




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.33 pm): I rise to make a brief contribution on the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill. I rise to support the bill and support generally the extension of the emergency powers. We are clearly not yet finished with the COVID-19 pandemic, either internationally or domestically, so it is important that those emergency provisions and powers are extended to allow our health workers and the Public Service more broadly to continue with that vitally important response to the pandemic. I will take the opportunity though to reiterate what I have said previously.

Given that we are still in the thick of the COVID-19 response, it is vitally important that the government initiates or reinitiates an inquiry or inquiries to provide parliamentary oversight of that response. I will make it clear for anyone who might want to dispute it that I have all of the respect in the world for the Chief Health Officer, the DG of the health department, all of those senior public servants and all of our health workers, but that is no reason for us to abrogate our responsibility here in this place to maintain parliamentary oversight of the exercise of what are extraordinary powers for extraordinary times. It is so fundamental to the work that we do here that we do not outsource our responsibilities or hand over the vitally important oversight of such extraordinary powers in the Public Service.

Let us not forget that less than a year ago the Premier commenced parallel inquiries into the health and the economic responses to this pandemic. Both of those inquiries were required to report back within three months after the conclusion of the public health emergency that was declared under the Public Health Act at the beginning of last year—that is, within three months of the completion of that. The public health emergency is ongoing—that declaration is ongoing—and yet the government has taken a position now that the inquiry that it initiated is no longer necessary. In the last parliament the health committee tabled only an interim report in September last year, having had the inquiry initiated back in April. The Economics and Governance Committee has tabled nothing—literally a six-month inquiry that produced nothing. The chair of the Economics and Governance Committee has given us a rollicking little trip down memory lane and through history in his contribution, but still we have seen nothing from six months of committee work on that inquiry.

It is arguable and brighter minds than me have told us that we have not yet seen the worst of the economic fallout here in Queensland or nationally. The federal supports are going to run out next month and we still have no international tourism market and no international student market. This is when the full brunt of the economic impacts of this pandemic will be felt, so state government decisions about what economic supports it is going to provide are more important now than ever before. These are decisions that are not in any meaningful way tied to the health advice, but it is still important that we have some oversight of those decisions.

We are also arguably dealing in coming months with the most important part of our health response as the vaccine rollout takes place. This is the point where the health response and government policy settings are, in some respects, most in need of scrutiny. As more of us are vaccinated

in Queensland, it is ever more complicated to shift and to readjust our approach to restrictions that have been imposed and that could in the future be imposed under health directions. How we respond to the inevitability of more cases of COVID-19 in coming months or years is really important, because more infections are inevitable.

We all sat in the briefing with the Chief Health Officer today who told us that the vaccine will not prevent infection. It will not do that and we will continue to have cases of COVID-19, even if we had 100 per cent vaccination coverage. So how will we respond to cases as they emerge in the community when the rollout is incomplete? This is the point at which we have to explicitly acknowledge the distinction between health advice and political decisions that are made on the basis of that health advice and even beyond that in terms of those political decisions that cannot be based on any health advice because they are political decisions in the context of a global pandemic.

The parallel inquiries that were undertaken were a good start. I think it makes much more sense to have a standing committee—a select committee—that looks at this as a holistic concern for the state. I will make the case again: in the absence of any action from the government to refer such an issue to a standalone committee, I implore the chairs of those existing committees to take up their work again and to recognise that the health committee put together an interim report and that it is important that that information come out.

During the last parliament I sat in those hearings for the health committee and the Chief Health Officer does not care about scrutiny. She has done a damn fine job and I am sure she would welcome the opportunity to present the good news story. If that is all it is, then that is great. If it can help our interstate or our international counterparts to understand how we have responded here in Queensland, that is worth doing. If it just helps us in future pandemics—if we have any similar situations unfold in years to come and it helps us in that circumstance—that is reason enough to hold an inquiry.

I want to thank the committee for the work it has done and thank the secretariat, as always, for the work that it puts in behind the scenes. Once again before I sit down I want to thank all of our health workers in Queensland and all of those frontline workers who have done the hard yards to keep us safe.