



**DAVID MORRIS MP**  
Member for Mornington

# Pandemic Management a Total Failure

*Posted on 19 November 2021*

## **Legislative Assembly 17 November 2021**

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) (17:53): It is a pleasure to rise and make a contribution to this matter of public importance advanced by the member for Ripon.

It is interesting to reflect, to the extent that you need to, on the contribution of the previous speaker. I guess the take-out I would have is that it does not matter whether you are telling the truth or not; if you say it loud enough and you say it with apparent conviction and you keep repeating it, then someone is going to believe it.

But I do not think anyone in this chamber believed it, frankly. Certainly no-one on this side of the chamber believed it, because we know exactly how bad the record is that the member was trying to, frankly, misrepresent.

I do strongly support the matter advanced, as I said, by the member for Ripon, because if there is any matter of public policy that is more worthy of serious examination by this house, it is the manner in which the government has managed the approach to the pandemic in this state.

The numbers themselves tell a story; you do not need to go much further: 107 000 cases in round figures so far; 260 days locked down; 1248 deaths so far.

Ms Britnell: Huge.

Mr MORRIS: As the member for South-West Coast says, huge. You contrast that with the result to our immediate north: fewer than half as many deaths, 612; well less than half the days locked down—lockdowns of course are not just inconvenient; they are job killers, they are business killers, they are life destroyers—and the total number of cases, less than 80 000.

We had 50 000 more people contract COVID in this state than in New South Wales.

I think we are right to express our concerns about the government's management of this pandemic because they have failed. They have failed comprehensively to keep Victorians safe.

No matter how loud the bluster, the fact is lives have been disrupted across the state. I do not know a single person in my electorate that has not been touched significantly by the

impact of COVID. And we have had it relatively easy, although we have been part of the metropolitan lockdown. We should not have been, but that is probably a subject for another time.

The community has been badly affected. Other communities I know have had it a lot worse. This was a situation that did not need to happen.

The example is there in New South Wales. They had competent management in New South Wales. The result in Victoria, is damaged lives, a damaged economy and mental health impacts I think beyond anything probably in the post-white settlement of this state—huge impacts.

The fact is the mental health impact will go on for the longest, but damage has been done to the economy, jobs have been lost and lives have been disrupted.

I was talking to a constituent on Sunday, and he said, 'I'm 85 years old. I haven't seen my grandkids for two years. I don't have that many more years left. I've lost that time'. The impact has been huge and it has been unnecessary.

We now have a situation where the view of the government is that, 'Oh, we'll have more of the same. We'll continue this. We'll change the rules'. We cannot talk about the bill, so I will not do that, but, 'We'll change the rules and we'll have more of the same'.

When I spoke on the extension of the state of emergency back in February I made the observation that you cannot use such a draconian and arbitrary regime to govern in a democracy. You can do it in short bursts, you can do it for emergencies, but you cannot use the sorts of powers that the government has invoked in its management of the pandemic to govern in a democracy.

Yet that is what has happened. That is what has been going on since March last year. Now, I am the first person to say on occasion intervention—and intervention on that scale—was probably justified, but for short periods only and with proper accountability.

The issue is it has gone on and on and on. I made the observation back in February. I said, 'What happens when we get to November? Will we still be there with this wicked virus?'. Yes, we are.

And we are seeing a wish to continue a regime that has not worked. It has not worked and in fact it has done considerable damage.

Now, the observations that are included in the matter of public importance, the observations from the Ombudsman, the bar council and so on, really are talking about protecting democracy under an emergency situation.

The first issue I have with the way the government has been managing the pandemic is that it has not worked.

The second issue I have with it is the way in which power has been concentrated: not only has the community been sidelined, the Parliament has been sidelined and half the cabinet has been sidelined.

A very few people have taken power into their hands and used it, we have had no accountability and we have had limited opportunities in this place.

Frequently the only reason we sat was to facilitate something the government needed.

We do not have an appropriate accountability mechanism. It is all very well to say, 'Oh, a parliamentary committee will do the job', but with the way we structure our parliamentary committees in this state they cannot do the job, speaking as both a former chair and deputy chair of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and having worked with two members of the current cabinet, Minister Pakula and Minister Pearson.

Yes, we work with good faith. Yes, we got a lot of good things done and I think to the benefit of the community and to the benefit of accountability of government from both sides.

But the reality is that when a conflict arises between the majority of the committee and the government, either the majority of the committee do as they are damn well told or they are replaced. That is the way it works. So let us not pretend that we can have some fig leaf of accountability through a parliamentary committee which is dominated by government members.

If you have a parliamentary committee that perhaps has a non-government chair and perhaps has a non-government majority, then you are possibly part of the way there.

I was interested to see a piece in the *Conversation* from, I think, Monday from associate professor William Partlett and a number of his colleagues. They made the suggestion there that there was an alternative accountability mechanism in New Zealand.

I note the Premier has not picked up that particular accountability mechanism, so I think there is a lot to be said for this matter of public importance submitted by the member for Ripon and it certainly is and remains the number one public policy concern for me.