

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Wednesday, 26 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Kristen Hilton, Commissioner,

Ms Emily Howie, Head of Legal and Dispute Resolution, and

Ms Catherine Dixon, Executive Director, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

The CHAIR: We welcome the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members are attending these hearings remotely from their homes and from their electorate offices, so we ask that people note, please, that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions of 6 August, part 2, section 7(i).

We advise that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We invite you to make a brief 5-minute opening statement. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you for joining us.

Ms HILTON: Thank you very much for your time today. My name is Kristen Hilton. I am Victoria's Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, and I am also joined here today by my colleagues Catherine Dixon, who is the Executive Director at the Commission, and Emily Howie, who is the Head of Legal and Dispute Resolution and who will be on hand to help with questions should the need arise.

Visual presentation.

Ms HILTON: We have a short statement, and just before beginning I would like to firstly acknowledge the work of PAEC over the last months and also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from which I am coming to you today, the land of the Boon Wurrung people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

In a time of emergency and disaster we believe that human rights need to be central to the decision-making of government, and certainly during this health pandemic we have seen that government has made very critical decisions to protect the health, lives, safety and livelihood of Victorians. In doing so the government has also exercised a range of quite extraordinary powers which have had far-ranging limitations on individual rights, such as our freedom of movement, our freedom of association, who we can see, how we move around and how we work and educate, and these have also had significant social and economic impacts.

These are extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in, and the expansion of state powers and the limitations of rights carry particular responsibilities on government decision-makers to ensure that restrictions on rights are necessary and that they are proportionate and time bound and to ensure that there are additional safeguards in place for transparency and accountability and that extra support is provided to those who are most impacted.

At the start of the pandemic the commission identified six principles which were based on the charter of rights and responsibilities to ensure that the government meets its obligations under the three Acts that the Commission has responsibility for—that is, the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, the *Equal Opportunity Act* and the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act*. These principles have really provided a foundation for how we have observed and monitored and responded to the pandemic in the last few months.

The first principle is that the limitations should be necessary and proportionate and that the government must have evidence to justify any action that it takes to limit people's rights. The wearing of masks is a good example of this. It is an imposition, but it is one for which we have been given very clear evidence that wearing masks will reduce community transmission or prevent it. Importantly there are also exemptions for mask wearing, which is a proportionate response.

The measures also need to be time bound and only remain in place for as long as they are necessary. The measures should also be regularly reviewed, and again the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* has this protection built in in that a state of emergency expires after six months and that state in itself must be reviewed or reported on every four weeks. And of course the actions need to be lawful, and during this period we have seen that the rights under the charter have not been suspended by the Victorian Parliament and so that means that all the rights continue to apply to decisions and actions of public authorities.

The decisions must also be transparent. This means government providing information in an accessible, clear and timely manner about the measures that limit people's human rights in a way that all members of the public can understand and that draws on the available public health evidence. In various stages of this pandemic we have seen that it has been difficult for some people, particularly those from linguistically diverse backgrounds, to get the information that they have needed in a timely way, and that has sometimes had consequences for their compliance or their understanding. The measures also need to be scrutinised, including legislative measures and the exercise of new powers. In this regard PAEC, the quarantine inquiry and the Ombudsman's current investigation into public housing lockdown are all critical examples of how the government's response to COVID-19 is being scrutinised.

Wherever possible, preventative safeguards must be built into any action that limits people's rights. We have seen that without additional safeguards and supports, the consequences of rights limitations can have quite serious impacts. We saw this, for example, during lockdown one, where we received at the Commission a number of complaints from families with children with a disability who were simply unable to learn from home or were confused about whether or not they were able to send their children to school. We have also seen it in the context of compromised access to NDIS services and the extreme vulnerability of people to the virus in aged care.

