

## **Submission on the Review of the National Emergency Declaration Act 2020**

**Submitted by:** Tom Latimer

**Publication preference:** Name published

### **Executive Summary**

The National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 (the Act) establishes a framework through which the Commonwealth can coordinate nationally significant responses to emergencies. It was enacted in conditions of acute uncertainty, with a deliberate emphasis on speed, flexibility, and executive coordination.

With several years of operational experience now available, Australia is in a position to assess the Act not by reference to the circumstances of its enactment, but by how it operates in practice over time. Recent emergencies indicate that governance strain tends to emerge not at the moment of declaration, but as exceptional arrangements persist, overlap, or risk becoming normalised. The central policy question is therefore no longer whether a national emergency declaration mechanism is necessary, but whether the Act remains appropriately calibrated as emergencies endure, recur, or evolve.

This submission advances a single, unifying proposition: the principal governance risk addressed by the Act lies not in the initial activation of emergency powers, but in how those powers are managed, justified, and overseen as time passes. Emergency powers derive legitimacy not only from necessity at the point of activation, but from sustained proportionality, transparency, and democratic engagement during their continuation.

While the Act is not coercive in nature and does not itself confer enforcement powers, it plays a critical signalling and coordinating role within Australia's emergency governance architecture. That role makes it particularly important that decision-making thresholds are clearly explained, that consultation and oversight remain visible, and that extended declarations attract progressively stronger scrutiny.

This submission supports the objectives of the Act and does not argue for its repeal or radical restructuring. Instead, it proposes targeted refinements, grounded in experience and comparative practice, aimed at strengthening legitimacy and accountability during prolonged or repeated national emergencies.

The submission proceeds by outlining the broader context of emergency governance over time, analysing key features of the Act's operation, and then setting out a series of focused recommendations designed to improve transparency, accountability, and democratic engagement as national emergency declarations persist.

## 1. Introduction and Purpose of Submission

This submission responds to the statutory review of the National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 (the Act). The Act is framed as a coordination and facilitation mechanism rather than a direct source of coercive power, but it nonetheless occupies a pivotal position within Australia's emergency governance architecture.

The purpose of this submission is to assess whether the Act's design continues to strike an appropriate balance between executive flexibility and democratic accountability once a declaration is in force and as time progresses. In doing so, the submission focuses less on the decision to declare an emergency, and more on how discretion, justification, and oversight operate during extended or repeated declarations.

Specifically, the submission examines:

- how the Act articulates and explains the threshold for declaration and extension;
- how executive discretion is justified and communicated over the life of a declaration;
- how parliamentary and public accountability functions as declarations persist; and
- whether the Act adequately distinguishes between short-term emergency response and longer-term emergency governance.

This framing reflects the reality that the most significant accountability challenges associated with emergency powers tend to arise not at the point of activation, but during their continuation.

## 2. Context: Emergency Governance Beyond the Point of Crisis

Building on the Executive Summary's focus on the management of emergency powers over time, this section situates the Act within the broader context of prolonged and recurring emergency governance rather than momentary crisis response.

Emergency governance is, by definition, exceptional. It permits departures from ordinary decision-making processes in order to address urgent and nationally significant harm. However, post-event reviews and parliamentary inquiries following the COVID-19 pandemic have consistently observed that the greatest governance risks often emerge not at the moment emergency powers are activated, but as they persist over time (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2021; Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee (SLCAC), 2021).

Australia now faces a strategic environment in which emergencies may be prolonged, overlapping, or recurring. Climate-driven disasters, complex supply-chain disruptions, and geopolitical instability increase the likelihood that national emergency declarations may be required for longer durations or in closer succession (Productivity Commission (PC), 2023).

In this environment, emergency legislation must be capable not only of rapid activation, but of credible long-term operation. Comparative analysis of emergency frameworks in peer democracies demonstrates a common pattern: initial executive flexibility is typically paired with escalating justification, enhanced transparency, and more active parliamentary engagement as emergencies endure (Department of Justice Canada (DOJC), 2022; United Kingdom (UK) House of Lords Library, 2021).

The context for this review is therefore not whether emergency declarations should exist, but how the Act ensures legitimacy, accountability, and re-calibration when emergency governance extends beyond the immediate crisis phase.

International indicators of democratic freedom and institutional integrity provide useful contextual signals for this review. Australia continues to be assessed as a high-freedom democracy, with Freedom House rating Australia as "Free" and assigning an overall score of 95 out of 100 in recent assessments. While this represents a modest decline from pre-2020 scores, Australia's rating has remained stable in recent years, suggesting resilience rather than systemic backsliding.

