




Speech By
Samuel O'Connor

MEMBER FOR BONNEY

Record of Proceedings, 25 October 2022

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

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (6.03 pm): I will start by thanking my fellow committee members and our amazing support staff for all their work on their investigation into this legislation. It was nice to hear that the member for Thuringowa used to be a paramedic. A lot of members did not know that. I can say, on behalf of this side of the House, that we will be doing everything we can to make sure he goes back to being a paramedic full-time from November 2024. We will certainly need every one we can get to fix the nation's worst ramping that we have in this state.

As the shadow health minister outlined, the opposition has carefully considered its position on this legislation and we have decided that we will not be supporting this bill. Simply put, it is unnecessary. Our state, our nation and the world have moved on from these sorts of measures, even in the watered down and constrained manner proposed here. The COVID-19 Emergency Response Act 2020 should just be allowed to expire on 31 October.

COVID-19 had a devastating impact on so many people in my community, not just on those who lost loved ones to the virus but to the hundreds if not thousands of people from my part of the Gold Coast who were not able to see their family and friends due to border closures. It was an incredibly tough time for so many small businesses, for so many sole traders—for all workers, in fact—and in particular our health workers who went above and beyond under conditions they could never have imagined, and especially those who stepped up when the borders did open and cases surged last December and at the beginning of this year.

We have come so far from back then. We are so far from a year and a bit before that when we did not have a vaccine to protect us from the worst impacts of this virus. If something does come up, if there is a new variant or if there is a need to impose extraordinary measures like these again, we can come back to parliament. We are not afraid of sitting in this House. We actually think we do not do it often enough. We would be the first to support an emergency session being called to swiftly bring up any necessary measures the government thought we needed to manage any resurgence of the pandemic or, indeed, any new pandemic threat. Of course, this happened just a few weeks ago with the death of the Queen. With a couple of days notice, the Leader of the House wrote to the Speaker to request a special sitting to pass legislation to enact a public holiday. If it was good enough for a day off then we can at the very least have this standard for legislation which has the potential to impact the lives of so many people.

Everyone should, of course, be vaccinated. I have been a vocal advocate for this since the fridge was first installed at the Gold Coast University Hospital back in February last year and I had a tour with a very excited John Gerrard when the rollout started. It should, of course, be enforced in particular jobs, such as with health workers, but we do not need this legislation to enforce mandates like this. It can be a condition of employment. That is exactly what Queensland Health does for many roles right now. I do note the requirement in this bill for the Chief Health Officer, when giving a public health direction, to

prepare and publish a justification statement explaining the reasons for the health direction and its compatibility with human rights within five days of the direction being issued. This statement must also then be tabled in parliament within 21 days and it also requires scrutiny by a portfolio committee.

If only someone had raised the need for this in 2020 when the original bill went through this place. Of course, we did. The opposition has consistently been vocal on the need for these sorts of transparency and accountability measures. It should not have taken this long for them to be proposed. We have never seen powers like these exercised and they should have been better scrutinised at the time they were most relevant to Queenslanders. It is incredibly disappointing that the government is only just bringing them in now when I do not think even they think we will need to put these further powers in place again. They did not support measures like these when they were needed so, frankly, this is a meaningless cop-out.

The time has come for us to fully revert to allowing people to use their common sense, to trust individuals to do the right thing. That is exactly why the mandatory isolation period has been removed around the nation. In relation to the measures in place around spitting and coughing, as the shadow minister outlined, the justice system already deals with this and it is the more appropriate way of doing that.

My main reason for opposing this bill is that the situation has changed. Since 14 October people who get infected with COVID-19 have not been required to isolate. That was a National Cabinet decision. The health minister and several members have said the legislation before us is all about health advice, but that decision to remove the mandatory isolation period was made by Prime Minister Albanese. Importantly, it was made without consulting the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, the AHPPC. It was just made by consulting the Chief Medical Officer. The quote that the Prime Minister gave at the time was—

... we have a responsibility to listen to the health advice but we also have a responsibility to make decisions which are proportionate. That is what we have done.

I table that article for the benefit of members.

Tabled paper: Article from *The Conversation*, dated 30 September 2022, titled "View from The Hill: national cabinet drops mandatory isolation, dumping "COVID exceptionalism"" [1741](#).

The article goes into further detail on how this was not taken to that full committee of chief health officers from across the nation. It was simply done by the Prime Minister on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and was advice that he requested because there was not agreement amongst the AHPPC. We saw that with the decrease in isolation requirements announced a couple of weeks before that.

Can members imagine if the former federal LNP government had done that? Imagine if they had made an arbitrary decision without consulting the AHPPC. As with the calls for fifty-fifty health funding, we would have seen motions moved in this House. There would have been absolute riots. Regardless, it was the right decision and now Queensland Health strongly recommends that people stay home until their symptoms go away, to not visit healthcare facilities, to avoid entering aged or disability care facilities and to wear masks indoors. The fact that none of that is mandatory is the greatest indication of how far we have come.

To conclude, this bill is unnecessary. It is looking backwards when we are all moving forwards, away from the pandemic. It is not the best way to manage a resurgence of the virus if that were to happen. I do not support the bill.