




Speech By
Sandy Bolton

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

Record of Proceedings, 26 October 2022

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

 **Ms BOLTON** (Noosa—Ind) (11.38 am): Queensland's declared COVID-19 emergency, as we know, resulted in an extensive range of legislation to support the public health, institutional and economic response of our government. Temporary amendments were made to the Public Health Act 2005 to provide the Chief Health Officer and emergency officers with extraordinary powers to respond to the pandemic. This temporary framework is due to expire at the end of this month. This bill replaces that temporary framework with a reduced set of public health powers, specific COVID-19 measures in the Corrective Services Act, and the power of the CHO to mandate isolation, quarantine, masks and vaccinations for high-risk settings.

When the temporary powers were extended earlier this year there was extensive evidence from credible sources that they were not fit for purpose, including the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, economist Gene Tunny, vice-president of the Economic Society of Australia (Queensland) and the Queensland Human Rights Commission. As submitted, the temporary powers at that time infringed on human rights without proper justification. They were not transparent nor backed up with data and evidence and contributed to trauma.

We saw divisions created across our communities based on economic capacity and vaccination status. I have spoken about the reality experienced in our aged-care homes and by our casual workers and everyday families who lost their businesses, homes, livelihoods and mental health. The introduction of this bill provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our, and Australia's, response to COVID-19, as well as to speak on behalf of those who may again be devastated by the decisions of those who have financial safeguards should we be placed in a similar situation going forward, whereas they do not have those financial safeguards.

The recently released report *Fault lines: an independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*—which was funded by philanthropists, including the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Minderoo Foundation, and chaired by Peter Shergold AC—outlined who bore the brunt of the pandemic. These included our frontline workers who put their lives at risk to protect us all—and, again, I give our deep gratitude to them all—women and children, aged-care residents and people with disabilities. The long-term ramifications of this are still unknown.

COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, exposed cracks in our health, social, economic, government and political systems and brought with it many challenges that impacted all. The *Fault lines* report found five overarching lessons from the Australian response to COVID-19 and how we can do better. As they stated in the foreword, it was not an undertaking to criticise; it was to improve our responses.

The five lessons included the need to consider societal fault lines—that is, how decisions impact on different groups in society, small businesses, the self-employed and regional areas as examples. As the member for Traeger outlined, the one-size-fits-all approach created even further divisions, leaving

many feeling ostracised and discriminated against. Differing viewpoints or concerns should not be mocked, and empathy and compassion, as well as respectful debate in this chamber minus any labelling, are essential moving forward.

In addition, the review found that we need to plan, prepare and practise pandemic events and avoid the impacts of overreach. Importantly, the review found that we need to be transparent, clear and consistent and we need to better balance competing trade-offs. The *Fault lines* report reinforces points that other MPs and I have raised in this House over the last year about the reality confronted by everyday Queenslanders and how we could improve our response to viruses such as COVID-19 by making equitable and consistent decisions, and I go back again to those societal fault lines. Providing clear, consistent messaging, including a forward strategy, with the provision of requested data and evidence to support decisions and mandates, recognising the impact on everyday people, builds trust and greater surety.

The *Fault lines* report made a number of recommendations, and we need to look at these as part of preparing for what lies ahead. Importantly, they said that Australia should establish an Australian centre for disease control and prevention. As the only OECD country not to have one, it is reassuring that the federal government is proceeding with this. Another recommendation was the establishment of a broad panel of independent, multidisciplinary experts and representatives to advise governments alongside the AHPPC during health crises. This would take the onus off CHOs as well as reduce political interference and rebuild confidence. In addition to that is the need to better harness the frontline, lived experience of business, unions, the community sector, mental health experts and local government in crisis planning and response. These were not considered and led to decisions with ramifications that we are now living with.

They also recommended the need to modernise how governments use data, including availability, sharing and analysis. Most importantly, they recommended the public release of the modelling and evidence used in government decision-making, as was done in the UK and New Zealand. Previous requests last year by me and other MPs for this to occur were ignored, and this led to increasing distrust from many Queenslanders of us as MPs and government, and it fuelled the misinformation that was at times overwhelming. It is good to see in this bill that we shall now be doing this. However, as the Queensland Human Rights Commissioner said in their current submission, 21 days is too long.

Despite lessons learnt, the approach in this bill is to continue with what has been utilised previously, although it is narrower in scope. It does not appear to take into account what has been analysed, reported, raised or independently assessed. Although I acknowledge the efforts in this bill for improvement, it is not enough.

We can learn very vital lessons from the last two years—both the good, and there has been so much of that relayed in this debate, and the not so good, which has also been relayed. We need an informed, collaborative and bipartisan approach for the future, and this bill is not fit for purpose to take us into that future. We have heard that the CHO has said that the need to utilise these powers is unlikely and only for a severe variant. We also know we can be recalled into this chamber at any time to give the necessary powers where needed to respond quickly and keep Queenslanders safe. It is for the reasons I have outlined that I cannot support this bill without amendments.

In finishing, I ask the government to commit to reviewing and implementing recommendations from reports such as *Fault lines* in any of the roles that the state government has responsibility in. We have a long journey still to go. Keeping Queenslanders safe must mean all Queenslanders, and this can only be achieved by considering those societal fault lines.