




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

 **Ms BATES** (Mudgeeraba—LNP) (4.38 pm): I rise today to give my contribution on the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill 2022. It is clearly not the first time this parliament has debated a bill which deals with how our state responds and manages COVID-19. I begin my contribution as I have done on other occasions, and that is to say an enormous and heartfelt thankyou to all those staff who have worked on the front line of the COVID-19 response. We must not forget the incredible courage and strength those on the front line showed when this pandemic first began. For quite some time the threat of COVID-19 was a threat which was largely unknown. As they are called to do, our frontline staff stared down that unknown threat and showed up in the face of it every day. They did so at risk to themselves, to their families and to their friends.

When this chamber last debated a bill such as this, I said that I doubted whether there had been a time in human history when such a spotlight had been shone on health care as there was throughout the difficult days of the pandemic. I stand by that statement. I feel as though, for a generation of people, health care will never be looked at in the same way because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As someone who loves health care, who has lived and breathed it, and who has stood on the front line as a registered nurse, it made me immensely proud. My two sisters and I are nurses. There is nearly 100 years of nursing experience between the three of us and I am incredibly proud of that too. Nurses were among the heroes in scrubs who turned up day in, day out in the face of what was then an unknown enemy. To them and everyone else who rose to the challenge at that time, I say thank you—thank you for what you did then and thank you for what you still do today.

Just as I mentioned the unprecedented spotlight that was shone on health care in the past few years in my last speech on the COVID-19 response, I want to borrow something else that I mentioned in my last contribution. It is not just through COVID-19 that our frontline health staff front up in the face of unknown adversity. That is their job. It is their job to do it every day. Whether it is a pandemic with the world watching on or a patient with problems on a Monday morning, they go to work to solve it, to stop it and to protect us from it. They go to work to nurture, to fix and to mend. They go to work to care and to care for us. Often they are there for us on our hardest days. They might see someone's hardest day 10 times over in just one shift. To those healthcare colleagues and workers on the front line, my family, my friends and my colleagues, I say thank you.

It is quite incredible to think just how different our world is compared to 12 months ago or two years ago. The things that we once took for granted were things we could no longer do—see a friend, catch up at a cafe, see a live gig, go to the cinema. We could not do those things not that long ago. We could not travel abroad. We could not visit our relatives in aged care and, for many, we could not attend a funeral or a wedding. COVID-19 took away a great deal. Many people lost many things—moments and memories that they will never get back or that they never got to have at all. We can never forget that in this place. If we lose sight of that then we have failed in our duty because COVID-19 took so

much away from so many. In this place we are privileged to be the voice for our constituencies across this great state. When we talk about how this state responded to COVID-19, we can never forget that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant upheaval to the lives of many Queenslanders.

At all times members of the LNP have remained acutely mindful of this in dealing with our constituents. We have carefully considered these realities in our examination of this bill. Despite being tempered somewhat as compared to previous iterations of similar legislation, the LNP recognise that in many ways the provisions contained in this bill still remain extraordinary. As such, 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 opposition will not support the passing of this bill. We all must acknowledge that the current state of the pandemic has shifted greatly since a bill of this nature was last introduced to the parliament. As an opposition, we are acutely aware of that. We realise that the threat from COVID-19 has not just upped and left—far from it. As a state and as a society, we must be prepared for a potential new variant of the virus and the risks that that could bring. Those risks and that threat is likely to remain with us for some time yet. However, the situation has rapidly evolved from where we once were to where we are now. Yes, we must be absolutely prepared but our response must be proportionate to the risk at hand.

As it stands, there are now very few COVID-19 restrictions that impact Queenslanders' lives. That is a good thing and it is reasonable, given that the risk and the threat of the virus to our way of life has significantly subsided since the beginning of this year. With more restrictions being wound back, both in Queensland and nationally, we believe it is extremely difficult to justify to the community why legislation like this bill should be passed in the Queensland parliament. In recent weeks, the requirements to isolate should an individual test positive were wound back. That was really the last of the more restrictive measures that still existed and now, as agreed by National Cabinet, it is no more. The decision to stay home if you are unwell now rests with the individual.

The lessons we have learned from the pandemic tell me that most individuals will be careful and respectful in how they choose to go about their lives if they are a known positive case, and so they should. Many businesses and organisations are now choosing what, if any, COVID-19 restrictions they will enforce. Most have none, which is now entirely lawful in almost all sectors and industries. That has been widely accepted by the Queensland public. Others have decided to keep some protections in place, and that is fine too. Those are businesses and organisations making decisions of their own volition. The same can be said for individual Queenslanders going about their day-to-day lives. Queenslanders have learned to live with the virus. They have learned to take careful personal responsibility in going about their daily lives.