Our own observations during this period have been that while the virus might not discriminate, its impacts are certainly felt more harshly by those who already experience discrimination and disadvantage and by those who are living in environments where it is very difficult to socially isolate or who are dependent on care. These sorts of environments include public housing, aged care, juvenile justice centres and prisons. The commission was, for example, concerned about the challenging circumstances for residents during the lockdown of the public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne, and we heard from residents there that access to fresh air, adequate and appropriate food, exercise and medical care were major concerns as well as the significant presence of police at their homes. Residents—

The CHAIR: Sorry to have to cut you off there, but the 5 minutes has gone well past. I will pass the first questions to Mr Gary Maas, MP. Thank you.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Commissioner, and to your team for your attendance today, and thank you for that presentation. If I could just take you to the issue of racism and vilification to begin with, obviously during this pandemic it has been unfortunate but we have heard reports of racism towards different groups but particularly Asian Australians. I was wondering if you would be able to shed some light on whether there has been an increase in reports of vilification for that group or for any other groups during the pandemic.

Ms HILTON: Yes. Thank you for the question. I am glad you asked it, because I was getting to it. We certainly have seen an increase in enquiries, and most of those enquiries have been in relation to racial vilification as opposed to race discrimination that might have happened in the workplace, for example. We have seen a doubling of reports of racial vilification over the last four months, which compares to the period last year, and most of those have happened, as I mentioned, in public environments. So on public transport we heard, for example, of a Melbourne doctor who was travelling to work by train and was so terribly abused because of his appearance that he was unable to travel to work on public transport anymore. We have heard reports from people, and it is often people of Asian or East Asian appearance, of people being abused in shopping at supermarkets; as I said, on public transport; accessing other goods and services; in schools; and

also neighbour complaints, so a number of reports of graffiti written on fences or neighbour abuse and often directed, as you mentioned, to people who are of Asian appearance. So it is something that we are extremely concerned about. And we have seen—there is research that backs this up—that when there is fear and anxiety, that will often lead to an increase in racism. So one of the things we are conscious of is: how do we ensure that the response and the recovery from COVID-19 builds in better protections around racial vilification for people in our community?

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Commissioner. Are you able to tell us what your organisation has been able to do to support victims of vilification and abuse?

Ms HILTON: Yes. One of the things that we have done is develop a new online reporting tool, really to make it much easier for people to report their experiences. We have also encouraged them to go through a formal complaints service that we run at the commission, but many people fear that they may be further victimised if they make a formal complaint so we have been very conscious of trying to capture that information in a really agile way. We are about to commence 10 information sessions for multicultural communities in partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and those information sessions will be for affected communities—those who have reported most vilification or discrimination during the last few months—about what their rights are and a greater awareness of where they can go to to report incidents of vilification.

We have also made a submission to the parliamentary inquiry into Victoria's anti-vilification framework, which is advocating for stronger protections for people particularly around vilification, so we continue to push for reform in that environment. And we are also working closely with other duty holders, employers as well, to make them aware that these sorts of things are happening in their environments and what we can do to try and promote better community understanding of how COVID is affecting people in this way.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you for that. I will take you to human rights now. There has been a fair bit of discussion in the community about the nexus between human rights and face masks in particular. Look, quite frankly, I think there has been, firstly, some I think irresponsible commentary from some sectors about face masks. But I was wondering if you would be able to elaborate on whether or not face masks are a breach of human rights. You can continue on from where you left off in your presentation.

Ms HILTON: Sure. Certainly we came out very unequivocally when there was some, as you say, unhelpful commentary I think about the resistance to wearing masks. Wearing a mask where it is determined to be a proportionate and necessary measure to stop a greater risk, in this case the risk to public health, is not a breach of human rights and we do not consider it to be a breach of human rights under the charter. We consider it to be a lawful, proportionate and necessary response to the risk that is posed at the moment, and we really used those principles under the charter to come to that conclusion. The other important thing I think to recognise is its proportionality in terms of people who are unable to wear a face mask or who would be significantly disadvantaged from wearing a face mask—that is, people who may be hearing impaired or people with a disability or who have some other reason as to why they cannot wear a face mask have exceptions built in. We have publicly stated in a range of forums that wearing a mask is not a breach of a human right in these circumstances.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. I will take you now to equality in the workplace, and of course there are plenty of new working arrangements that people are experiencing right now. How has the commission been able to assist organisations in developing fair and equal workplaces during the COVID period?

