




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (5.32 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021 which extends the expiry date for various provisions to respond to the ongoing pandemic. I will be supporting the bill, as I have done with various measures introduced by the government to limit the spread of COVID-19. Nevertheless, I do note that in simply extending the same provisions to the end of September this bill still does not do enough to protect some of our most vulnerable Queenslanders or to address the economic impacts of the pandemic on workers and renters.

The government's abject failure to protect renters during and beyond this pandemic is one of the greatest disappointments and missed opportunities. The bill extends the operation of the regulation for commercial and retail leases through to 30 September this year. While the actual provisions have expired, it preserves the rights of a lessee under these leases to continue to seek rent relief in respect of the relevant periods, to seek to mediate a dispute through the Small Business Commissioner, whose ongoing operation is also provided for in the bill, or to apply to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal to resolve the dispute following an unsuccessful mediation.

It is incredibly telling that the government continues to provide concessions for commercial lessees after prematurely ending the evictions ban for residential tenants. These are people for whom their lease is not just a business but their home. The government has shown time and again that it believes the right for private businesses to make a profit is more important than the rights of people to have their most basic needs met. There is no more fundamental need than housing.

I continue to receive emails from people in my electorate who are terrified of losing their home because their landlord has an almost unfettered power to kick them out for no reason at all. The so-called evictions moratorium during the pandemic was weak to start with and now that it has gone the government is still prevaricating on its promised renters' rights legislation, almost three years after that promise was made to the people of Queensland. Meanwhile Queenslanders are struggling to find a home for them and their family in an increasingly tight rental market. The fact that a renter can be evicted from their home for no reason, that there are absolutely no limits on how much landlords can charge in rent and renters are prevented from having the most basic things they need to put down roots, like hanging a picture on a wall or keeping a pet, should not be acceptable, least of all in a global pandemic.

What it really came down to when the government decided who to help most during the COVID-19 pandemic was how wealthy and powerful are you? How much can you threaten us in the *Courier-Mail*? Are you someone like the REIQ who can afford a full-page spread in the *Courier-Mail* and a sustained attack on any protections for renters? Great! Gold star! We will water down our laws and actually expand your ability to kick someone out of their home. If you are a teacher, a nurse or another

Public Service worker busting a gut to keep us and our kids safe you get a wage freeze—in real terms a wage cut during a recession. If you are a mining corporation you get a royalties freeze. Big gold star there!

In this bill the Labor government is continuing its pattern of siding with big corporations over ordinary people by extending the date for the gambling industry to pay its deferred taxes from 30 June to 30 September. Where are these special deals for ordinary people? The bill before us today still allows the government to retrospectively refund taxes to their mates in the gambling lobby—to the same industry bleeding millions of dollars from ordinary working people's pockets with pokies that are designed to addict and exploit. It is truly disgraceful to prop up these industries while more than 47,000 people languish on the social housing waiting list and thousands of kids go to school hungry.

I support the fairly common-sense provisions in the bill to allow local governments to increase or reduce rates for their 2021-22 financial year via extraordinary decision, to provide flexibility for local government by-elections or fresh elections held during COVID-19 and to allow local government and committee meetings to be held online.

I also support the extension of amended quorum requirements for Parole Board hearings to three members, but I note this goes nowhere near what is needed to address the parole crisis in Queensland at the moment. As I told the House earlier today, the Parole Board is currently so under-resourced and overloaded that the applications of at least 1,500 people are outside the legally allowed time frame for decision. The board says applications made today likely will not be heard until December this year, which means there are or will be potentially thousands of Queenslanders in prison when they should not be. Meanwhile, prisons will continue growing dangerously overcrowded and the government's only answer is to build more of them.

The Prisoners Legal Service estimates this crisis is costing the state an extra \$3.9 million per month. That is not even to mention the significant economic impacts on those people held in prison who are missing opportunities for income and housing. While the minister's response in question time today confirms that a temporary fourth board has been established to consider parole applications, it is not clear when that board was established, how long it will be in place and what the government's long-term plan is.

