




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.14 pm): We need to respect the views expressed by the Australian Human Rights Commission, which have increasing concerns regarding lack of transparency and scrutiny of bills such as the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill. The commission stated—

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge that has required extraordinary measures to protect public health. Governments across Australia have acted swiftly to protect everyone's rights to life, health and to an adequate standard of living, while also focusing efforts on groups who are particularly vulnerable at this time.

We have been told over and over again by the government that to protect against the spread of the virus difficult decisions have had to be made about restricting some basic human rights, such as freedom of movement and association. The opposition acknowledges the unprecedented legislative challenges of dealing with the first two years of this pandemic. However, we are also of the view that, in a democracy such as ours, these types of powers should not be in place any longer than necessary.

The position which Queensland now finds itself in is very different to when this House debated a similar extension in August last year. Now, looking to the future, it is the responsibility of the government to provide a step-by-step road map, grounded in expert advice, that shows Queenslanders the path out of the pandemic. Governments tell us they are working hard to protect people, but their actions can sometimes result in limitations of human rights. This can especially be the case when significant decisions have necessarily been made quickly and previously untested policy solutions are implemented. The Queensland Human Rights Commission statements were important during our deliberations. They said—

We have all been subject to significant restrictions on our human rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission is very aware of the difficulties and distress these have caused Queenslanders, particularly people whose lives have been severely disrupted by border closures and lockdowns.

Throughout the pandemic we have handled thousands of enquiries and complaints and strongly advocated for improvements to the way the Queensland government responds to the pandemic, including to hotel quarantine, communication about restrictions, and transparency and accountability in how these decisions are made.

The Commission is concerned about the impact on human rights of some COVID response measures, including vaccine mandates.

I want to put on the record the tragic circumstances occurring in my electorate in the last week involving two frontline nurses in Bundaberg. Even though they both have GP and specialist letters and certificates stating the underlying medical conditions why these public servants need to be exempt from vaccination mandates, they have now had their exemptions rejected and second notices to their terminations have been received. This is very distressing for them. A lot of issues need to be resolved there. No-one could think that outcome is acceptable.

These two frontline nurses have raised issues with me about the employment vaccine mandates. They said that those mandates are: removing their human right to provide food and shelter for their families through loss of employment; eliminating access to health care; destroying small businesses and friends; placing unnecessary extreme pressure on families and individuals and creating mental anguish; leading to poor provision of health care in hospitals and communities; leading to issues in education for their children due to a loss of highly skilled educators; and creating a burnout of staff in emergency and health-care sectors. They wanted to put on record that student nurses, student paramedics and allied health students have been thrown in without required experience, training and mentors, while being expected to work outside their usual scope as we all battle through the pandemic and associated issues.

They also want to raise the issue of discrimination against the unvaccinated through health directives mandated through acts and powers. The government now wants to extend the act further to continue to allow one person, the CHO, to overwrite the human rights of all Queenslanders for a virus that is subsiding quicker than any of the government's computer modelling predicted. This is something we must debate over the next day or so.

The Queensland Human Rights Commission has opposed previous extensions to the bill due to a risk versus benefit basis, transparency and erosion of human rights, which have been ignored. Amnesty International Australia advocates that vaccine mandates legalised through this bill infringe on fundamental human rights and that risk versus benefit does not justify mandating. Social, economic and community welfare is being severely and negatively impacted due to the health directives being legalised through this act and is leading to monumentally higher stressors and loss of financial security for Queenslanders than any concerns regarding health impacts caused by COVID-19.

I acknowledge those thousands of people who have contacted our offices through the committee process who live with the hope that they will be able to return to work one day and resume being an independent individual, living with dignity and being an accepted part of society. I hope that one day we can all come together again as a proud state and not continue to be divided. The mandated restrictions imposed by the government and authorities have impacted greatly on those who work across many sectors, including government, education, emergency services, tourism, retail, hospitality, health, entertainment, construction, transport and personal services. Many of these hardworking Queenslanders have continued to work in their field. They have done the right thing but they have not been immune to the negative impacts of the mandates and restrictions. Some have suffered great loss financially, emotional turmoil, family relationship breakdowns, and loss of friends and family due to suicide and some have suffered vaccine injury.

I hope common sense will prevail as we move to restore Queenslanders' faith in our system of government, and we can allow these temporary management provisions to expire in April as we all agreed was the right course of action in August last year. With the calls for transparency, I support the amendments proposed by the shadow minister.

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

The third amendment is to establish a parliamentary committee which would routinely hold hearings with the Chief Health Officer to assess and scrutinise the health advice. This layer of parliamentary oversight would be in line with other Australian and international jurisdictions. We also seek to increase the level of transparency in government decision-making so that all Queenslanders can understand why certain restrictions are imposed but, more importantly, to give them hope and a pathway out of the pandemic and what these mandates mean.

The need for parliamentary oversight is important because the opposition believes that the government has not undertaken the level of scrutiny necessary for a bill of this significance. To provide context—it has been raised, but as deputy chair I want to put it on the record—I think 31 days to examine a bill like this could be questioned. I think we did a good job getting through the workload, and the report reflected that, but, as has been mentioned, we had only one hour with Queensland Health. I would have loved more time to scrutinise and perhaps get some evidence from the director-general at the time, particularly about the health advice. 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.

I welcome the debate over the next couple of days on this very important reform. I thank all those people who put a lot of work into the thousands of submissions in such a short period of time. I thank the committee members for their diligence in putting together this report.