




Speech By
Peter Russo
MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (4.42 pm): I rise to support the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. The objectives of the bill are to: increase the power for emergency officers and the Chief Health Officer to limit or respond to the spread of COVID-19 in Queensland, including by issuing directions to require physical distancing, restrict movement and gatherings, require people to quarantine or self-isolate and implement other containment measures; authorise the sharing of confidential information for contact tracing; encourage compliance with quarantine requirements and other public health directions by the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022, providing appropriate penalties for any contraventions; increase the period for which a regulation may be extended a declared public health emergency from seven to 90 days; enable fees to be charged for costs associated with the mandatory quarantine of persons in government arranged accommodation; and protect personal information collected for contact tracing.

It was on 29 January 2022 when a public health emergency was declared for all of Queensland due to the global outbreak—a pandemic—of COVID-19. Some two years later we are still dealing with this pandemic. While Queensland's management of COVID-19 has proven to be rapid and effective, the pandemic continues to be unpredictable and has presented a number of significant challenges over the past two years to the Queensland health system, economy and community. It is our responsibility as a parliament to respond and provide the pathway for Queensland to return, as much as is possible, to pre-COVID-19 days. Our government has endeavoured to find a balance—a balance between public health outcomes and freedom of an individual's rights and a transition to living with COVID-19. We must act to prevent the loss of life and ensure any decisions made aim to address the health of all Queenslanders: people with disability, the aged, our First Nations people and other vulnerable Queenslanders. Many Queenslanders who consider themselves privileged understand the responsibility and the small sacrifices that come with this privilege.

The spread of the COVID-19 virus remains unpredictable. Since late 2021 Queensland has been easing restrictions and moving away from the suppression approach towards finding a way for all of us to live with COVID-19 and to minimise, as much as possible, the impacts caused by this pandemic. Tragically, since the emergence of the virus in Australia in 2020 to 28 March, 727 Queenslanders have lost their life to COVID-19 with further deaths across the country. In the same period 747,434 Queenslanders have been infected. The virus has been ruthless in who it targets. It does not differentiate based on where people live or who they are. We have seen good outcomes in the number of people who have been fully vaccinated, and I understand that figure for Queensland as of 29 March is 91.7 per cent. I shudder to think what statistics we would be discussing here today if we did not have those vaccination results.

Last year we saw the emergence of a new variant of COVID-19 called the Omicron variant. Health data indicates that while the resultant infection is not as severe as the original variant, it has been

proven to be more easily spread. The number of COVID-19 cases experienced here in Queensland up to 20 December was 2,356. As I mentioned earlier, the number of people who have had COVID is now in the hundreds of thousands. That increase in cases occurred in just 14 weeks.

Anyone with the idea that this pandemic has been beaten would do well to remember how rapidly this has spread as well as the potential and the significant impact on our health and hospital systems. It is critical that flexibility is retained to ensure that as restrictions are eased and normal social and economic activity resumes, appropriate public health measures can continue to be put in place where necessary to address ongoing public health risks, protect the health system and safeguard the health of Queenslanders.

I acknowledge the many—thousands of individuals—who have put in submissions to the committee. I have received a number of emails from across Queensland from people who expressed their heartfelt desire for this bill not to be passed. I would like to acknowledge them as well. I do not discount their views. I acknowledge their views do differ from my experience and my own views.

The committee noted that many of the submissions they received were from individuals who opposed the proposed extension of the temporary COVID-19 legislative framework in the bill. The committee acknowledged that public health directions and other public health measures can have a significant impact on individuals and businesses. In response to those concerns, the department stated—

COVID-19 vaccines are a proven, safe and effective means of reducing the risk of moderate to severe disease with COVID-19, and up to date vaccination reduces both the severity of infection and transmission. Individuals who become infected despite vaccination (break-through infection) may be at reduced risk of transmitting due to a generally lower viral load and shortened duration of shedding.

They further stated—

High vaccination coverage remains a key determinant of positive health outcomes for all Queenslanders, while also minimising the impact of COVID-19 cases on our hospital system and the impact of COVID-19 on ongoing operations of businesses and public facilities and community life in general.

There was general support for the extension of the temporary framework from some stakeholders, including the Australian College of Nursing, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists and the Queensland Law Society. Other stakeholders called for an extension to legislative measures not extended by the bill, including the Australian Logistics Council, the Strata Community Association and the Family Responsibilities Commission.

As someone who has seen COVID spread through my family, I can say that this is something that I would not want to see others suffer through.

The bill proposes to amend the Corrective Services Act 2006, the Disaster Management Act 2003 and the Mental Health Act 2016 to directly support the public health response. The proposed measures would all be dependent on the COVID-19 public health emergency declared under the Public Health Act and could not be used if that declaration ceased.

Amendments to the Corrective Services Act recognise that correctional facilities are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 due to the close proximity of prisoners and staff and the inability to maintain social distancing. In this regard, the bill seeks to ensure Queensland Corrective Services is fully equipped to continue to respond rapidly to the increasing risks presented by COVID-19 for the duration of the public health emergency. With regard to the proposed amendments, it is important to note that the Corrective Services Act already allows the chief executive to make an emergency declaration. The only change made by the temporary amendments is to extend the application of the declaration to a broader number of facilities and to extend the time frame for the declaration.

The bill proposes to extend amendments of the Mental Health Act that allow patients subject to the Mental Health Act to be granted leave where it may be necessary to comply with public health directions. As stated in the explanatory notes—

While the public health emergency continues, the approval of absence of certain patients may be required where, for example, a person who is already in the community on a temporary absence from a mental health facility contracts COVID-19 and is then required to isolate.

This global pandemic has shown that we can be, and must be, adaptive and able to respond in a timely manner to the challenges we face. We need to have in place safeguards and measures that will allow us to continue to keep Queenslanders safe. I want to end on an anonymous quote—

Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem to you personally.

I commend the bill to the House.