Similarly, Australia's position in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has improved following integrity reforms, though recent results show minor year-to-year fluctuation rather than sustained deterioration. Taken together, these indicators suggest that Australia's core democratic freedoms remain strong, but that public confidence in governance depends increasingly on transparency, justification, and visible accountability - particularly where exceptional powers persist over time. This context reinforces the importance of ensuring that emergency governance frameworks remain predictable, explainable, and democratically legible as emergencies endure.

## 2.1. Threshold for Declaration: Discretion and Justification

Under the Act, a national emergency declaration may be made where the Prime Minister is satisfied that an emergency has occurred, is occurring, or is likely to occur, and that it has caused or is likely to cause nationally significant harm.

The Act deliberately adopts broad and flexible threshold concepts, including “nationally significant harm”, “Commonwealth interests”, and whether a declaration is “appropriate” having regard to the nature and severity of the emergency. Oversight bodies have observed that such open-textured concepts are common in emergency legislation, but that they require compensating transparency and accountability mechanisms where parliamentary disallowance is excluded (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Law Council of Australia, 2021).

As a result, the legitimacy of a declaration rests less on the precision of statutory thresholds than on the quality of explanation accompanying their exercise. Clear articulation of why thresholds are met, and why a declaration remains proportionate over time, is therefore central to sustaining confidence in the framework.

This analysis directly informs recommendations relating to structured statements of reasons and definitional clarity, including Recommendation 1.

## 2.2. Federal–State Consultation and Cooperative Governance

The Act requires consultation with affected states and territories prior to the making of a national emergency declaration, except where consultation is not practicable. This reflects an important recognition of Australia’s federal structure and the operational role of states and territories in emergency response.

While the consultation requirement is sound in principle, the Act does not require disclosure of whether consultation occurred or why it was impracticable where it did not. Over time, this creates a risk that consultation becomes opaque, particularly in prolonged or repeated declarations.

Transparency around consultation is therefore central to maintaining trust between jurisdictions and ensuring that the Act supports genuine cooperative governance rather than purely formal compliance.

## 2.3. Duration, Extensions, and the Management of Time

The Act limits both initial declarations and extensions to three-month periods, but permits unlimited successive extensions where the statutory criteria continue to be met.

While this structure avoids indefinite declarations by default, parliamentary scrutiny during the Act’s passage and subsequent review processes has highlighted the risk that long-running national emergencies may persist through repetition rather than through explicit long-term authorisation (SLCAC, 2021). Over time, this creates a risk of emergency

normalisation, whereby exceptional governance arrangements become embedded through routine renewal rather than active reassessment.

Comparative experience in peer democracies suggests that time itself functions as a critical accountability variable. Frameworks in the UK and New Zealand (NZ) rely on short default durations coupled with frequent renewal and parliamentary scrutiny, while Canada mandates ongoing parliamentary review throughout the life of an emergency declaration (UK House of Lords Library, 2021; New Zealand Government, 2002; DOJC, 2022).

Read as a whole, the Act implicitly distinguishes between the acute phase of an emergency - where speed and executive discretion are paramount - and an extended emergency governance phase, where justification, transparency, and democratic engagement become increasingly significant. However, this distinction is not made explicit in the statutory framework.

Clarifying this lifecycle logic does not require rigid phase-based triggers. Rather, it supports a graduated approach in which scrutiny, explanation, and oversight scale with duration, ensuring that emergency governance remains proportionate and contestable as circumstances evolve.

This analysis underpins the recommendations that follow, particularly those relating to graduated oversight, stronger justification for extensions, clearer articulation of exit conditions, and safeguards against emergency normalisation as declarations persist.

## 2.4. Parliamentary Oversight and Democratic Engagement

Under the Act, declarations, extensions, variations, and revocations are legislative instruments that are not subject to parliamentary disallowance. This design choice prioritises certainty and continuity during emergencies and reflects a deliberate trade-off made at the time of enactment.

However, multiple submissions to the original inquiry and subsequent statutory review have raised concerns that the exclusion from disallowance limits Parliament's ability to engage meaningfully with decisions of substantial national consequence, particularly where declarations are extended repeatedly (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Law Council of Australia, 2021).

International experience demonstrates that many comparable jurisdictions supplement executive declaration powers with structured parliamentary engagement during the life of an emergency. Canada's Emergencies Act, for example, mandates the establishment of a parliamentary review committee and regular reporting while a declaration remains in force (Department of Justice Canada, 2022).

This submission does not argue for routine parliamentary veto of emergency declarations; rather, it suggests that sustained parliamentary engagement over time is essential to preserving democratic legitimacy as the duration of a declaration increases.