Ms HILTON: Thank you. So we have seen in some ways a real proof of concept in terms of greater use of flexible work, and that has had some very I think positive effects for many types of workplaces. But we have also seen the disproportionate impact sometimes that remote working has had, particularly for women. We have recently run a survey of 1500 Victorian workers, both men and women, from a range of industries and different backgrounds as to how the pandemic has affected their working lives. I am very happy to share the data with the inquiry once we have properly analysed and collated it. The first reading of that data is that while there have been some benefits there have also been disproportionate caring burdens placed on women and also unrealistic expectations from some employers about just how people will be able to work, particularly when they are caring for children from home.

So we have been quite active in terms of putting out information that is directed towards both employees and employers about carer and parental discrimination, for example, which is a protected attribute under the *Equal Opportunity Act*, but also using it as an opportunity for employers to think about how they can embed better and more sustainable flexible working practices beyond COVID-19. But I might also just hand over quickly to my colleague Catherine Dixon, who has been looking at some of the gendered impacts of work during this period.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

Ms DIXON: Thanks for the question. Just referring to the survey that the Commissioner mentioned, we have also seen that while more men than women have reported a pay reduction during the pandemic, the women that did report a pay reduction have actually lost more pay than men have, so having their pay cut by 46 per cent on average compared to 30 per cent for men. When you look to casual workers that rises to 65 per cent for women that are in casual employment. So I suppose we have been concerned that more women have been losing their jobs during the pandemic or have had their working hours drastically reduced because of COVID and that that has had significant consequences for pay and for economic security, and I think we have also reflected on the fact that for women that are already in lower paid and less secure work that means when it comes to recovery some really important targeted interventions are going to be needed to redress that impact.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Ms Dixon, and thank you, Commissioner. Still with equality in the workplace, we have just looked at this through, I guess, a gendered lens. I would like you to put another lens over this issue at the minute, and I would like to ask about casual workers and perhaps labour hire workers. I was wondering if you had any insights on how the rights of these workers have been impacted during COVID-19.

Ms HILTON: We have certainly heard through our enquiry and complaints functions that it has been very difficult for casual and labour hire workers—that they are nervous, for example, about losing shifts or losing income. We saw this in particular during the public housing lockdown, where residents in those towers had very little or pretty much no notice about the lockdown and were very anxious about what that meant for their employment conditions. Many of the residents in those towers would fit into that sort of category of employment market that you have described. As I said, some of the evidence that we have collected through our survey looks at the rates of casualisation and how the pandemic has affected casuals and workers that might have less regular working arrangements. I think the broad answer to it is that there is real concern about what the effects will be for those people and that we really need to ensure that there are good structural interventions in recovery to make sure that people are protected in those environments.

Mr MAAS: Are there any particular employment sectors or any particular groups that you could identify who fall within those categories that have been affected?

Ms HILTON: Do you mean industries themselves or types of working—

Mr MAAS: Industries, yes.

Ms HILTON: Look, I would probably have to take that one on notice and go back through some of our data and see whether or not we have been able to identify trends, just giving you a strong evidence base. I mean, certainly anecdotally, we have probably heard what you have heard in terms of people that are working in disability services or aged care who have been particularly affected, but also people who are in retail or hospitality have also been affected in terms of job security.

Mr MAAS: Happy to take that on notice too, by the way. Thank you.

I think my time is almost finished, but I would like to move to other vulnerable communities. It is clear that measures taken to address COVID-19 do not affect everyone equally. I am wondering if you can shed some light on how the commission has been addressing the concerns of other vulnerable communities during COVID-19.

