




Speech By  
**Robert Skelton**

**MEMBER FOR NICKLIN**

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Record of Proceedings, 20 April 2021

## **COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr SKELTON** (Nicklin—ALP) (5.26 pm): Today I rise in support of the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. I wish to acknowledge and thank the committee, secretariat and stakeholders who met via digital media after the last outbreak at short notice late last month. I also commend the people of the hinterland for their resilience and patience. The state of Queensland has weathered the ravages of this virus thanks to timely advice from the Chief Health Officer; the proactive efforts of the state government; the professionalism and dedication of our frontline workers; and the sacrifices that have been made by everyday Queenslanders, but we still have more work to do. This has become increasingly evident in recent weeks as new and more contagious mutations of this virus have been detected.

In addition, changes made by the federal government to its vaccine rollout program have delayed the immunisation of the population, thus making it essential to maintain the ability to enact emergency powers. This bill seeks to put the health, safety and wellbeing of Queenslanders first by extending amendments put in place to allow the state to continue to function in a COVID-safe manner through to the end of September 2021.

To support Queensland and to continue functioning during the pandemic, we need to maintain the flexibility provided by the legislative framework introduced in 2020. The COVID-19 Emergency Response Act 2020 provides temporary powers to change legislative requirements by regulation to support social distancing; adjust statutory time frames where necessary; safeguard the continuation of court and tribunal proceedings; and permit bodies to take actions electronically or take certain actions related to leases and tenancies. I understand that the Queensland Law Society supports the amended arrangements for the making of affidavits, statutory declarations and general powers of attorney and deeds. These temporary arrangements have modernised the way in which these legal documents are created. Allowing these documents to be witnessed over audiovisual link has improved access to justice for Queenslanders from the perspective of both cost and efficiency which benefit vulnerable people and people who live and work regionally or remotely in particular. This is perhaps a good by-product of this terrible pandemic.

The bill will also mean that we continue to support the financial stability and sustainability of local governments during the COVID-19 emergency by allowing local governments to decide by resolution at a meeting other than a budget meeting what rates and charges are to be levied for the next financial year. In action this allows local authorities flexibility to sustain operations and make critical financial decisions whilst observing any restrictions that are necessary under the act.

The bill also seeks to provide flexibility as required to facilitate the holding of local government by-elections and fresh elections in a way that helps minimise serious risk to the health and safety of persons caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and extends the operation of temporary local government

and committee meeting provisions. Even with an emergency declared, governments must be democratic. Constituents deserve their voting rights and arrangements can be made that protect citizens as they exercise this right.

As this bill is extraordinary in nature, the legislative framework is time limited to ensure that it is in effect only as needed. This means that without legislative amendment these measures would have expired on 30 April 2021. The bill will extend the amendments until the end of September and affects all subordinate legislation required to respond to the public health emergency. This means that if we no longer need these measures before 30 September they can be rescinded as quickly and flexibly as possible. This is another important safeguard. I note that some members opposite were a little bit confused and mentioned something happening indefinitely when it is, indeed, time limited.

This government's strong, rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed businesses to reopen and allowed workers to return to their jobs, kids to go back to school and tourists to enjoy our state once again. After being the first state to recover all its jobs lost during the pandemic, Queensland continues to see strong employment growth according to the latest ABS labour force data. This bill will continue to support further growth by providing certainty to business.

There were 23,300 jobs added during March, despite the federal government removing support for Queensland business owners and employees with the wind-up of the JobKeeper program. This means there are nearly 63,000 more Queenslanders in jobs than there were in March last year, and a massive 320,000 since the Palaszczuk Labor government was first elected in 2015. I have heard a lot of financial data from members opposite, but no references have been provided. The member for Woodridge provided ABS labour force data and data from Deloitte in his contribution. Queensland has seen the highest percentage point increase in labour force participation of the states over the past 12 months. That means more people are coming to Queensland, more people are looking for a job in Queensland and more people are finding a job in Queensland. This is what it means when we say we are united and recovering.

None of these things would be possible without the ability for government and its departments to act at the earliest opportunity and take the required measures. To continue this progress we must pass this COVID-19 Emergency Response and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2021. I commend this bill to the House.