

23 January 2024

Ms Robyn Kruk AO  
Chair  
Commonwealth Government COVID-19  
Response Inquiry

Dear Ms Kruk,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this extremely important inquiry.

As the State MP for the Noosa Electorate, I have witnessed the profound impacts of the Covid pandemic on our communities, as well the effects of government responses to the ongoing physical and mental wellbeing of Queenslanders.

Having requested repeatedly unsuccessfully for the Queensland State Government to commission an independent review of their response in efforts to identify improvements for any future pandemics, I welcomed this much needed Federal Inquiry.

However, the terms of reference have excluded the unilateral decisions of the state and territory governments that played such a central role in the pandemic response. This equates to conducting a review of supermarket pricing and excluding the big two supermarkets.

Nonetheless the parts of the terms of reference relating to governance, health responses and support for business do provide a basis to be able to respond to some key issues.

Firstly, the Noosa Electorate is not the wealthy area as perceived, with incomes below the Queensland average in the 2021 census, dominated by small to medium businesses heavily dependent on tourism.

Throughout the pandemic we saw:

- a) divisions created across our communities and within households based on economic capacity and vaccination status
- b) the shocking reality experienced in our aged-care homes with residents isolated for months in their last days from visits and physical contact, leading to a decrease in both physical and mental wellbeing
- c) casual workers and everyday families who lost their businesses, homes, livelihoods and their mental health. This devastating, unequally distributed impact was never acknowledged or considered in decision making
- d) Increased domestic and family violence since lock downs came off, with police capacities exhausted then, and continues to be
- e) Residents dying alone, or needing to make difficult end of life decisions, without any loved one by their side due to border closures and restrictions.

In the ensuing years since the pandemic ended, where there has never been an examination of the impacts, nor answers to questions to give much needed 'closure', we have seen:

- a) a spiralling decrease in mental health, increasing the demand on already exhausted police resources
- b) increased demand on our hospital and health systems, leading to ongoing long wait lists, including critically appointments to mental health professionals
- c) divisions in communities that grow, with vitriol and anger on- and off- line that has yet to be addressed, which is impacting all realms including mental health
- d) lack of clarity and data around decisions made, leading to ongoing mistrust of politicians, governance and governments, providing a 'breeding ground' for extremists.

The report "Faultlines – an Independent Review into Australia's Covid Response", conducted by [REDACTED], provided vital commentary of government's Covid response and overreach, yet has not been responded to by the Queensland government.

Some key considerations coming from that report, and from our own experience here in Noosa were that governments need to be transparent, clear and consistent in their decisions and communications. The provision of consistent messaging with a forward strategy, requested data and evidence to support decisions and mandates, and a mandatory review of responses, recognising the impact on everyday people, would have built trust and surety.

We still have none of the above, nor closure for Queenslanders. This has led to a lack of confidence, underlying fears and the 'fall out' we continue to experience which is unsustainable in all realms including our police, health and other services.

Further we need the establishment of a broad panel of independent, multidisciplinary experts and representatives to advise governments alongside the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) during health crises to take the onus off Chief Health Officers. This will reduce political interference and build confidence in health responses.

Government decision making in crisis planning and response would also be significantly improved if the public service advising decision makers is able to 'plug into' and harness the frontline, on the ground, lived-experience of businesses, unions, the community sector, mental health experts and local government both urban and throughout rural and regional Queensland.

In addition to the Faultline report, may consideration be given to the report "Let the Sunshine In" on the Queensland Public Service by [REDACTED], while not directly addressing Covid, many of the same issues were identified including a loss of capacity in the public service, compounded with a culture unwilling to give unfashionable points of views any consideration, dominated by short term political thinking. The report targeted creating a cultural shift to openness, with a shared focus on identifying and dealing with the challenges government faces, through a well-resourced, responsive and highly valued public sector.

Thank you for your work on this inquiry and if you would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

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**SANDY BOLTON MP**  
**Member for Noosa**