




Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (2.59 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. At the outset, I want to extend my condolences to the families and friends who have lost loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also want to acknowledge all of the frontline health workers who have provided care and kept our health services running during the pandemic. I commend them for the work they have done, particularly those staff in my area who did rounds of lots of different hospitals doing the vaccinations.

COVID-19 has had an impact on the mental health of many people. They have lost their livelihoods, some have lost their businesses, others have lost their jobs and others were separated from their families and their support. COVID has been hard economically, socially, physically and mentally for everyone. For those who live along our state's borders—for example, communities in my electorate like Mungindi—they even struggled at times to be able to get a bottle of milk. The double standards were difficult too. It was galling for Mungindi residents to read of the red carpet treatment given to the NRL entourage who jetted in from Sydney, whilst at the same time Queensland Health nurses who worked at the Mungindi Hospital in Queensland and lived on the New South Wales side of the border could not cross the border to come to work. Where was the health advice to downgrade the services at the Mungindi Hospital during a pandemic? Where was the health advice to lock the staff out of the hospital they worked at during a pandemic?

There needs to be more scrutiny of government decisions, and the health advice needs to be publicly released. I would like to know where the health advice has been to leave hospitals like Mungindi, Augathella, Cunnamulla and Quilpie for days and sometimes weeks without doctors during a pandemic. The hardworking local nurses and the on call emergency retrieval teams have been left to provide these communities with health care, and I want to thank them for keeping the doors of these hospitals open in the absence of doctors. It is disappointing that this Labor government does not properly resource these regional hospitals during a pandemic. The stress on people has been immense. The constant changes of criteria and the anomalies created by the government have been difficult, and they still are for those involved with our local agricultural shows.

As an opposition, we have been carefully considering the detail of the government's bill. The LNP recognise that the provisions contained in this bill are extraordinary. They give an unprecedented power to the Labor government, with little to no oversight. I only have to refer to the report of the Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee—which is an oversight committee—into the sacking of the Logan councillors to demonstrate how important oversight committees are.

The position which Queensland finds itself in now is very different to when this House debated similar extensions in August last year. At that time, the vaccine rollout in Queensland was still ramping up. More than 90 per cent of our state's adult population has now received two doses of COVID vaccine

and some, like me, are triple vaccinated. I support vaccination and I ask those people who want to get vaccinated to please go and get vaccinated. At the beginning, it seemed unlikely that there would be such a safe and effective vaccine in such a short period.

COVID will not be eliminated because the symptoms are not easily recognisable. We need to look to the future as to how COVID will be managed on a permanent basis. Looking to that future, it is the responsibility of the government to provide a step-by-step road map grounded in expert advice that shows Queenslanders the path out of this pandemic. First on that road map should be dealing with the anomalies impacting showgrounds. Showgrounds and agricultural shows have been unfairly singled out, despite providing an annual economic contribution of \$141 million to local regional communities, and I will be going to the Dalby show on Friday.

All shows are asking for is to be treated equally like other events that are able to continue in the same communities on the same showgrounds. It is absurd that for one to two days during the show there are restrictions on who can enter; however, for other community events for the other 363 days these restrictions do not apply to the same people. I do not think the government understands the impost on local show society volunteers. There are 15,000 volunteers who are being blamed for the restrictions, when in fact it is the Labor government who are enforcing an anomaly through their requirements.

We were told things would be reviewed at 90 per cent vaccination—well, the government have sat on their hands. We still have no clear path forward and Queenslanders should know what that plan is. It is for this reason that the LNP are moving key transparency amendments to the bill. The LNP's amendment would see the extraordinary powers given to the government and the Chief Health Officer expire on 31 May 2022. The government has two months to outline a plan for the future. The LNP has consistently called for the expert health advice received by the state government—which is used as a rationale for implementing the public health directions—to be publicly released. It should be publicly released. We also want to establish a parliamentary committee which would routinely hold hearings with the Chief Health Officer to assess and scrutinise the health advice. This layer of parliamentary oversight would be in line with other Australian and international jurisdictions.

The LNP back the AHPPC guidelines for frontline staff and aged-care staff to be vaccinated. We have backed them from the beginning, and I support vaccination. The amendments set a target for the transition away from restrictions. They say to the government, 'What's your plan?' They say to the government, 'As a parliament and as a population, we've upheld our end of the bargain for two long years. Now it's time the government did the same.' They also seek to increase the level of transparency in government decision-making so that all Queenslanders can understand why certain restrictions are imposed.

The opposition believe the government has not undertaken an appropriate level of scrutiny which is necessary for a bill as significant as this. Despite these powers existing for more than two years, with ample time to prepare for a proper and thorough review of the bill, the government has chosen to undertake a rushed process again. The public hearing with Queensland Health lasted one hour. That is one hour of questioning. It is not appropriate that a bill of this magnitude is subject to such little scrutiny. The opposition believe that the level of ongoing parliamentary oversight for a bill of this nature is insufficient.

Under the bill as it currently stands, there is no requirement for the public health officials to formally answer questions or for the restrictions to be scrutinised by the Queensland parliament. The establishment of the parliamentary committee would see routine hearings with the Chief Health Officer and Queensland Health officials, and I think having those Queensland Health officials in there is particularly important. The committee would scrutinise the health advice, consider changes to the AHPPC advice recommended by the Commonwealth government, deliberate on appropriate quarantine requirements for international arrivals that may be carrying new strains of the virus or other viruses, and provide recommendations to the government on the suitability of other COVID related restrictions. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opposition has called for the public release of the expert medical advice which has been used as a rationale for the restrictions. Clarity around decision-making is essential for public confidence. That is why the LNP and our shadow minister will move amendments stipulating that the health advice needs to be released publicly.

Queenslanders have displayed an extraordinary level of trust in the government by giving up basic rights and freedom to control the spread of COVID-19. They have done their bit. The opposition are of the view that we have a responsibility to honour this trust by outlining a pathway for the return of these rights and to restore transparency. We believe the amendments do just that, and I will be supporting the amendments as proposed by our shadow minister.