Ms HILTON: Yes, I have mentioned some of the work that we have done with multicultural communities and also with women. One of the other areas that we have been focusing on is the effects of mandatory quarantine and isolation for people in prison settings or correctional settings. We have had very good engagement with the Corrections Commissioner, and we understand that a robust range of measures have been

needed to prevent transmission and introduction of COVID-19 into the corrections system. We have, though, been concerned about what the effects of mandatory quarantine and isolation measures are for people in corrections settings. Certainly when these measures were introduced towards the end of March it was very much hoped that they would be temporary. We are now butting up against September and it is likely that those conditions will continue for some time. Obviously it is a frightening situation if COVID-19 was to spread through the corrections system, not just for people who are being detained there but also for workers and their families and the broader community. But certainly we have heard about the impact of long periods of isolation on people, particularly people who are coming into the corrections system with mental health issues, people from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and also people with intellectual disabilities. While I appreciate that a great deal of effort has gone into making sure that there has been access to other forms of contact with families and services digitally, because of the cessation of prison visits, they are obviously very difficult circumstances for people within the corrections system to go through.

The other area that we have also looked at is in relation to people who might be more vulnerable to receiving enforcement notices or fines as a result of not complying with the Chief Health Officer's orders and just, I suppose, being in constant communication with Victoria Police about the use of discretion and the quick and transparent review of those enforcement powers and those notices that are being issued.

The other group that I would mention, which I probably have not yet, is people who are living with a disability. We know, particularly from our experience in working in the public housing lockdown, that children and people living with a disability—it was very, very difficult for them to access the services that they needed, and for many impossible, and that was also the case—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I might have to cut you off there. The member's time has expired. And Ms Bridget Vallence, MP, has the call.

Ms VALLENCE: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Commissioner, for your time and for your team's time with this PAEC inquiry. Earlier this week the Premier announced that the government intends to change the law to extend the state of emergency beyond the six-month maximum to a new 18-month maximum, meaning that the state of emergency for this COVID pandemic would be extended another 12 months. What concerns do you hold about people's rights in extending this state of emergency another 12 months?

Ms HILTON: Well, the concerns or the interests that we have in that respect are I think the same as we have had and sort of reflect the principle that I set out at the beginning, and that is that when you have access to these powers and when you are using these powers in a state of emergency you need to really redouble efforts to make sure that they are transparent, that there are safeguards that are built in, that they are time bound and that they are necessary and proportionate. Now, obviously as we head up to the end of the six-month state of emergency there is still a need for the exercise of those powers, as we still have high levels of community transmission. I think the question that we are most interested in, not just in terms of whether it should be another six months or another 12 months, is also: what happens if you have a 12-month extension and you have very little or no community transmission? Does that continue to justify the existence of a state of emergency? And there should probably be just a little bit more detail on the explanation or the justification for the length of that extension.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. So do you have any views on the need to change the law from the current six month maximum to 18 months, given that there are provisions under the current Act to be able to announce a new six-month state of emergency?

Ms HILTON: Yes. We have looked at this question in the last couple of days, and I might hand over to my colleague Emily Howie.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Emily?

Ms HOWIE: Thank you for the question. The issue is of course having provisions in the Act that ensure that the use of a state of emergency is always necessary and proportionate. And the way that the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* has been established has got a good system of safeguards. One of those is that the state of emergency powers are time bound. But just as important, we think, is that there is appropriate scrutiny of those powers and transparency around the exercise. So I think it is interesting and important to look at the length of

time that is imposed, but it is just as important to make sure that as a state of emergency extends for a considerably longer time it continues to be as protected as it is at the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Howie. From my end it is a little hard to hear you. But on that, what kind of oversight or accountability measures—that is to you, Commissioner—do you think would be necessary to ensure the powers are used appropriately?

Ms HILTON: Well, one of the things about the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* now is that it has that provision built in that there is a four-weekly report or review of the necessity of the emergency powers. So we would obviously be very keen to see that continue. In its current form that is a report to Parliament. I think it raises a question: if Parliament is not sitting or there are significant periods where Parliament is not sitting, what other oversight mechanism might need to be in place? We would also be interested in understanding—

Ms VALLENCE: Do you have any suggestions of what that oversight mechanism would be?

