



STATEMENT

August 26, 2020

On the border, the COVID crisis demands a cohesive response

Helen Haines MP, Independent Federal Member for Indi, last night – August 25 – spoke about border closure in the House of Representatives' adjournment debate:

The New South Wales-Victorian border stretches for over 1000 kilometres from east to west. All along this distance, communities have been split in two by border closure. I'm the only representative of those border communities who's an Independent in this place. Therefore, I have the freedom to say what I think and to tell the story as the communities ask me to do. I don't need to play political games or hold my tongue until I'm given the signal from my city colleagues or to position my leader to come up with an announcement at just the right time.

Yesterday (August 24), I asked the Prime Minister what he would do as our national leader to resolve the crisis that we're experiencing. I didn't get much—nothing, in fact, that convinced my community that anything would be done from a national leadership perspective. They still felt like they were forgotten members of the Australian community.

But today came the announcement by the New South Wales Deputy Premier to extend the current 2.5-kilometre border zone to a 50-kilometre radius—promises, but scant on detail.

It's taken seven weeks to get us back to where we began. Make no mistake: it's a good development today. The economic, cultural and healthcare benefits cannot be quantified. Many of my constituents will feel as though some of their humanity has been restored this afternoon, but many still will not.

While I absolutely support this latest change, I want to know what the rationale is. Has the medical advice changed? We wouldn't know, because the public health benefit for this hard-line approach has never been explained or justified. It came about because of an outbreak in Melbourne, and it resulted in a breakdown on the border. There is simply no national plan around border closures. Our lives on the borders remain in a vacuum; our lives hang, at times, actually in the balance.

So, the Deputy Premier of New South Wales has promised that these changes will occur within seven to 10 days. Why a week? Why 10 days? Why not now? Where is the procedure?



One thousand applications for compassionate exemptions for border permits are right now sitting on the desk of the New South Wales health minister—1000 really sad and desperate stories. Every time I pick up the phone and talk to the people in my electorate who've put in for an exemption for a compassionate permit, I honestly feel like we are living in some kind of dystopian nightmare. I can't believe this is happening in Australia. It's totally heartbreaking, and the thing that's even more heartbreaking for me, as someone now in this place, is that there is an appalling lack of procedural fairness. There's an opaque process, if you want to call it a process, which potentially is open to corruption, and I would say it must be fixed immediately.

Despite the changes today, the catastrophe continues for many, many people. There is no guarantee that this is the end of the border closure saga. Over the last seven weeks, each new late-night public health order issued without consultation has us all on the border waking up to a fresh set of problems with no procedure to fix them. Our border commissioners have been outstanding, but, by golly, what a job they've got—shocking! Allied health professionals can't get to work to see their clients. Even after today's announcement, many of them still will not. Some patients can't access urgent care; many more are simply confused by the system and cancel important check-ups.

With my intervention, 80 doctors, nurses and allied health professionals from Northeast Health Wangaratta managed to get back to work. Three maternal and child-health nurses at the Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service—the only ones they had—needed direct intervention so they could get back to work. And the region's only two infectious diseases doctors—cop this—couldn't cross the border until we had direct intervention from my office. Since the border closed, over 550 individual constituents have contacted me in distress with stories, such as these, of confusion, anxiety and grief.

In a survey conducted by Business Wodonga, business owners said that the border closure is a bigger issue than COVID itself. Tonight, in the Senate, a motion was passed by the National Party calling for this to be fixed. It's extraordinary that this needs to happen.

(Time expired)

ENDS

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