




Speech By  
**Ros Bates**

**MEMBER FOR MUDGEERABA**

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

 **Ms BATES** (Mudgeeraba—LNP) (4.53 pm): I rise to contribute to the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. I do so being in the privileged position as the opposition shadow minister for health and ambulance services. Before I delve into my response to the bill, I want to reflect for a moment on what it means to be a healthcare professional, as you would well know, Mr Deputy Speaker Kelly. I am not sure there has been a time in human history where such a spotlight has been shone on health care as it has been over the past two years. It is quite a profound thing to say, but I say it because I believe it to be genuinely true.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have no shame in saying that I love health care, as I know you do as well. I love the undeniable good it can bring to the life of one person or the lives of many. As a registered nurse, I have lived it. I have lived the highs of a healthcare career—being with a patient when their life is changed for the better. There is nothing quite like it. A test, a vaccine, a scan, a surgery—these things change people's lives; all done through the wonders of modern health care.

I feel extremely lucky to have experienced firsthand the delivery of all of those things. But that feeling is not always like that, as we now know. In those autumn days of 2020 our healthcare workforce went to work every shift not knowing what they were in for. Out there was this great unknown and the whole world was watching. I think that captured the imagination of many here in Queensland but also right across the world. These people, our healthcare workers, were not just shuffling off to another day at work—they were putting it all on the line. They were our defence, our protection, superheroes in scrubs—and I do not use that term lightly.

Suddenly work in health care was not just another occupation because these people were on the coalface of a disease that nobody knew anything about. The sacrifices, miracles and magic that our health workforce weave every day were suddenly acknowledged on a very wide scale. So too the toughness, the grit and the risk of fronting up each day to face what was then a very worrying, unknown, invisible enemy.

I am proud and so thankful for the incredible job our frontline health workers did and continue to do through the pandemic. I am also so proud and so thankful for every day before and every day since. To my healthcare colleagues out there I just want to say thanks. I am sure the events which have unfolded since March 2020 have piqued the interest in a career in health care for many a young person and maybe not so young. If it has, let me say to you that you will not regret it. It is a richly rewarding career and you can do immense good.

I now turn my attention to the bill more directly. At the outset, as a member of the opposition I wish to place on record an acknowledgement that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption and upheaval to the lives of Queenslanders. It has impacted people in every corner of our great state. I want to acknowledge those Queenslanders who have lost loved ones. I want to acknowledge those Queenslanders who have lost their livelihoods. I want to acknowledge those who

were forced to close their businesses. I want to acknowledge those who have never reopened. I want to acknowledge those who might still be waiting to say hello for the first time. I want to acknowledge those who never got to say goodbye for the last time.

COVID-19 has taken away many things for many people and it is only proper that this fact be recognised. In this place, regardless of your stripe, we must all be cognisant of that fact when we speak to this bill. Always, members of the LNP have remained acutely mindful of this in dealing with our constituents every day.

As a good opposition should, we have carefully considered the detail of the government's Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022. This bill, and the iterations before it, are probably the most significant pieces of legislation that many of us have or will ever debate. The LNP recognises that the provisions contained in this bill are extraordinary. They give unprecedented power to the government with little or no oversight. Because of this, our party has and will continue to treat the passage of this bill, and any others like it, with the appropriate level of respect that is demanded.

The position which Queensland now finds itself in is very different to when this House debated a similar extension in August last year. Things have changed quite remarkably in the last two months alone. However, if members cast their minds back to when this chamber last voted to extend these powers, domestic and international travel was non-existent. A PCR test was the only option to check on mild COVID-19 symptoms. They will remember the vaccine rollout here in Queensland was still ramping up. We were slow out of the blocks and demonisation of the AstraZeneca vaccine and the Premier's refusal to have it played no small part in that.

We have not forgotten that sorry chapter on this side. However, despite that unfortunate episode, now more than 90 per cent of our state's adult population has received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. That is a wonderful thing because we know that it works. Full stop; it works—and I have said that in this chamber time and time again. It is a marvel of modern science. It prevents serious illness, meaning people do not end up requiring treatment in our ICUs or passing away from their illness. That is plain for all to see now, even here in Queensland.

Given the situation we now find ourselves in, it is time for us to look to the future. It is now the responsibility of the government to provide a step-by-step roadmap, grounded in expert advice, that shows Queenslanders the path out of this pandemic. We were told things would be reviewed at 90 per cent. The government have sat on their hands. We still have no clear path forward. Queenslanders should know what that plan is.

We know there will be surges in the number of cases from time to time. We know there will be new variants or subvariants as there are right now. We know we must be prepared for and react to those things, and the opposition acknowledges that, but that should not mean paralysis and we still need to plan. Each day that goes by we are more normalised to living with COVID-19 circulating within our community. Now it is time for the government to tell us how and when these restrictions will be appropriately eased.

Across two years the government has failed to show us a clear and coherent plan, so it is for this very reason that the LNP will move key transparency amendments to this bill. I now table a copy of the amendments which the opposition will move.

*Tabled paper:* Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022, amendments to be moved by Ms Ros Bates MP [435](#).

The government has shown that it is not going to be open, transparent and accountable of its own volition, so we will put it to a vote in the parliament. The government should have a vote on why those very things—openness, transparency and accountability—should not apply to them. The truth is that there is not a valid reason that exists.