Ms HILTON: That is something that we are looking at at the moment. So we are turning our minds to that and are very happy to come back or take that on notice—

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, that would be great to take that on notice and provide your commentary to the committee. And—

Ms HILTON: I think one that we would be interested in: does PAEC's role continue for the length of the state of emergency? Because certainly I think an independent committee that is able to in a very dynamic way scrutinise and have that interrogatory role around the exercise of these powers would be very important.

Ms VALLENCE: So what do you think about the Premier and the government's justifications provided to Victorians about why the law needs to change to extend a state of emergency period to an 18-month period, as opposed to the current six-month maximum?

Ms HILTON: Well, I mean, look, it is a matter for government to explain that to the Victorian community, and I—

Ms VALLENCE: What do you think about their justifications so far?

Ms HILTON: Well, there is certainly a justification, as we have said, that the state of emergency needs to continue for a period. Our concerns are really around: what are the mechanisms that will be in place to ensure that that remains necessary and how will it be regularly reviewed? And if it is a longer period, does that mean that there should be additional safeguards in place? Or if we get into a period where there are no or very few community transmissions, does that mean that there should perhaps be a change to the exercise of the state of emergency powers? So I think that, you know, this is a discussion that is being had in real time, and these are all questions that we—

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, I appreciate that. I could not quite hear Ms Howie, but given there is current legislative provision to extend a state of emergency or to renew a state of emergency for six months, do you think that changing the law is justified?

Ms HILTON: Well, the current *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* only gives you a six-month state of emergency, so to have another state of emergency you would have to change the law anyway—that is my understanding. So I think the question is now: for what time and what additional measures might need to be in place for there to be a strong level of confidence that there is a justification for it?

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. Were you consulted or did you provide any input on the human rights issues associated with the government's decision concerning the operation of the security for hotel quarantine and for the hotel quarantine program?

Ms HILTON: Well, we are in regular contact with the department of justice, and certainly we provide information and advice where it concerns our functions.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. And were you consulted or did you provide input in relation to any decisions around the public housing towers lockdown and the human rights issues associated there?

Ms HILTON: Certainly we have had regular contact with both the Department of Health and Human Services and the department of justice post the lockdown of public housing, and we have been able to raise our concerns with many of the authorities—

Ms VALLENCE: So post, not pre?

Ms HILTON: No, we were not consulted about locking down the towers.

Ms VALLENCE: Was the charter of human rights a significant influence on the decision to use private security for the government's hotel quarantine program as opposed to perhaps the ADF or Victoria Police?

Ms HILTON: That is not a matter I can answer.

Ms VALLENCE: Do you have any comments on that?

Ms HILTON: No.

Ms VALLENCE: No? Were any human rights or discrimination complaints received as a result of the hotel quarantine program?

Ms HILTON: To us directly?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes.

Ms HILTON: I will have to defer. I do not believe we have received any formal complaints under the *Equal Opportunity Act* or under the charter. Importantly, you cannot make an individual complaint under the charter of human rights. There is no dispute resolution mechanism in there. And for it to be a complaint that would come under the *Equal Opportunity Act*, you would have to establish discrimination on a protected attribute. I will just check in with my colleague, Emily Howie, about whether or not we have received a formal—

Ms VALLENCE: On notice is fine, because I think Ms Howie's connection is a bit difficult.

Ms HILTON: We can take that on notice. Sure.

Ms VALLENCE: Are you aware of any communication problems with culturally and linguistically diverse people—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallence, your time for questions has expired. I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing before the committee today. Ms Hilton, I know that you spoke about masks and that they do not breach human rights; however, I have not heard much about the human rights that are being breached. If we look at the Victorian human rights charter, section 12 says that:

Every person lawfully within Victoria has the right to move freely within Victoria ...

Section 16 says:

- (1) Every person has the right of peaceful assembly.
- (2) Every person has the right to freedom of association ...

