




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (11.47 am): I rise to address the Public Health and Other Legislation (Further Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill, including to foreshadow some amendments that I will propose to the bill. This bill extends the various special COVID-19 provisions until 30 April 2022. The Greens will again be voting in favour of that extension because, as I said in the last debate on special COVID provisions, there is no doubt that this public health emergency is far from over.

Few places in Queensland know that better than my own community in Brisbane's inner west after what has been dubbed the 'Indooroopilly cluster' broke out just over a month ago now. This outbreak was a harrowing experience for many of us, particularly for the thousands of families who were directed to quarantine after cases of the delta variant were detected at local schools. The way we dealt with it and pulled through is something for our community to be incredibly proud of. It is largely thanks to all of those quarantining families that we were able to keep the broader community safe and end the lockdown after just 10 days.

We owe them all a great debt of gratitude, but I want to make particular mention of all the families and staff at Indooroopilly State High School and Ironside State School. I also have to thank the whole west side community for the way they pulled together to help their neighbours. It was truly heartwarming to see all of the local Facebook groups buzzing with offers of support, information and resources and seeing the flood of volunteers who helped deliver click and collect orders when the big supermarkets' delivery systems gave out on us. John at the Inner West Social Inclusion Project needs a special mention for his great work in coordinating much of that volunteer effort.

The first week of the lockdown was undoubtedly one of the busiest we have had in the Maiwar electorate office as well, and my staff did not flinch. Despite working from home and in very challenging circumstances, they rose to the challenge and did extraordinary work supporting locals during that period. I want to thank them for that. We did some vitally important work—like getting people their quarantine directions so they could apply for federal support payments and helping people navigate the lockdown or quarantine rules, particularly around shared custody arrangements, including for people who had potentially violent circumstances in their home or were in a dispute with their ex-partner.

We kept the Indooroopilly cluster under control thanks to a quick, strong response from the government, the community and frontline health workers, but I also saw up close some of the limits of the government's health and economic response in that week. The biggest problem at the very start of the outbreak was a lack of testing capacity which meant that some people were waiting for hours and hours and hours to get tested. The Queensland Health website's list of testing sites was not always up to date, both the Indooroopilly State High School and the Toowong bowls club sites were closed at crucial testing times, and there were limited options for folks without a car to walk in and get tested.

Thousands of families in quarantine did not get their formal directions which meant they could not apply for the federal income support payments. Then, just before their 14 days were up, the Premier told the media that they would need a release letter to exit quarantine. This seemingly off-the-cuff remark meant that the department had to scramble to create a process on the go, effectively reshaping reality to match the Premier's comments. A day or two later, the CHO clarified that they did not actually need a letter at all. I am not saying for a second that this stuff is easy or that I or anyone else should expect it to be perfect, but it is worthy of scrutiny.

If the government could set aside its fear of criticism, it might see how additional transparency and reflection would actually allow us to learn from and improve our response and do it even better next time—because, as much as we hope there will not be a next time, this bill and much of the commentary around the state of play in Queensland now clearly assumes that there will be. This is why I will again seek to move amendments to this bill to create a parliamentary committee to oversee and scrutinise the government's health and economic response to COVID-19. I table a copy of those amendments now.

Tabled paper: Public Health and Other Legislation (Further Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2021, amendments to be moved by Mr Michael Berkman [1330](#).

If we are going to pull through this pandemic, people need to have faith in the health directions and economic protections in place, especially during lockdown. On Tuesday this place here was locked down after antilockdown conspiracy theorists outside threatened to enter the building. It was only a handful of protesters this time but my concern is that this group could grow without better scrutiny and transparency. Keeping Queenslanders in the dark is not only undemocratic but it creates an environment where conspiracy theories can flourish. As we have seen in the US, that can be incredibly dangerous.

We are at arguably the most crucial point of the COVID-19 response where we have to deal with increasingly complex questions about things like vaccine passports, targets and criteria for ending lockdowns, and tackling future variants. It is no longer simply a question of following the health advice; in truth, it never really was that simple. The health advice is varied and could be used to justify dramatically different decisions and outcomes. Modelling like that of the Doherty Institute can give some guidance about what outcomes we might expect as a result of different decisions, but it does not and cannot make those decisions for you.

We have already seen politicians use that modelling and other data to support their own positions or try to justify decisions while glossing over some crucial underlying assumptions—like the consequences of including kids under 12 in vaccination targets or the likely extent of infection if we open up at 70 per cent, or 80 per cent or even 90 per cent. No matter what vaccination threshold we choose for opening up, Queenslanders need to be confident that there is some visibility of how that decision is made. That is part of our job as members of parliament—to maintain oversight of how these extraordinary powers extended by this bill are exercised. It is literally a fundamental legislative principle.

While the government, the Chief Health Officer and all of our incredible frontline workers deserve great credit for a strong response to COVID-19 overall, it has been hard to get any clear justification for certain decisions—like blocking residents from coming home while waving NRL players' families through. The COVID-19 oversight committee that I am again calling on this House to establish would comprise three opposition MPs, one crossbench MP and three government members. Importantly, it would have a non-government chair. With powers mirroring relevant sections of the Crime and Corruption Act 2001, it would inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly on the Queensland government's response to COVID-19, including border closures, lockdowns, hotel quarantine, contact tracing, hospital capacity, economic support for workers and renters, and national cabinet decisions.

The amendment proposed by the opposition that would require the publication of health advice appears to make some very narrow and, I would say, unfounded assumptions about what form health advice from the CHO takes. The opposition's proposed amendment is no substitute for the kind of scrutiny that an oversight committee would offer. This bill extends extraordinary COVID-19 powers until April 2022, yet there is still no opportunity for public hearings to scrutinise the decisions made under those powers. Even debate on this bill has been cut short to only a few hours. It is a pretty plain admission that the government do not want any genuine scrutiny, any genuine debate; they just want a rubber stamp.

I will cut my comments short in the interests of ensuring other members have an opportunity to speak. In conclusion, again I will be supporting this bill because our frontline workers must be able to implement the government's economic and health response to the ongoing threat of COVID-19, but I urge the government to stop hiding away from transparency and scrutiny. To get through this pandemic, especially during the vaccine rollout and as we work towards a transition out of emergency measures, the public must have absolute confidence in the government's response.