



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BUNDAMBA

Record of Proceedings, 25 October 2022

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

 **Mr McCALLUM** (Bundamba—ALP) (6.10 pm): I rise in support of the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill. It certainly has been a long couple of years with the pandemic here in Queensland, right across the nation and, indeed, right across the globe. In Queensland we have seen the terrible impacts of COVID-19 and around the world millions of people have passed away. We have seen the absolutely catastrophic impacts on our economy, our supply chains and our workforce. It has been truly a test of our resilience as a state, as a nation and as a people.

However, in Queensland we have been world leaders in our response to the global pandemic. We have done that because we have taken action and based policies on expert health advice under the strong leadership of the Premier. That expert independent health advice puts the safety of Queenslanders first. During the worst of the pandemic, in Queensland we were able to enjoy relative safety and freedom far in excess of what we saw in other states such as New South Wales and Victoria, for example, which experienced extended lockdowns, and certainly compared to what we saw in other jurisdictions around the world, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The way that the Queensland community responded to the challenges thrown at us during the pandemic has been absolutely world-leading.

That said, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge those who lost loved ones during the pandemic in Queensland. Whilst we had relatively low mortality rates, that does not make it any easier for the families and loved ones of those who passed. I also take this time to thank our frontline health workers and all health staff. They did an absolutely magnificent job throughout the pandemic. I thank all Queenslanders, including those in my local community of Bundamba, who came out to be vaccinated. They followed the health advice and protected themselves, protected their loved ones and protected their local communities by getting vaccinated.

Over this time and because of our high vaccination rates, despite the challenges with vaccine availability and the rollout, we have been able to move from the emergency phase to a management phase of the COVID pandemic, which is what this bill is about. The fact is that COVID-19 remains a concern. It is going to continue to circulate in our communities. It is out there right now. According to health advice, we are likely to experience ongoing waves of infection. It still has the potential to place a very significant burden on our health system. In fact, we saw that earlier this year when we had three waves of infection. During the peak of the most recent wave, we saw record numbers of patients in our hospitals and record numbers of workers, including health staff, had to take time off due to the impacts of COVID. Of course, there is also the potential that other more dangerous or vaccine-resistant strains of COVID-19 could emerge. That is why a framework for a targeted and proportionate response that will allow us to manage future impacts of COVID is so important.

The current temporary emergency framework for COVID is due to expire in a couple of weeks, on 31 October. In its place, this bill proposes to establish a new framework in the Public Health Act to manage COVID-19 until 31 October 2023. Effectively, it proposes a step-down approach. It will enable

us to end the public health emergency that we have currently declared and move to a more balanced public health framework to manage COVID-19 over the next 12 months. The bill proposes to retain three main measures until the end of October next year: quarantine for people with COVID and symptomatic close contacts, if required; requirements around masks; and vaccination requirements for workers in particular settings. Those are the measures that have proven most effective in responding to the risks of COVID-19 in our current environment. Those are the things that have worked to date. They are also measures that are likely to be needed to give effect to any decisions of National Cabinet or the advice that may come from national health advisory bodies. The powers are subject to limitations and safeguards to ensure that public health directions are proportionate, are subject to parliamentary and public scrutiny and, indeed, are compatible with the Queensland Human Rights Act.

We have heard some contributions, particularly from those opposite, saying that we should just let the current framework expire, declare the end of the pandemic from a public health framework point of view and let people manage the risks going forward. It is clear that the virus is simply too unpredictable to remove all of the health framework and rely solely on self-management strategies at this time.

As I said, there remains the possibility that new variants could emerge that might be more severe or better at evading vaccines. The reality is that that could place the community, especially vulnerable people, at serious risk and place a further strain on the health system. While our Queensland health system is extremely resilient, it is still recovering from the cumulative impacts of COVID-19 and we saw that with the recent resurgence in cases over the winter months this year. The bill currently before the House contains the measures that are most likely to be needed to manage any future waves, outbreaks or new variants as well as help protect our health system and protect the most vulnerable in our communities for the next 12 months.

Most stakeholders who submitted to this bill welcomed the balanced and measured step-down in powers and the inclusion of greater parliamentary oversight and other safeguards that are contained in this bill in terms of any of the public health directions that the Chief Health Officer may make. We have heard very clearly that they can be brought before the parliament and have oversight by a committee.

Ultimately, the bill does strike a balance in retaining the effective powers that are most likely to be needed to respond to risks posed by COVID going forward whilst ensuring that these powers are proportionate and recognising the role of individuals and the community to help manage risks. I commend the bill to the House.