




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR JORDAN

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

 **Mrs MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (11.52 am): I rise to make a contribution to the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. I do this in the knowledge that for the past two years and two months we have prioritised the health, safety and interests of the people of Queensland in responding to the most challenging and unknown health crisis many of us will ever see in our lifetimes. We have done this with due care and consideration through our public health measures.

I reflect on some remarks of the World Health Organization's director-general in March 2020 when the pandemic was declared the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus. He went on to say that several countries had demonstrated that the virus could be suppressed and controlled, but he posed a challenge to those dealing with large clusters or community transition—not whether they could do the same in suppressing and controlling the virus but whether they would. He recognised that some countries lack the capacity, that some countries struggled with a lack of resources and that some countries struggled with a lack of resolve.

It is very clear that in Queensland over the past two-plus years we have created the capacity, provided the resources and, most importantly, have shown the resolve to deal with COVID-19. We moved quickly to activate established disaster management arrangements, enabling planning for changes in service delivery to ensure continuity of care and preparation to lift health system capacity for the anticipated surge of cases. Our government committed an additional \$1.2 billion in health funding to support the health response to the pandemic and the resources we would need, including: the expansion of fever clinics, more paramedics and ambulance services, new infrastructure for and better utilisation of existing hospitals, expansion of community screening, contact tracing and 13HEALTH services, backfilling of health staff exposed to the virus, additional regional health services, and more aeromedical services for regional and remote communities as well as the provision of elective surgery in both public and private hospitals.

From 29 January 2020 when Queensland was the first jurisdiction in Australia to declare a public health emergency, we certainly had the resolve. This resolve has meant that we were able to suppress the virus as successfully as we could. We did this by implementing quick and successful lockdowns, mask-wearing and social-distancing requirements, and closing our borders at the appropriate times despite the foolish dog whistling from those opposite who called for the borders to be opened 64 times and even took out billboards spruiking their irresponsible message. This is what resolve means. It is sometimes about making the unpopular decisions if they are the right decisions for the health of our communities.

Once we had suitable vaccinations developed, Queensland moved from a pre-vaccination suppression strategy to a post-vaccination strategy focused on prevention of serious illness, hospitalisation and fatality. As a government we recognise that vaccination is and continues to be safe and effective against COVID-19. It is that simple. I know that every member on this side of the House went above and beyond to engage with and communicate to our communities the importance of

vaccination. The results speak for themselves. As a state, we now are 91.7 per cent fully vaccinated, something to be honest I was not sure we would be able to achieve in the early days of the vaccination campaign, especially with the federal government's 'stroll-out' of the vaccination program, not to mention the absolutely heartbreaking utter and dismal failure in terms of vaccinating our most vulnerable in our aged-care facilities and disability homes.

Let us be clear, our decision to introduce mandatory vaccinations for key sectors has been challenging but it has been incredibly successful in lifting our vaccination rates. Lifting those vaccination rates mattered. At the height of the first Omicron wave, Queensland recorded 928 hospitalisations and 71 ICU admissions instead of the worst-case scenario modelling of 5,000 hospital beds and up to 500 ICU beds. Despite those who say COVID-19 is not serious, COVID-19 is not real or 'So what?' as the member for Mermaid Beach said last night, think about what those words mean to the grieving families of the 727 Queenslanders who lost their lives to this cruel virus.

According to the World Health Organization, globally as of 28 March there have been 480,170,572 confirmed cases of COVID-19 including—and I want not to round these figures out but mention every one of them—6,124,396 deaths recorded. Everything that our government has done to protect Queenslanders from COVID-19 has relied on having the right legislative measures to make decisions quickly and flexibly to respond to the unpredictable and changing nature of COVID-19.

I thank those who contacted my office to express their views in relation to the extension of the public health measures. I appreciate that not everyone is supportive of these measures, though the majority seem to be focused on the vaccination mandates rather than recognising that public health measures extend beyond the eight per cent of Queenslanders who remain unvaccinated.

It is also important to recognise that the majority of associated COVID-19 legislative measures are due to expire on 30 April 2022 and will not be extended by the bill before us. However, it has been recognised that the legislative framework of essential public health measures must continue and that withdrawing all public health controls in one go would be reckless. Last week the Chief Health Officer advised that it is as a result of the BA.2 variant of Omicron that COVID-19 cases actually increased by 54 per cent and that we now are in a second wave of the virus. Health professionals are also indicating that there may be a further wave during the winter months as well.

Internationally, 48 countries have reported an increase in cases. The latest news shows that Shanghai has begun a phased lockdown as an Omicron fuelled COVID-19 wave spreads through mainland China's most significant financial hub, resulting in the highest caseloads in the country since the early days of the pandemic. It is really interesting when you read the statement of reservation issued by the LNP committee members only on 24 March who speak of 'the virus subsiding faster than any of the government's computer modelling predicted' and 'we are now in a more endemic period'. It would seem those opposite believe the pandemic is over, despite the growing evidence to the contrary. Here is the rub—because as a government we rely on the health advice of those medical professionals with years of study, training and experience to tell us when the pandemic is over or, maybe, just read occasionally a newspaper.

Last night the federal budget allocated \$4.2 billion in 2022-23 for the response to the pandemic and has made a number of assumptions, some positive but some negative, again reflecting that this pandemic is far from over.

At the Ipswich Hospital last week I, along with my fellow Ipswich based MPs, organised free coffee for the health workers. It was the smallest of gestures, because really how do you say thank you to those amazing people who we know are continuing to work each and every day to make Queensland's response to COVID-19 the best it can be. Our health workers, our paramedics, our police, our border workers, our pharmacists, our cleaners, our supermarket workers—every single person on the front line these last two years has been doing everything they can to keep people healthy and safe, to keep shelves stacked and to keep workplaces clean.

I know the last two years have been very difficult for our communities—the uncertainty, the fear, the upheaval and the constant changes to rules and requirements. I have ridden those waves with my community members and I recognise that everyone is fatigued. We are all tired and we just want life to get back to normal—a time before we knew what a coronavirus was or what it meant to live through a global pandemic.

I conclude by saying to those individuals who did their part—physically distancing, adhering to the lockdowns, wearing masks, staying home when unwell, keeping kids home from school, getting vaccinated—you followed the directions, even when they were sometimes challenging or complicated or perhaps felt like they did not make sense. You recognised that by sticking together and by doing the right and selfless thing by our community we have and we will continue to emerge from this pandemic stronger, more resilient and with a continued resolve to keep each other safe. I commend the bill to the House.