Section 21 says:

- (1) Every person has the right to liberty and security.
- (2) A person must not be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention.

In the UN declaration of human rights, article 23 states that:

Everyone has the right to work ...

Do you accept that the government is currently breaching these human rights?

Ms HILTON: I accept that the government is limiting those human rights. So those rights under the Charter are not absolute, and they are subject to section 7, which is a limitation or justifications clause. So the point about whether or not the limitations are necessary, proportionate and justified is the one that I made earlier, and really to determine whether or not there has been a breach of charter rights that is the analysis that you have to go through.

Mr LIMBRICK: So if we talk about that—all right, so I think you said necessary, justifiable, proportionate and time bound. So we are in a situation where the time boundary is expanding dramatically—three times longer than the initial legislation allowed for. Necessary? I do not know. That is a matter of opinion. You said before that it requires evidence, but we have heard from the CHO himself that many of the decisions that they have been making have not been relying on scientific evidence; they have been relying on the precautionary principle, where there is not evidence required. It is just on the balance of things, and we saw this with aggregate activity demand. Also, justifiable. I have been asking about this. The government in my mind needs to justify the harms that they are causing—that the benefits that they are getting from these actions are outweighing the harms. We have not seen any calculations of what these harms are causing, and therefore I do not think it is possible to say that it is justifiable. What is your response to that?

Ms HILTON: I take your point that the limitation of some rights and certainly the measures under lockdown four are having consequences for many different members of the community and that those consequences are in some cases severe. I do not dispute that there is a very, very legitimate aim and purpose to the restrictions of these rights at the moment, and I think that the analysis and the justification which we have been highlighting is what is required to understand in a rapidly evolving situation at any given point in time what is the most proportionate response. In that respect, I think that is why we are lucky that we do have a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities here in Victoria, because it does allow us to have that framework and that lens to do what you are suggesting, which is to balance up ‘Well, what is our right to freedom of movement against the right to life?’, for example. So that is a very difficult balancing exercise, and it does involve public health information and also a consideration of exactly how proportionate the restrictions are.

I might just call on my colleague Catherine Dixon, who has a lot of knowledge about how the charter applies, just to expand on that if she would like to.

Ms DIXON: Thanks, Kristen. I agree really with the framework that we mentioned earlier. I think people often think that the rights in the charter are absolute, but in fact it is a framework for balancing rights against one another and balancing rights against other public interests. It is a framework in which to do that. People will have different views about the justifications, but at least it creates the avenue to have that discussion. A lot of the work that we have been doing with the Department of Health and Human Services and with Victoria Police has been about the implementation of some of the public health directions and making sure they are implemented in a way that is as proportionate and least restrictive as possible. I think that ‘least restrictive’ principle is also an important one in a human rights charter as well.

Mr LIMBRICK: Do think that the responses that they have been using are the least restrictive? I do not think there are many people that buy that.

Ms DIXON: Well, I mean we have sort of gone through the areas where we have had areas and issues of concern, and I think, for example, the public health lockdown was an area where we have definitely publicly and to government raised a number of different concerns about the severity of the restrictions. So I think you have got to look, I suppose, at the impacts across a number of different areas, and I think that was one that was concerning and troubling. But then you have to balance it against the very severe public health risks at stake in closed environments, if you like, like public housing and also like the corrections environment, for example, that the Commissioner mentioned earlier.

Mr LIMBRICK: But how can we say that something is justifiable if we do not have a good measure on the long-term harms that are being caused by the government’s action? For something to be—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Mr Limbrick, but your time has expired. That concludes the time we have available for this session this afternoon, so we thank you very much for appearing before our committee today and for the other information you have provided the committee. We will follow up on any

questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

This is our final hearing session for this afternoon, so we thank you very much for appearing, and all of the witnesses indeed who have appeared today, and of course, as always, the support of our Hansard and secretariat. So thank you. I declare this hearing adjourned. Thanks for your time.

Ms HILTON: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.