Ms FENTIMAN: Mr Speaker, I rise to a point of order on relevance. I am not sure how this is relevant to the bill currently before the House and I ask the member to come back to the substantive issues in the bill.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Lui): I ask you to come back to the long title of the bill.

Mr BERKMAN: As I have said, the bill does make provision for the extension of amended quorum requirements for Parole Board hearings. That is clearly in response to the increase in extraordinary circumstances applications during COVID-19. This has clearly exacerbated the backlog, but it is by no means the start and end of the issue. Thousands of people in prison are there on parole suspensions, some for violations as minor as a failure to report, and they are waiting months and months for their matter to be considered.

The longer they are stuck in prison the more difficult it will be for them to get back on their feet and the more likely they are to reoffend. In the long term, to address the root causes of offending we need a better plan than the government's lock-them-up approach. We need things such as building more public housing, legalising low-harm drugs and justice reinvestment.

The bill also continues the lack of any proper mechanism for public scrutiny of the government's response to COVID-19, taking the health, regulatory and economic responses together. With the vaccine rollout underway, this level of scrutiny is arguably more important than ever. The government has had to rapidly adjust its procedures to bring forward requirements that healthcare staff treating COVID-19 patients are vaccinated after a cluster of community transmission grew from the infection of an unvaccinated nurse at the Princess Alexandra Hospital. Many people were rightly surprised to learn that that rule was not already in place. Without forgetting the role that the federal government must play in the rollout of the vaccine and the frankly shocking job they are doing of that so far, that seems like a pretty significant mistake made without genuine oversight or scrutiny from this parliament.

It is worth noting that the vaccine supply issues hampering Queenslanders' access to the vaccines could have been avoided if we had a publicly owned pharmaceutical company capable of domestically manufacturing vaccines. The Greens brought to the election a plan for a Queensland public pharmaceutical company similar to the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories or CSL, which had that capacity until it was privatised by the federal Labor government in 1994. It is a true shame that not only is the public missing out on revenue from a publicly owned pharmaceutical company today but also our community is at greater risk as we scramble to access vaccines from international suppliers.

During debate on the COVID-19 Emergency Response Bill 2020, I moved amendments to create a new statutory parliamentary committee with a non-government chair, the COVID-19 oversight committee. In contrast to the brief and flawed inquiries started by the Economics and Governance Committee and the health committee in the last parliament, the COVID-19 oversight committee would inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly on the whole of the Queensland government's response to COVID-19. At least this time the government got in early enough to put this bill through the committee inquiry process, but with a government chair and the general workings of the committees we all know how ineffectual that process can be.

In general, so far the state government's response has been subject to very minimal parliamentary scrutiny, effectively leaving it up to journalists to examine the health, regulatory and economic measures in place. Granted, they have done a good job at getting information out from the daily press conferences, but they have not and cannot conduct the kind of direct in-depth scrutiny that an independent committee could. During the debate on the COVID-19 Emergency Response Bill 2020, I said that, while Queensland's public health response has been strong so far and we should all feel very proud and fortunate for that, we can take nothing for granted. At estimates when I asked about the infection risks in hotel quarantine, including staff working multiple jobs, the minister's response was, 'I think the results speak for themselves.' That was just a few short weeks before an outbreak in those very hotels threw Brisbane into a three-day lockdown.

I have said many times before that the government deserves credit for taking the health advice seriously and so do our incredible frontline workers whose efforts have kept community transmission low in Queensland. However, taking a so-far-so-good approach is not good enough. This year is vitally important. It has been dubbed the 'year of the variant'. It is a year when public trust is absolutely crucial during the vaccine rollout and it is a year when thousands more people will be dropped into poverty by the federal government's refusal to extend JobSeeker. This bill would have provided a perfect opportunity to introduce proper oversight of the government's responses in this all-important year. I will continue to acknowledge the government when they are doing the right thing and point out these missed opportunities and shortcomings in the government's response.