

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

7 June 2022

Debate - Public Health Amendment Bill 2021

Intro

Thank you, Madame Speaker.

Firstly, I want to start by acknowledging and thanking our many frontline health staff and all those who have been working tirelessly in our health and compliance sectors throughout this pandemic to help keep us all safe, and to help keep our economy ticking over. This has been an enormous effort and has required coordination and cooperation across so many different services, and from our entire community.

Thank you, Minister Stephen-Smith for bringing forward this Bill and the further Government Amendments, and ensuring the legislation is robust, provides for the public health needs of our community and provides an appropriate approach to human rights.

Throughout the pandemic, the ACT's public health response has taken different forms in order to implement the most appropriate directions as the pandemic has evolved at a rapid pace.

It is important that we have in place the amendments proposed through this Bill as a public health emergency is no longer appropriate, however, there is a need to have certain public health measures continue or allow for the

possibility of implementation to keep our community safe. The directions of the Chief Health Officer and associated compliance mechanisms have been fundamental in the ACT's success in its handling of the pandemic, and will continue to be as we navigate COVID-19 into the future.

All of us in this Assembly have heard many different perspectives from our community about the ACT Government's response to the pandemic.

Primarily, this has been incredibly positive.

Community

I thought it is important to reflect briefly on where we have been, as we now look to the future. The last couple of years have been incredibly challenging. The shock and then practical implications of the lockdowns impacted every single person in our community. I am incredibly proud of how our community has banded together, to get through this and keep our community safe. We have to remember when this started, we did not have a vaccine, we did not know how the virus would variate, and no one knew how this would all play out.

One key observation from these last couple of years is how we have all had a slightly different set of circumstances that we have had to come to terms with during periods of lockdown and other restrictions. It would be hard to find any two experiences that are exactly the same. Our unique experiences have been shaped by the industries in which we work, how and where we

work, whether or not we have school aged children, how we travel, whether we live in a safe and comfortable domestic situation (or not), if we have underlying health conditions, or mental health conditions, or if your family lives interstate or overseas, and probably most pertinent is when/if you or your family/household/work place have had COVID exposures.

Regardless of our circumstances, our challenges and our individual coping mechanisms and levels of resilience, it has been incredibly encouraging to see the way in which our community has come together to support each other.

I think the thing that has struck me over the past couple of years is how quickly everything changes. However, I think it is important to point out there are some people in our community that have struggled with the changes.

I do want to acknowledge some constituents in my electorate that I have built a relationship with over the last year or so, that have raised their concerns about public health mandates, vaccines and the future of our society more broadly. I always believe we should ask questions. I encourage people in my electorate to ask me questions and to talk with me about their concerns. I may not always have the same point of view – but I will listen.

I think questions, inquiry and scrutiny are more important than ever and are critical in maintaining the confidence of the community as we continue to navigate the pandemic. I want to assure those handful of residents that I

have looked at the Amendment Bill and the evidence and I have talked to many people, I am confident to support this legislation.

As part of my engagement with these continents – they have sent me videos and documents to back up their concerns. These are many of the same documents and YouTube videos that have widely circulated these anti-vaccine/anti-mandate groups. What troubles me deeply is it never takes me more than one google of the source – ie. the ‘doctor’ who is speaking out, or the group – to see major warning signs. They are doctors who are long retired, those who have lost their medical licences, and those that are looking for notoriety or aren’t even ‘doctors’ – or are faceless, saying they fear retribution. The language they use is fear mongering, it is not medical language, it’s emotive and distressing. I feel very angry towards the creators of these groups and this media, that are targeting people who are fearful in our community for their own self-interest in a very coordinated, calculated way. They have preyed on the vulnerable, like vultures.

It has been a scary time. I will remember points of the pandemic, announcements, moments in time, decisions to go and get vaccinated, to vaccinate my children – as moments that I will remember for the rest of my life. Some of these moments scared me, some were empowering, that my decisions to stay home, minimise my interaction with people, wear a mask and get vaccinated were the little bit that I could do to help keep our

community and my family safe. But some in our community did not feel this sense of empowerment to balance the fear.

