each other and with industries like the agriculture industry, to make sure we are getting the best possible outcomes for Queenslanders. I am proud to be part of a government that has helped to make that happen. This legislation will extend the emergency provisions particularly as they pertain to local governments.

The Palaszczuk government has received praise from many quarters for its management of the COVID-19 pandemic and its successful efforts to keep Queenslanders safe. As well as taking a sensible approach to border arrangements and restrictions when necessary, this government has also received praise for the economic recovery plan that is now driving Queensland's economy into the future and ensuring the jobs and livelihoods of Queenslanders are front and centre—exactly where they should be. Our approach and our plan was endorsed by the people of Queensland at last year's election, and we are grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve every Queenslanders.

Queensland has led the nation in many ways when it comes to managing the pandemic. We were the first state to declare a public health emergency, we were the first state to declare agriculture as an essential industry and we were the first state to trial on-farm quarantining to ensure our hardworking farmers could access workers from the Pacific region to support their harvest and planting work.

All of us are looking forward to when this pandemic and its knock-on effects will end, but the reality is that it is still a fast-evolving situation. Few if any could have predicted that early suggestions of having millions of Australians vaccinated by the end of March could not in fact be made a reality. This legislation continues the Palaszczuk government's legacy of sensible and practical management of the pandemic. I again congratulate the committee and its chair, and I commend the bill to the House.