

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH

May 2021

Supporting the ACTs Indian community during the Covid pandemic

I wish to thank Ms Orr for bringing this motion to the Assembly.

What is unfolding across India and South Asia is simply awful. The pandemic is now in its third wave in India and causing hundreds of thousands of new cases every day. It is quickly spreading to other, nearby countries, including Nepal, where the number of cases is now 57 times higher than it was a month ago.

I read the news and I am saddened, aghast and deeply concerned. Just a few days ago: “Bodies washing up on the banks of the Ganges River... Believed to be of those whose families cannot afford wood for funeral pyres”. The rate at which the pandemic is spreading is horrific. The lack of medical supplies and facilities to assist is of real concern. Exhausted health workers are being pushed to the brink of collapse.

I read these articles and, while deeply distressed by what’s occurring, I know that my response is nothing compared to those in our community who read these same articles and have direct connections to the people affected.

From the ACT, where we’ve been – relatively and comparatively – unscathed by the pandemic, it’s difficult to comprehend the devastation being caused by the pandemic overseas.

There are many members of our ACT community who have an intimate connection to India and South Asia, whether it be their country of origin from and /or have family and friends living there or because they have other connections.

In the Murrumbidgee electorate which I represent, India is the third most common place of birth for residents, behind Australia and England. Our Indian and South Asian communities contribute much to our city’s culture and lifestyle. We benefit from the diversity of

businesses, organisations, religions and lifestyles. And now it's our turn to give back.

There are many ACT residents that need our compassion, care and empathy right now as they struggle with loved ones living in some of the hardest-hit and worst-affected countries in the world. As Ms Orr points out, people in our Indian and South Asian communities in the ACT have already lost loved ones and wait anxiously for news on others who are unwell. And they wait anxiously on news about when the situation will ease.

The effect of distance has its own toll, with people in our community feeling helpless to be able to assist family and friends in India and elsewhere; and suffering their own anguish and despair, let alone also the grief and heartbreak.

The Federal Government's response to this situation falls far short of addressing the reality of the situation being faced by Australian citizens in India, and by people here in our own communities. Now, more than ever, our Indian community need our care, support and compassion.

It is abhorrent that the Federal Government had imposed such harsh penalties, preventing Australian citizens from returning home. I welcome that there will be some – although limited – repatriation flights for people returning to Australia from these worst-affected nations after the ban is lifted in two days' time.

I acknowledge that we need to continue our excellent response in Australia to the pandemic. However, as we all now live with the realisation that COVID -199 is not going away, there is a significant way to go to addressing the ongoing health and security of the Australian population, alongside effective logistical arrangements and quarantine facilities to allow the thousands of of residents overseas to return home. We should not be leaving Australians stranded in some of the worst affected areas of the world during a global health crisis.

I support Ms Orr's motion to write to the Commonwealth Government, calling for expanded quarantine facilities.

We need to consider what we, as a community, can do to: firstly, support those living in our communities who are anxious, who are grieving, who are frustrated, and who are feeling more isolated than ever before from their loved ones overseas. Let's ensure these people know who to contact for

support and counselling, and what resources are available. I support Ms Orr's motion to call on the ACT Government to ensure those supports are in place.

Secondly, we need to consider what we, as a country, can do to improve the situation for those suffering this pandemic in India and South Asia. Indian hospitals are desperate for medical supplies and equipment. I support Ms Orr's motion to call on the ACT Government to consider what medical supplies and assistance can be provided to health workers in India and South Asia.

Across all regions of the ACT we have people in our communities who have loved ones in COVID ravaged countries. I encourage all Canberrans to be kind, be thoughtful, offer support and assistance where you can.

Our reputation as 'The Lucky Country' has never rung truer. We've been spared the worst of the pandemic to date. But the pandemic, in a strange irony of distance and closed borders, is affecting too many people in our community – while not physically, but emotionally. It's taking its toll.

I support this motion brought forward by Ms Orr.

Thank you.