



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

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

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (3.33 pm): I rise to address the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2020. At the outset, I pass on the gratitude and thanks of the people of Glass House to our health workers, including the Chief Health Officer, who have done such a marvellous job of keeping us healthy and safe over the past 12 months as COVID has had its way around the world, in Australia and Queensland.

I also thank each and every person in the electorate of Glass House for tackling what has been an extraordinarily challenging year with, in large part, a really positive attitude. It is fair to say that we have not always agreed with some of the decisions that have been made. Some of them have had disastrous impacts on businesses and organisations and on the personal lives of people across the electorate, but we have sucked it up and got on with it.

It was particularly challenging during the brief lockdown that occurred in the Greater Brisbane area. The electorate of Glass House is split across the Moreton Bay Regional Council and the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Half of my constituents were in hard lockdown and the other half continued to enjoy the freedoms that we had on the Sunshine Coast.

For businesses on the Sunshine Coast it was particularly challenging during that time. We have had a bumper tourism season in all of our tourist areas—the Glass House Mountains, Maleny, Montville, Mount Mee, Woodford and the like—but when Greater Brisbane went into hard lockdown that evaporated very quickly. We are talking about 70 per cent reductions in turnover in the space of a day and maintained for a week.

The resilience of our businesses is extraordinary. The previous speaker was talking about weddings. We are the home of the wedding industry in Queensland. Whilst we were able to eventually get some improvements in terms of what could occur, last year was absolutely dreadful for them. The good news hopefully is that all those people who were hoping to get married last year are now getting married this year. Whereas it used to be one or two weddings a week for most of these venues, some of them are up around three, four and even five weddings a week. That is a bright light on the horizon for many of these guys. However, as others have said, it does come down to our continuing ability to meet the challenges that COVID throws at us.

Like all members, I attended the briefing with the Minister for Health and the Chief Health Officer on the rollout of the vaccine. I say to the people of Glass House that I have just shared that information on my Facebook page. I encourage people to jump on board and have a read of that information. In terms of a number of the issues and a range of the concerns that people have raised with me over the last couple of weeks, it looks like nearly all of those things have been addressed in the information on the website, the link for which I have shared. Please head there. As always, if there are any outstanding concerns do not hesitate to contact me and I will do my best to get the answer.

I want to focus on one aspect of this amendment bill. It is around people being required to enter hotel quarantine at their own cost. We originally passed this as part of the Community Services Industry (Portable Long Service Leave) Act 2020 in June last year. I want to focus on this as it pertains to our agricultural sector and particularly the horticultural sector.

Glass House is home to pineapple and strawberry production in this state. We talked about disasters. Last year was the worst it could possibly be. I will refer to one of my operators, Pinata. Pinata is a very large operator with holdings not only in Glass House but across Queensland, North Queensland and even the Northern Territory. Last year they left over three million punnets of strawberries in the field to rot. They have also recently left 400 tonnes of pineapples in the field in Mareeba. In both cases it was due to a lack of labour.

A lot of people will say, 'There are plenty of people in Australia who should be stepping up and taking on these jobs.' I will give members the example that Gavin Scurr, the Managing Director of Pinata, gave me. He stated—

During September we employed 663 Australians on our strawberry farm. Of these 42—

that is less than 10 per cent—

were in more than 1 pay period (worked for more than 1 week)—

that was not because of Pinata; that was because the workers chose not to continue to work on the farm—

and at the end of season we only had 2 still with us.

It clearly is an example that Australians just do not want to do this kind of work. It is a crying shame. I am concerned that there are a number of people out there on JobSeeker and JobKeeper who could be doing some of this work. Clearly those statistics demonstrate that they are not willing to do this kind of hard yakka.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr POWELL: I take that interjection from the member for Logan about paying more. Most of the operators in the electorate of Glass House are paying above-award wages.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr POWELL: The member for Logan clearly does not understand how a market operates. If you pay your staff too much, customers will not be able to afford to buy the strawberries at the supermarket. Growers will not be able to sell the strawberries to the supermarket because they will not be able to make any profit whatsoever to employ those workers in the future. Gavin goes on to say—

As I see it the quickest part of the solution is to sort out the quarantine for the Seasonal Workers from the Pacific Islands. These people are highly experienced having done many seasons for us in the past as well as a very low Covid risk due to there being no Covid in the islands due to their borders being closed for close to 12 months.

My understanding is that the federal government has cleared the way in terms of immigration and migration. I heard the minister's response yesterday to a question without notice, but I am hoping that we can come to a very quick arrangement where we can create travel bubbles with these Pacific islands so that quarantining is not needed for seasonal work. As Gavin said, they have not experienced COVID for nearly 12 months. They have been as successful as Queensland has in that case. We have done it with New Zealand. Why can't we do it with the Pacific islands? Why can't we get these seasonal workers over here and not require them to quarantine at all? If that is not suitable, then come up with an arrangement where it is not the farmer who has to pay the quarantine costs. Again, if they have to quarantine on farm, that is an expense that most farmers cannot afford.

Mr Last: \$4,000.

Mr POWELL: I take the interjection from the member for Burdekin—\$4,000. As to the reason they cannot afford it, let me add this complexity to it. As I said at the start, many farmers left punnets of strawberries or pineapples rotting in the field last year. That was the revenue they needed to pay for the runners and the plants to go into the fields this year. As a result of their poor season last year, they cannot afford to service loans. When they go to the bank this year to get a loan to put the runners in the ground to grow the strawberries, the banks will not lend them the money. They are caught in an insidious situation where they need to put a crop in the ground, but they cannot afford to put a crop in the ground or they are worried that they will not be able to get the crop out of the ground at the end of the season because of there being no seasonal workers and, yet again, their debt increases.

It is not a simple equation of paying the workers more, as the member for Logan said. In fact, that would not work at all. We need to access experienced seasonal workers from the Pacific islands. The way we can do that is to create travel bubbles, bring them in quarantine free and get them working, particularly now with the vaccine. If it is a case of these workers having to have the vaccine, give them the vaccine. Get them in here quarantine free and get them on the ground working. That way we can ensure that when we go along to Coles, Woolies, IGA or Aldi, there are Queensland-grown strawberries and pineapples and all of the other products produced in the electorates of Burdekin, Lockyer, Bundaberg and Burnett. All of those seats that are the fruit and salad bowls of this state require these workers.

I call on the minister for agriculture and the government to come up with a solution this week. It is that critical. It cannot wait any longer. We do not have the time. The farmers do not have the time and they need certainty.