




Speech By  
**Laura Gerber**

**MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN**

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

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (11.50 am): Residents and businesses in the Currumbin electorate, which everyone in this chamber is aware straddles the border—residents who live with one foot in Queensland and one foot in New South Wales—shouldered the burden of state border closures enabled by this temporary legislative framework for over two years. Families were torn apart by a line on a map, my constituents and border locals lost precious time with their sick loved ones, many did not get to say a final goodbye, patients were cut off from their doctors, and businesses were left stranded in a ghost town. My community understands better than most the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, restrictions enabled by amendments made to the Public Health Act like this bill over the past two years which upheaved the lives of so many in our community, and every day my office had the human toll of the government's abrupt lockdowns and rushed mandates.

The emergency powers are set to expire on 31 October 2022. This means that in five days' time, the Chief Health Officer will no longer have the power to issue public health directions which would allow for interstate border closures or restrict the movement or gathering of people. The expiry of the temporary legislative framework on 31 October 2022 was set to restore the Public Health Act to its pre-pandemic state, except that this Palaszczuk Labor government wants to hold onto some of the extraordinary parts of the legislative framework with this bill.

The current state of the pandemic has shifted so greatly since a bill of this nature was introduced into parliament that these powers, in my view, are no longer necessary, and that is why the LNP will not be supporting this bill. Unlike two years ago, COVID-19 is no longer an unknown enemy on the horizon. It is now something that we live with. I have also said that our response must be proportionate to the risk at hand, and I do not think it is a proportionate or reasonable response to continue these emergency powers even watered down as they are drafted in this bill. We cannot go on living indefinitely with these types of extraordinary legislative provisions in place. It is wrong and I will not support it.

Today there are very few COVID-19 restrictions which impact our life. That is a good thing and it is reasonable given the risk and the threat of the virus has significantly subsided. Despite the vaccination rollout being hampered by the Palaszczuk Labor government's mixed messages on AstraZeneca, and the Premier's refusal to have it, more than 90 per cent of our state's adult population are now vaccinated, and many Queenslanders have now chosen to have a third or even a fourth dose.

Many businesses and organisations in our community are choosing what, if any, COVID-19 measures they wish to keep. Most have none. Others have decided to keep some protections in place. Both are fine because that is their choice, and the same can be said for individuals. The decision to stay at home if you are unwell now rests with the individual. Individuals can take precautions to protect themselves from a contagious virus if they wish to do so and, in my view, that is a reasonable and proportionate approach to the current risk we face.

The other reason it is unnecessary to extend the extraordinary emergency powers with this bill is because, in the event that we do need these powers again, this parliament can be recalled on short notice to swiftly debate and pass any necessary laws to protect Queenslanders. In fact, we saw this is indeed possible just this month when parliament was recalled on extremely short notice in order to give Queenslanders a public holiday for the passing of the Queen. If we can recall parliament to legislate for a public holiday, then surely we can do it if the interests of public health require it.

The other aspect of this bill that I want to touch on is the fact that it has taken the threat of COVID-19 dissipating for the foreseeable future for this government to introduce measures of accountability and transparency like we see in this bill. If the gall of this government were not so insulting to Queenslanders, it would be laughable. It is only now that COVID-19 restrictions are all but gone that the government decides it is time to front up to the Queensland public and start being a little bit transparent with the parliament and the public around directions and advice. It is gobsmacking.

Where was this transparency over the last two years? Where was the rationale to justify upending the lives of my border community over the last two years? Where were the details to keep loved ones apart from each other, to keep loved ones from saying their final goodbyes? Where was the transparency for that over the last two years? This is an insult to every single person in my community who was left reeling by decisions made by this government, decisions that were made without a shred of accountability or transparency.

Where was this transparency and accountability for Kerri from Currumbin Waters when her husband was locked out of this state? During the pandemic Kerri told me—

We had barely settled into our new apartment when my husband was given a directive he could no longer return home across the border.

They had to relocate, which Kerri said 'cost us unbelievable and unnecessary financial hardship'.

Just last week during a mobile office, I had two primary school aged girls and their dad come up to me to say thank you for getting them an exemption so they could see their mum across the border. I had to fight to get them that exemption. This family would have loved some accountability and transparency as is contained in this bill. They would have loved that two years ago so they could have had some measures in place for their children.

Melissa from the Gold Coast would also have loved transparency and accountability two years ago when we called for it. During the border closures, Melissa told me—

My parents are in their mid-eighties and live in Kingscliff. I live on the Gold Coast. The border pass allows for travel to supply support and care to a family member. However, each time I cross back into Queensland, I am having to justify my reasons to see and look at my parents. I have anxiety every time I go to see them as I am afraid of being turned away at the border. I have letters from doctors, stat decs and a whole lot of other supporting documents but the pressure and anxiety I feel at the border is indescribable. No-one should have to go through this for almost five months now. I limit my visits to one day per week because of this ridiculous border situation and it is time with my parents that I will never get back.

Angelika from Bilinga also needed this kind of transparency two years ago. During the pandemic she told me—

My family all live outside of Queensland. Twice I had to flee like a refugee when I visited them due to border closures, and for seven months I had not seen anyone. My parents were hospitalised and my son was in Canberra receiving life-threatening surgery, but I was stuck here, double vaccinated and I couldn't go any further.

I have so many stories from constituents who were crying out for transparency and accountability during the pandemic, and I will continue to tell their stories in this chamber because I will not let this chamber forget what my community went through and what my constituents bore in order to keep the rest of Queensland safe. Fiona from Currumbin told me during the pandemic—

'I have two kids in Melbourne who I saw once in two years and the rest of my family is in Ballina. My husband's father is in Ballina and lives alone as my husband's mother, who I have not seen in almost 18 months, has been diagnosed with dementia. The last 12 months her decline has been so quick, she no longer recognises family and my husband did not get the opportunity to visit her.

Kerri, Melissa, Angelika and Fiona would have all loved these transparency measures two years ago when they could not see their loved ones, when they were locked out of their homes, and when they were prevented from seeing their children.

Queenslanders deserved the transparency measures contained in this bill right from the very beginning. But in typical Palaszczuk government style, only concerned about how things look rather than how things are, they are implementing transparency measures when it is too late, to give the facade that they are transparent. This is a government that is only open with Queenslanders when it suits them politically—transparency only when there is nothing left to be transparent about.

Queenslanders have learned to live with the virus. They have learned to take careful personal responsibility in going about their daily lives. It is time that this government accepts this and removes these extraordinary provisions that were introduced at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I want to finish my contribution by acknowledging all of our healthcare workers who fronted up to work every day, who took on whatever risks were presented pulling double and triple shifts, who traversed border crossings in order to get to their employment, who were told that they could not come to work and still fought to be able to go to work to protect and serve our community. I want to thank every single one of those health workers for doing their job during the pandemic and for supporting our communities

*(Time expired)*