




Speech By
Hon. Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

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

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities) (7.23 pm): I rise to support the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. This legislation continues the vital measures the Palaszczuk government has put in place through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. At each and every step we have had the health, safety and wellbeing of the Queensland people at the absolute forefront. I acknowledge our frontline workers—our health professionals, our police, our retail and transport workers—who kept Queenslanders safe. I congratulate the member for Mansfield as the chair of the committee in terms of her stewardship of the report that was handed down by the Community Support and Services Committee and, in particular, for her leadership in the examination of the bill and thank all the other members of that committee for their excellent work. I note the committee's recommendation that the bill be passed as the only recommendation of this committee.

One thing we have heard over and over again from the Palaszczuk government is that we have followed the health advice during the COVID-19 pandemic. When you go to your GP you follow that advice. You do not go out and seek other advice, whether it be on the internet or in other places, to find a different opinion. Pragmatic people do that. People with common sense do that. That is what the Palaszczuk government has done on this occasion.

Across the world we have seen all too many times examples of where the health advice has been followed only to an extent and been undercut or ignored by too many. We only need to look at our friends in the United States to see how politicisation of the COVID-19 response has ended in copious numbers of sickness, in tragedy and in death in that nation.

In Queensland we have been led in so many ways. Led by the Premier, by our world-leading advice and action from Queensland's health authorities, we saved thousands of Queensland lives. We have stood strong against political opportunists trying to exploit the frustrations of restrictions for political advantage only to see it blow up in their faces as a new wave of the deadly virus took hold in 2020.

The Palaszczuk government had the courage to stand strong, the courage to lead and the courage to stand up for the health and safety of Queenslanders. As much as we would wish it to be otherwise, the pandemic is still with us today and that is why we cannot afford to become lax in our approach. This bill extends provisions of the Public Health Act that are still important to manage and minimise the impact of COVID-19 on Queensland. As they have done through the course of the pandemic, these provisions enhance the powers of emergency officers and the Chief Health Officer to limit the spread of the virus, authorise information sharing for contact tracing where necessary, provide penalties for contraventions of public health directions and makes arrangements for aspects of quarantine where that is necessary.

As we continue the work of returning to a more normal life as Queenslanders know it, other measures that were designed to provide regulatory relief for institutions and businesses early in the pandemic will expire in accordance with sunset provisions made by the parliament in September last year. I understand that some argue that the pandemic is in the past, that we do not need these

provisions any more. That is not the case. If one looks at the figures reported yesterday, there were 10,326 cases and nine deaths. We have seen through the most recent wave of Omicron that new variants can emerge quickly and have devastating impacts on families both here and across the world. We do not want to dismantle the legislative and regulatory apparatus that has been so carefully put in place to deal with this pandemic and risk leaving us flat-footed in the face of the next variant that comes along. The Chief Health Officer has made it very clear that it would be a mistake, indeed reckless, to withdraw all our public health control measures at once.

In my portfolio area of agriculture the Palaszczuk government's pandemic measures proved critical in ensuring that supply lines could remain open, that our farmers could keep working and that the great tasting produce for which Queensland's reputation is famous continued to be enjoyed by millions of people around the world and throughout this nation. We moved quickly to declare agriculture an essential industry. We moved quickly to form the Agriculture Coordination Group so that key stakeholders and producers could directly advise government of the issues they were facing and we could quickly respond to those. Those telephone conferences included senior representatives from health, police, TMR and, of course, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. They had over 100 industry stakeholders and we also invited the Commonwealth government on occasions to take part in those meetings. The federal agriculture minister preferred to take pot shots at Queensland in the media rather than take part in helping this industry.

We facilitated on-farm quarantine facilities—leading the nation once again—to ensure that more than 5,000 Pacific Labour Scheme workers could enter safely through federal schemes, all while taking every measure possible to keep communities where they worked safe from COVID-19. On many occasions they were quarantining on-farm, working at a distance from other workers. A prime example was in Emerald where PLS workers were picking table grapes at the same time people who were completely vaccinated were working at a safe distance.

Members do not need to take my word for it; they can listen to the words of industry that found us the best to deal with of all the Australian states. AgForce said that our work to improve border crossing exemptions and special conditions for farmers, farm workers and harvest crews were 'especially vital for many grain growers looking to harvest their best winter crop in years.' They went on to state—

Agforce would like to thank the Government for working with us to ensure that agriculture kept moving while restrictions were in place, as well as members for their compliance and patience during tough times.

Richard Shannon, from Growcom, also assessed the Queensland government's performance. He said that his group appreciated the work on the seasonal workers framework. He said it was 'implemented better than any other state or territory'. He said that the common view among lobby groups working across many jurisdictions is that Queensland was doing a far better job than any other state or territory in agricultural support throughout this pandemic.

Joe Moro, the chair of the Queensland Horticulture Council, with whom we will be engaging next week as head of the fifth Queensland Horticultural Council established by this government, said—

We are grateful for the continued guidance and support from your Department as the horticulture industry navigate this most difficult period, and for the quick actions by the Premier and Queensland Government to ensure our ongoing food security.

We did not put these measures in place to earn praise. We did not do it for politics and we did not do it to control people's lives. We did it because it is the right thing to do. We did it because we believe in keeping Queenslanders, and our food supply chains as well. We did it to save lives and the livelihoods of Queenslanders. We did it because we know that agriculture has always been essential in the Queensland economy.

I spoke earlier about the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Programme. This Commonwealth government is lacking in terms of its programs and its ability to get seasonal workers from other countries. The Commonwealth indicated that, through their agriculture visa program, those workers would be available by Christmas last year. That has not eventuated. Still farmers are calling out for labour and support, but time and time again the Commonwealth government proves to be lacking. This evening I am waiting to hear what they will do in the budget and whether they will deliver on the promise around Christmas last year. I think we will still be waiting to see whether anything eventuates at Christmas this year.

All of these provisions have been about keeping people safe, healthy, employed and ready to bounce back when we can put the darkest days of the pandemic behind us. I love hearing the adulations of those opposite. It never fails to amaze me that they have lost touch with the bush. That is why they call them 'the doormats'. The doormats have vacated the bush and left the farms and the regions to the Labor Party. That is our true origins. It is where we come from. We will look after our farmers, as we always will do.

(Time expired)