




Speech By
James Lister

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (COVID-19 MANAGEMENT) AMENDMENT BILL


 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (12.12 pm): I rise to make a contribution in the debate on the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill 2022. I echo what my honourable friend the member for Glass House said when he commenced his contribution earlier in this debate which was ‘Enough is enough.’ In my electorate of Southern Downs, which has a uniquely advantageous position to have an opinion on this matter, the handling of COVID was a very costly exercise.

I say from the outset that I have never called for the borders to be opened. I understood the need for those orders for them to be closed. But because my electorate spans 400 or 500 kilometres of border country with communities which are situated on both sides of the border that regard themselves as part of their community of interest, the closure of the border caused enormous disruption. I am not talking about personal inconveniences; I am talking about businesses, primary producers and families who have been forced to travel very long distances in order to cross a border, if they were allowed.

One of the reasons I oppose this bill is I do not trust that the government is sufficiently in connection with the people to be able to make decisions quickly that are correct for the management of COVID or other infectious diseases. I was never consulted about any of the measures to do with border closures. I was always rebuffed by the government when I insisted on being at the table when decisions about border closures were made. On a number of occasions decisions were made regarding how border closure measures would operate which did not further the cause of containing and keeping COVID out of Queensland, but rather caused unnecessary cost and inconvenience to the people whom I represent. I want to make one exception in saying that: the Minister for Small Business, the Hon. Di Farmer, called me directly about measures associated with her department. I was grateful for that, and I thank her for that.

I am naturally suspicious about leaving these sorts of powers on the table without us coming back for a proper debate. As many speakers on my side of the House have said before, there is the opportunity, as we have seen, at short notice to convene parliament to pass necessary amendments or measures to empower authorities to deal with emergencies as they arise. I doubt very much that an emergency response would be so fast that it would need to be considered before politicians were available to come back and consider it in the House.

When I listened to the debate in this chamber on this bill and its predecessors, I was disappointed to hear members of parliament making haughty statements and mocking people who have a different view to them on matters such as vaccination. Although I am vaccinated myself, it became very apparent to me—

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (12.47 pm), continuing: For those who are watching at home, I resume my contribution to the debate on the public emergency bill. I know that the people in my electorate who have dealt with the inconveniences and the hardships of COVID will be interested to know what my position is on this particular bill and why I am voting against it.

I said earlier that the government systematically failed to consult me when measures concerning communities that I represent and the border along my electorate with New South Wales were involved. That was very disappointing. I wrote to the government on many occasions: to the health minister, to the Premier and to the Chief Health Officer. On those occasions when I did get a reply they did not address the issue I raised: that the democratically elected representative of that area should be systematically excluded from consultation obviously because I am a member of the opposition and not the government. As a result, a number of decisions were made which imposed unworkable situations for those in my electorate and needlessly caused economic hardship and pain for the people I represent.

Already we are not off to a good start when the government asks me to agree to the extension of the very powers that enabled them to do those things arbitrarily. I did not oppose the closing of the borders as such, but I wanted it to be done in a workable fashion which did not needlessly disadvantage the people I represent.

I also wish to say that I have been disappointed in the course of this debate and others before it about the way in which members of parliament have referred to people who have a differing view from them on matters such as vaccination. As a vaccinated person myself I do believe that the vaccine reduced the severity of my own cases of COVID. Not everyone agrees, however. When we last debated these powers, I made the point that it has never been disclosed satisfactorily that there was a need to exclude people who have chosen not to be vaccinated from the daily life of Queensland. I am talking about cafes, pubs and music venues. There was a lot of disruption to people who have exercised what is their fundamental right to not be vaccinated.

I say again: I believe in vaccination. I am vaccinated and my family is vaccinated. They all caught COVID from me in the 12 hours after I returned home from parliament. I think the case has not been met that it was necessary, under the kinds of powers that we are talking about here, to exclude people who have chosen not to be vaccinated from the life of Queensland. If being vaccinated does not stop you from spreading the virus to other people, the case has not been met that to protect the public at large—and I am not talking about nursing homes or hospital wards but newspaper shops and local restaurants—we needed those kinds of restrictions. That has never been satisfactorily addressed. It was not addressed in the last debate. Nobody has interjected while I make these points so I take it that it is a matter that the government is not prepared to address. I am opposed to the extension of the powers that enable those kinds of restrictions to be imposed. I believe that the House needs to give very careful consideration to them the next time they may be necessary, although I certainly hope that they will not be.

I say to the people of Southern Downs: the hardships that we endured were perhaps greater than in any other part of Queensland. I understand that. I understand that many people made great sacrifices in order to have the borders shut so that the rest of Queensland could be safe. I will always fight for the interests of my electors, whatever their views are on medical interventions and border interventions. I ask the government to never again systematically exclude members who occupy border electorates, such as myself and the member for Currumbin, from consultation when extreme measures regarding border closures are being arranged. It was clearly a case of either the staff of the minister, the Chief Health Officer or the Premier systematically excluding us for political reasons or the ministers themselves. Whatever the reason—

Mrs D'Ath: You have just accused the Chief Health Officer of being political.

Mrs Gerber: Politics over people.

Mr LISTER: I take the interjection from the member for Currumbin; it is politics over people. That the health minister should seek to interject while I make that point is disappointing because, in my experience, the minister has a very poor record of replying to letters. On several occasions I have had to write two or three times to the minister's office before receiving a response, as the current minister and also when she was the attorney-general. I ask the government to remember that the people of the Southern Downs who elected me to represent them expect that I will not be excluded from the table when decisions that impact their lives are being made. It was disgraceful. People were unnecessarily inconvenienced in the process of having the border closed.

Mrs Gerber: And they didn't get a voice.

Mr LISTER: They did not get a voice; I take that interjection.

One of the most pressing matters, which was never satisfactorily addressed in my view, was that an ambulance that has to travel from New South Wales to Queensland or from Queensland to New South Wales can be obstructed by a concrete barrier across a road. I am not saying that the barrier should not be there but that it should be able to be opened by someone on the gate so that somebody who has had a heart attack, been involved in a vehicle accident or something like that can get to the nearest hospital. In my part of the world, the communities are connected with one another. If you need hospital treatment, you may go from Wallangarra to Tenterfield District Hospital or from Liston to Stanthorpe Hospital. I would not like to think that my ambulance had to take an hour-long round trip to reach the nearest border crossing.

Again I say that these powers need to be taken back and disposed of for the moment. If the government would like my vote on further powers to impose restrictions on the people I represent then I invite them to bring in another bill and I will consider it at that time.