




Speech By
Jennifer Howard

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

Record of Proceedings, 25 October 2022

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

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (7.29 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill. I want to stress that over the last two and a half years our emergency framework has held us in good stead. I think it is easy in this House to look back and pick apart and find fault with some of the things that the government did, but overall if one looks at us in a comparative way, within the state and internationally, we made very sound decisions that held us in good stead and history will judge us well. We had expert guidance under our chief health officers, Dr Jeannette Young and now Dr John Gerrard. We used our emergency powers to quickly stop the spread of COVID-19 in the community before Queenslanders had the opportunity to get vaccinated. That was the key reason we put those restrictions in place. Because we were able to prevent widespread outbreaks of COVID-19 in the community, we were able to avoid the lengthy lockdowns that we saw happen in many other places and keep our economy open.

Throughout 2021 we kept those emergency powers in place while we urged all Queenslanders to get vaccinated against COVID-19 to protect themselves and to protect their loved ones. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the exemplary work of the Ipswich General Hospital throughout this pandemic, from the senior executive at our hospital, which was headed up at that time by Dr Kerrie Freeman, to the frontline health workers who are indisputably heroes in our communities. We heeded the messages. Every Queenslander heeded the message and by December 2021 we had a significant majority of Queenslanders vaccinated.

Through each phase of this pandemic we used the emergency COVID-19 powers to help keep us safe. Over time our strategy has shifted from one of elimination to suppression and then to managing COVID-19 in the community. This bill will allow the emergency framework to expire on 31 October 2022 and in its place introduce a set of temporary and targeted measures to manage COVID-19 as a notifiable condition to the Public Health Act 2005. Under Queensland's Public Health Act we have provisions for controlled notifiable conditions that strike the appropriate balance between public health and the rights of individuals' liberty and privacy. Other controlled notifiable conditions under the Public Health Act include measles, influenza and tuberculosis; it is not just COVID. These targeted measures for COVID-19 under the Public Health Act will allow the Chief Health Officer to put in place time-limited and targeted public health interventions to maintain the capacity of our health system and to protect our most vulnerable members of the community. Dr John Gerrard has held us in very good stead. He has done such a good job. I cannot think of safer hands for those decisions to be in.

I acknowledge that there are still some high levels of concern in the community about COVID-19, especially among medically vulnerable people and older people. That is why we have stopped short of completely repealing all public health interventions. COVID-19 is still too unpredictable to expect people to self-manage the risks on their own. We know that new variants of COVID-19 can rapidly emerge and that these new variants can be more severe or better at evading vaccines. We know that immunity from vaccines wanes and we know that COVID-19 presents a significant risk to older people and medically

vulnerable people. We know that we will more than likely see further waves of COVID-19 infections for some time to come. We also know that COVID-19 can be more severe and have a greater impact on our hospital system than, say, the flu.

Dr John Gerrard, in his briefing to the parliamentary Health and Environment Committee, said that at the peak of the winter Omicron wave on 25 July 2022 there were over 1,000 people with COVID-19 in Queensland's public and private hospitals, including 28 in ICU, while at the same time there were 35 patients in hospital with the flu. It is for these reasons that we need to keep some targeted public health measures in place, such as requiring masks in healthcare settings and aged-care facilities, to protect those vulnerable members of our community. Under this bill the powers that the Chief Health Officer can issue will now be subject to limitations and safeguards to ensure that public health directions are proportionate, subject to parliamentary and public scrutiny and compatible with human rights.

These powers also reflect our current approach to managing COVID-19. The emergency powers that we have had in place in Queensland over the past two and a half years have served us well, but they were not designed for the long-term. Some of the restrictive public health restrictions are no longer appropriate given we have a highly vaccinated population and have therapeutic treatments in place to help people who are at severe risk.

In the first year and a half of the pandemic Queenslanders came together to comply with the emergency public health measures to stop the spread and keep each other safe. I have said before in this House but I want to say again how proud I was of the people in my electorate of Ipswich when the pandemic first hit. I spoke to thousands of residents, mostly over the phone because we were not going anywhere, and I was blown away by their selflessness and their understanding of what they had to do. They stayed at home, they complied with the rules and they put their families and their neighbours first. Most people accepted the border restrictions that were in place. They were necessary. They kept the virus out. They used their Check in Queensland app at venues. They wore their mask when required and they got vaccinated. The few lockdowns that we had in Queensland meant far less disruption to our state than in southern states, but when we were asked to lock down we did so knowing that a short, sharp lockdown was better than letting the virus rip into our unvaccinated population.

Living in a state of perpetual emergency is not a normal way to live and it is impractical over the long-term. As more people got vaccinated in the last months of 2021 there was growing fatigue and frustration in the community. In the first two years of the pandemic the public health directions issued under the emergency powers restricted movement and gatherings. It restricted people from visiting loved ones in aged-care facilities and hospitals. It enforced compulsory quarantine on domestic and international travellers and we saw the closure of interstate and international borders. But they were necessary, as I have said.

I acknowledge the fantastic leadership that we had here in Queensland during this period from our Premier and our health minister, the Deputy Premier. They stood up every single day to keep us informed and to really put our minds at rest. We know that many of the restrictions that were in place caused emotional and financial pain for Queenslanders. I am sure all of us in this House spoke to many in that situation. Last Christmas I had not seen my son for a couple of years. He lives in Melbourne. He and his sister were in cahoots about a surprise visit from him on Christmas Day. He did everything right: he got the PCR test 72 hours before; he booked the flights. He had it all planned: he was flying to Queensland on his birthday on Christmas Eve; he was going to stay at his sister's place and then arrive at my place on Christmas Day. Like hundreds if not thousands of others, due to the sheer demand his PCR did not come back in time and he was disappointed again. After 263 days of lockdown, he spent Christmas Day by himself in Melbourne and I did not get to see him.

My story is just one of many. I spoke to many of my colleagues on Christmas Day and on Boxing Day. I was on the phone nearly all day to constituents who had similar frustrating stories to tell. The overarching theme behind all of the stories was a deep appreciation of our government for the steps that we had taken. While they were upset—there was a personal cost to them—they understood that it was something that we had to do and that it was for the greater good. My heart went out to them and I could empathise with many of those stories on the day. I respected that our constituents understood we had to make these tough decisions for every single Queenslanders. Like many others, I am looking forward to this Christmas where I can be with my whole family largely free from restrictions thanks to the excellent work of the Palaszczuk government.