The LNP's first amendment would see the extraordinary powers given to the government and Chief Health Officer expire on 31 May 2022. We are saying to the government, 'You have two months to outline a plan for the future.' The opposition and the people of Queensland have played ball. Now it is time the government did the same. The date of 31 May 2022 has been chosen as it will provide the Queensland parliament with the option to scrutinise the government's plan moving forward.

If there was a genuine need to extend the restrictions the parliament could do that. There are two sitting weeks in May when we can vote to extend the powers again if necessary. We understand and we respect the need for the response to be grounded in expert medical advice, but the government must take Queenslanders into their trust.

Our record on this is clear. We back the AHPPC guidelines for frontline healthcare staff and aged-care staff to be vaccinated. We have backed them from the beginning. What this amendment does is set a target for the transition away from restrictions. It says to the government: 'What's your plan for we must have one?' As a parliament and as a population, we have upheld our end of the bargain for two long years. Now it is time the government did the same.

The second amendment to the bill would see that the expert health advice received by the state government which is used as the rationale for implementing public health directions is released publicly. The parliament and the Queensland public have been left in the dark for too long when it comes to this.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opposition has called for the public release of expert medical advice which is used as the rationale for the COVID-19 restrictions. A good government does not shy away from openness, transparency, accountability and scrutiny. However, this government has. Asking for this advice is not somehow an argument against medical advice. It is about how the government communicates it with Queenslanders.

Releasing the advice that the government receives will allow Queenslanders to know why hard decisions are being made. As an example, meeting minutes and correspondence between the minister and the Chief Health Officer in Victoria are routinely released by the government when new health directives are issued. Go to their website and see for yourself. It is an insight into government decision-making which has been absent in this state.

This level of openness and transparency has been non-existent in Queensland, but it should never have been this way. Clarity around decision-making is essential for public confidence. That is why the LNP is moving an amendment stipulating that the health advice is released publicly. The government should not be surprised by this. We moved the same amendment last time these powers were extended.

Finally, the third amendment which will be moved by the opposition will be to establish a parliamentary committee which would routinely hold hearings with the Chief Health Officer to assess and scrutinise health advice. This layer of parliamentary oversight would be in line with other Australian and international jurisdictions. The opposition believes that the government has not undertaken the appropriate level of scrutiny which is necessary for a bill as significant as this.

In one form or another these powers have existed for more than two years. The government has had ample time to prepare for a proper and thorough review of this bill. Alas, no, the government has done a rush job and that is to the detriment of all Queenslanders.

To provide context, the committee was only given 31 days to examine the bill. Public submissions were open for barely two weeks. The public hearing with Queensland Health lasted one hour—one hour. Based on these facts alone, the government blatantly treated the committee system and the examination of this bill with contempt. It is ironic that the government chose to ram this bill through in such a fashion.

When we last voted on the extension of these powers, the LNP sought to move an amendment that would have brought the extension time line forward. The health minister stood up and exclaimed how inappropriate it would be for such a short time frame to be given for the House to consider the bill. Yet here we are a few months on in a position where the committee was only given—and I repeat—31 days to examine the bill, two weeks for the public to make submissions and one single hour to ask questions of Queensland Health.

This is a case in point for why a parliamentary oversight committee must be established. It is not appropriate that a bill of this magnitude is subject to such little scrutiny. The opposition believes that the current level of ongoing parliamentary oversight for a bill of this nature is insufficient. Under the bill as it currently stands there is no requirement for public health officials to formally answer questions or for the restrictions to be scrutinised by the Queensland parliament. Should the bill pass without amendment, it will mean that the bill is not scrutinised for six months by the parliament, and we believe that to be unacceptable.

The opposition is moving amendments to establish a six-person parliamentary oversight committee, chaired by a non-government member. The establishment of a parliamentary committee would ensure there were routine hearings with the Chief Health Officer and other Queensland Health officials to assess and scrutinise health advice. The committee could, among other things, consider changes to AHPPC advice recommended by the Commonwealth government, deliberate on appropriate quarantine requirements for international arrivals who may be carrying new strains of the virus, and provide recommendations to the government on the suitability of other COVID related restrictions.

Based on the evidence provided to the committee, the committee could also recommend to the government when the public health emergency can be declared over. That power rests solely with the minister unchecked by the Queensland parliament.

The establishment of such committees is not new, having taken place in other jurisdictions such as New South Wales and New Zealand. The opposition flagged this very issue in April 2020 when the member for Kawana raised that a non-government member should chair the committee. I should also note that submissions by the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties and the Queensland Law Society cited a current lack of oversight.

To round out my contribution, I would like to place on the record that the opposition acknowledges the unprecedented legislative changes of dealing with the first two years of this pandemic. That is clear. However, the opposition is also of the view that, in a democracy such as ours, these types of powers should not be in place any longer than necessary.

Over the past two years Queenslanders have displayed an extraordinary level of trust in government by giving up basic rights and freedoms to control the spread of COVID-19. The Queensland public held up their end of the bargain. The opposition is of the view that we, in this place, now have a responsibility to honour this trust by outlining a pathway for the return of these rights and to restore transparency. We believe these amendments will do just that.