There are now only three Chief Health Officer's public health directions in effect in Queensland and they are as follows: the COVID-19 vaccination requirements for workers in residential aged care and disability accommodation services direction; protecting public officials and workers from spitting, coughing and sneezing, direction No. 3; and the public health face mask requirements, direction No. 6. They are quite self-explanatory. Those three directions are now largely self-governed. They are common practice and, in the case of the direction to protect public officials and workers, it is common sense. To any individual who thinks it is okay to spit, cough or sneeze on anyone, it is not. It is also not okay to verbally abuse people in those positions. We have a justice system with the necessary protections in place to punish those who might choose to partake in vile acts such as those.

As I outlined earlier, the opposition realises that, while the phase of the pandemic has moved on considerably, the threat is not yet gone. If a situation was to arise where a new variant of the virus begins spreading through the community and poses a significant threat to public health, parliament could be swiftly recalled in order to pass the necessary laws to protect Queenslanders. Recalling parliament at short notice can be done. It happened as recently as last month following the passing of the late Queen Elizabeth II. If we can recall the parliament to legislate for a holiday then surely we can all get together and pass laws to protect Queensland from any new threat that may emerge. It would be a process that would be well understood by all in this chamber and understood by the Queensland community. It is the job of this parliament to sit, to debate. Let the parliament do its job.

Mr Hinchliffe interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Member for Sandgate, I will not warn you again. The next time it will be a warning under the standing orders.

Ms BATES: Queenslanders have walked this path before. Queenslanders heeded the advice once and, if it ever had to happen, they would accept it again. If there were a genuine need for the government to change the laws to strengthen the response to ensure the public health of

Queenslanders is protected then the opposition would never stand in the way of the parliament sitting. As an opposition, we would then carefully and judiciously consider any legislation brought forward. However, we cannot go on living indefinitely with these types of legislative frameworks in place.

I want to take some time to address the attempts that the government has made to include measures of transparency and openness in this bill. The gall of those opposite is quite something. Here we are in a phase of the pandemic when COVID-19 restrictions are all but gone and the government decides that it is time they embark on the very novel idea of being transparent with the parliament about public health directions and advice. Where on earth have they been for the past two years? Seriously, where? With the worst of the pandemic behind us, at least for the foreseeable future, the government now wants people to believe that they are the source of all things transparent, accountable and open when it comes to how they handle COVID-19.

Queenslanders are not falling for that one. It is an insult to all those who were left reeling by the decisions made by this government—decisions that were made without a shred of transparency and accountability. There was the decision to deny six-year-old Lenny and his father a chance to quarantine in Queensland after major surgery for his cerebral palsy took place overseas. There was three-year-old Memphis, who was stranded with his grandparents over the border and unable to come home to his mum and dad. On top of that, we had the truly unbelievable cases of footy players' wives and girlfriends who were allowed into the state while others such as Lenny and Memphis were not. Yes, the Queensland public would have loved a little transparency about who made that decision and how it was made. The image of the plane on a Queensland tarmac will live long in the memories of the Queensland people.

Then we have the mother of all COVID-19 response stuff-ups, Wellcamp or 'waste camp'. It is a monument to the hubris and ineptitude that has become the hallmark of this tired third-term Labor government. Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars are gone. The Queensland public needs no reminder of just how open and transparent those opposite were with that decision. It was not just lacking; it was entirely absent.

If ever you need a clear example of the motives of this government, here it is laid bare in this legislation: open with Queenslanders but only when it suits them politically; transparent but only when there is nothing left to be transparent about; accountable—well, actually they never have been and never will be. The opposition is not going to accept that the government has decided these provisions are some gesture of goodwill or some belated conversion to being transparent in government. Everything those opposite do is contrived. Every non-government member in this chamber backed calls in some form or another for openness and transparency the last time a bill like this was debated. The government did not support it. In that moment the government nailed its colours to the mast. How can one take it seriously on these issues now? Once elected on the principles of transparency and accountability, this government has now walked so far away from those things that it does not know where to start looking to find them again.

A lot was asked of Queenslanders by the government throughout the pandemic, and Queenslanders rose to the challenge. That is despite these situations I have just outlined. More than 90 per cent of our state adult population has now received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. Many Queenslanders have chosen to have a third or even a fourth COVID-19 vaccine. Ask Queenslanders now and you will find it difficult to find one who has not had COVID-19 themselves or does not know someone who has had it, and many will have had it more than once. COVID-19 is no longer an unknown enemy on the horizon; it is something we all now live with every single day. As such, the opposition believes that the time for legislation like this has come and gone. Until such time as a new public health emergency arises—should that happen, the parliament should then be allowed to do its job: be recalled if urgent and pass the necessary laws.