## 2.5. Ministerial Modification of Administrative Requirements

The Act permits ministers to modify administrative requirements during a declared emergency, subject to public-benefit and relevance tests and explicit exclusions for core integrity, intelligence, and law-enforcement legislation.

These powers are appropriately constrained in scope and are designed to address administrative friction during emergencies. However, they exhibit characteristics often described in constitutional and administrative law as Henry VIII–style powers, in that they permit modification of legislative requirements through executive instruments.

The primary governance risk does not arise from the existence of these powers, but from their cumulative and cross-portfolio use over time. Without consolidated visibility, it may be difficult for Parliament or the public to understand the aggregate impact of multiple administrative modifications made during a declaration.

Improved transparency, sunset alignment, and structured justification would strengthen accountability and legal clarity without limiting operational agility or ministerial responsiveness.

## 2.6. Review, Reporting, and Transparency

In combination, the review and reporting mechanisms established by the Act reflect a predominantly retrospective accountability model. While post-event review is essential, it is insufficient on its own to sustain confidence where emergency governance persists or recurs.

Across Sections 3 to 7, a consistent pattern emerges: the Act provides significant flexibility at activation, but relies heavily on after-the-fact scrutiny as time passes. Undefined threshold concepts, limited visibility of consultation, unlimited extension mechanics, insulated instruments, and dispersed use of administrative modification powers all become more consequential as duration increases.

This creates a structural gap during the continuation phase of emergency governance, where decision-making remains active but accountability mechanisms are comparatively thin. In this phase, transparency and contemporaneous explanation are not merely informational; they are foundational to maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Taken together, these features suggest that the Act's primary governance challenge is not excessive power at the point of declaration, but the absence of a clear, integrated accountability framework that scales as time passes. Undefined threshold concepts, limited visibility of consultation, unlimited extension mechanics, insulated instruments, and dispersed use of administrative modification powers all become more consequential as duration increases.

Strengthening transparency, justification, and parliamentary engagement during the continuation phase would therefore address multiple governance risks simultaneously, without constraining urgent initial action.

## 2.7. Summary: Accountability Across the Declaration Lifecycle

Read as a whole, the Act can be understood as operating across three phases: an initial activation phase requiring speed and coordination; a continuation phase in which exceptional arrangements persist; and a termination or transition phase in which lessons must be captured and authority normalised.

The analysis above demonstrates that the Act is strongest in the activation phase, but comparatively under-specified in the continuation phase. As a declaration endures, accountability relies increasingly on convention, discretion, and fragmented reporting rather than on structured, contemporaneous justification.

The recommendations that follow are therefore not isolated proposals. They form a coherent package aimed at strengthening the continuation phase of emergency governance by improving explanation, visibility, proportionality, and democratic engagement as time passes. This approach preserves executive flexibility where it is most needed, while ensuring that prolonged national emergency declarations remain legitimate, intelligible, and contestable.

The Act establishes a number of review and reporting mechanisms, including reviews of individual declarations and periodic statutory review of the Act itself. These mechanisms provide important retrospective accountability.

However, retrospective review alone is insufficient to sustain confidence during prolonged emergencies. Transparency and structured reporting while a declaration is in force are essential to ensuring that emergency governance remains intelligible, contestable, and legitimate over time.

### 3. Recommendations

The following consolidated recommendations are confined to the operation and wording of the Act. They are intended to strengthen the explanatory and accountability architecture surrounding national emergency declarations, rather than to constrain decision-making capacity or delay urgent action.

For each recommendation, Type indicates the nature of the change proposed:

- **Legislative amendment:** Changes requiring amendment to the Act;
- **Governance mechanism:** Measures strengthening parliamentary or institutional oversight without altering core powers; and
- **Implementation and practice:** Administrative or reporting measures capable of implementation within the existing statutory framework.

#### 3.1. Recommendation 1: Structured Statements of Reasons for Declarations and Extensions

**Type:** Legislative amendment

**Aim:** To improve transparency and accountability around the decision to declare or extend a national emergency without unduly constraining executive flexibility.

**Recommendation:** Require that each declaration and extension be accompanied by a structured statement of reasons, addressing a minimum set of matters including: the nature of the emergency; why the harm is nationally significant; why a declaration is appropriate; and why the response remains proportionate.

**Justification:** The Act relies on broad, subjective thresholds that are not subject to parliamentary disallowance. Similar concerns regarding threshold opacity and the need for clearer justification were raised by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and the Law Council of Australia (LCA) in submissions to the Senate review, both of which emphasised the importance of structured reasoning to support transparency and accountability. Requiring a structured, but non-determinative, statement of reasons strengthens accountability and supports informed parliamentary and public scrutiny without raising the legal threshold for action. Comparable approaches are embedded in Canada's Emergencies Act, which requires detailed tabling and justification of declarations, and in the UK, where emergency regulations are accompanied by explanatory material enabling parliamentary scrutiny.