The very real fear that these people have felt – has increasingly led them to turn away from their family and friends, away from mainstream news, away from knowledge from our academic institutions, government institutions and engage in online forums with likeminded people, where misinformation and egos reign supreme. This situation culminated in the anti-mandate protests in February here in Canberra and still plays out in the stragglers of protesters around the ACT who I don't believe have anywhere else to go now. The few constituents that I speak about here in the ACT, have had reputable careers, have made a contribution to our community in many ways – but have become severely lost and disenfranchised. They don't look like the protesters that yell abuse at people in the street, that fly flags indiscriminately and write 'freedom' scribbles all over their cars – they don't talk about paedophiles or Chem trails – instead these people attempt to structure arguments and raise concerns through legitimate channels – like ATAGI, like Ministers offices, their Federal and local members - but regardless of what these people look like, or how they chose to engage - the problem is that the source of all the information they use is the same – and the bottom line is the source/s are just not credible.

I commend the Chief Minister and Health Minister and Chief Health Officer and officials who provided daily updates to the community during the lockdown days of the pandemic and to the Health Minister for the detailed

updates she provides to the Assembly every sitting. To all the directorate officials and health workers, school staff who have moved mountains to keep our worlds moving in a safe, informed and transparent manner. And the position that our community now finds itself in, is testament to the success and culmination of all the hard work over the last couple of years.

As the pandemic is not over, and as we embark on a new regulatory framework - I do feel a need to speak for those how have felt disenfranchised – I want to reiterate how important is is that we do always ask questions, we should always assess the source and interests of the evidence we are receiving sources, we need to strengthen our government institutions and bodies that assess this evidence to ensure rigor, transparency and be adequately able to communicate these processes broadly to ensure community confidence, we need to be open to doing things differently and work hard to bring the community with us. As we embark on this next stage or stages of the COVID pandemic, we must seek to bring those who have been disaffected back into the fold. To re-engage them.

The world really has changed. Flexible working arrangements and the dawn of a new digital era is definitely high up the list. I thank the Chief Minister for the work he is doing in this space, and the advocate he has become for flexible working arrangements that meet the needs of employers and employees.

I also welcome Minister Gentleman's initiative for 'satellite offices' which are being trialled in Tuggeranong and Gungahlin. This concept allows people living in and near those town centres to work from office hubs nearer their home, rather than travelling long distances to their regular office. In a sense, this goes back to Canberra's history and heritage, where our satellite towns were planned for exactly this sort of local living.

Community safety

Community safety is another – dare I say "benefit? – we've seen through the pandemic. We saw crime rates drop during periods of lockdown.

Unfortunately, we can't use lockdowns as the long-term solution to reducing crime across our community!! But we can take lessons from it: Passive surveillance, for instance.

Passive surveillance – people out and about in our suburbs and on our streets – has a real effect in reducing crime.

I'm sure I'm not alone in enjoying seeing neighbours, families and couples out and about in our local areas, enjoying our nature reserves, urban parks, shared pathways and local footpaths. I feel like we developed a really nice sense of neighbourliness and of community during this time: Children etching out chalk drawings and messages on our footpaths, messages of hope and inspiration; the global 'bear hunt' and those 'where's wally's' that kept popping up everywhere.

I jumped on this bandwagon of community activation and hosted the 'Canberra Scarecrow' competition back in Spring last year. It was incredibly successful, with 52 Scarecrows constructed and submitted for online voting, and over 600 votes cast! I learnt a lot from this activity, about community-building, and just how important these – perhaps seemingly frivolous – activities are, in creating connection, social cohesion and a break from the 'heaviness' of the pandemic. I hadn't realised just how much the community needed this sort of distraction until we were in the midst of the competition and I was overwhelmed by the level of engagement.

We need to keep ensuring that our suburban neighbourhoods are welcoming, safe and amenable places for everyone in our community to *want* to be. I commend Minister Steel and the staff within Transport Canberra and City Services for the ongoing maintenance and continual upgrades to make our neighbourhoods attractive spaces for active travel and outdoor play and recreation.

This is also reflected in our schools – with technology now completely ingrained in our children's learning, with schools' ability to transform to remote environments. I have significant admiration for teachers and schools over the past two years in the enormous work that has gone into developing this remote learning ability and agility. While my personal struggle was balancing remote learning and working – my children are more tech savvy – technology is more a part of our home life than ever before – for better or for worse.

We have a long path ahead and to hopefully eventually adjust to life beyond the pandemic. I know the measures in the Public Health Amendment Bill, and the Government's Response Bill, will help get us there. They will keep us safe and will enable us to start adjusting to a new way of living, a new way of interacting with each other and of 'being' in our communities and neighbourhoods.

Ends