#### 3.2. Recommendation 2: Clarification of Key Threshold Concepts

**Type:** Legislative amendment

**Aim:** To reduce ambiguity and reliance on implied meaning in key decision-making concepts.

**Recommendation:** Insert non-exhaustive, principles-based statutory definitions for key terms such as “emergency” and “Commonwealth interests”, or alternatively require these concepts to be expressly addressed in the structured statement of reasons.

**Justification:** Undefined concepts expand executive discretion by default and rely heavily on implied meaning. The AHRC and the LCA both highlighted the governance risks associated with open-textured statutory concepts in emergency legislation and supported clearer articulation of decision-making criteria. Clarifying their intended scope through non-exhaustive or principles-based drafting improves legal certainty and consistency while preserving flexibility. Peer frameworks, including the UK Civil Contingencies Act 2004, adopt defined emergency concepts while allowing broad application through principles-based language.

### 3.3. Recommendation 3: Transparency of Federal–State Consultation

**Type:** Governance mechanism

**Aim:** To strengthen cooperative federalism and public confidence in intergovernmental engagement.

**Recommendation:** Require tabling of a brief, factual consultation statement identifying whether states and territories were consulted, which jurisdictions were consulted, and, where consultation was not practicable, a written explanation of why.

**Justification:** The Act’s consultation requirement is an important safeguard, but the absence of disclosure obligations risks it becoming procedural rather than substantive. Submissions from the St Vincent de Paul Society and the AHRC similarly emphasised the importance of visible consultation and accountability to maintain public trust during national emergencies. A factual disclosure requirement strengthens trust without delaying urgent action or requiring evaluative commentary. Canada’s Emergencies Act, for example, requires early reporting to Parliament on provincial consultation, demonstrating that disclosure can coexist with urgent executive action.

### 3.4. Recommendation 4: Graduated Oversight for Prolonged Declarations

**Type:** Legislative amendment

**Aim:** To prevent prolonged or rolling national emergency declarations without escalating scrutiny.

**Recommendation:** Introduce graduated oversight mechanisms that apply once a declaration exceeds a defined cumulative duration, noting that such duration thresholds could be specified administratively or by regulation rather than fixed in primary legislation. These mechanisms should include enhanced justification requirements for each extension and articulation of indicative exit conditions.

**Justification:** While three-month limits apply to individual declarations, unlimited extensions permit long-running emergencies without recalibration. The AHRC and the SLCAC have both cautioned against the normalisation of emergency powers through rolling extensions without escalating scrutiny. International practice demonstrates that escalating scrutiny over time strengthens legitimacy while retaining operational flexibility. NZ's emergency framework relies on very short declaration periods with frequent renewal, while the UK limits emergency regulations to 30 days unless actively renewed by Parliament.

### 3.5. Recommendation 5: Ongoing Parliamentary Oversight During Extended Emergencies

**Type:** Governance mechanism

**Aim:** To enhance parliamentary involvement in extended national emergency declarations while preserving speed for initial action.

**Recommendation:** Establish a dedicated parliamentary oversight committee upon declaration and require regular reporting, ministerial appearances, and parliamentary debate on extensions beyond an initial period, noting that the precise form and composition of such a committee would be a matter for Parliament.

**Justification:** Current oversight mechanisms are largely retrospective. The AHRC and the St Vincent de Paul Society both advocated for stronger parliamentary engagement during the life of emergency declarations, noting that ongoing scrutiny is central to democratic legitimacy. Live parliamentary engagement improves democratic legitimacy, deters normalisation of emergency governance, and aligns with comparable frameworks in peer democracies. Canada's Emergencies Act mandates the establishment of a parliamentary review committee that operates throughout the life of a declaration, providing a practical model for continuous oversight.

### 3.6. Recommendation 6: Parliamentary Affirmation for Long-Running Declarations

**Type:** Legislative amendment

**Aim:** To re-balance certainty and democratic accountability for extended declarations.

**Recommendation:** Reconsider the exclusion of extensions from parliamentary disallowance, or introduce an equivalent parliamentary affirmation mechanism - such as an affirmative resolution or mandatory parliamentary debate - once a declaration exceeds a defined cumulative duration.

**Justification:** Non-disallowance prioritises continuity, but over time risks marginalising Parliament in decisions of national consequence. A delayed or graduated affirmation mechanism preserves emergency responsiveness while restoring democratic ownership. Renewal mechanisms in the UK and reform proposals in the United States of America (USA)

illustrate how affirmative continuation requirements can coexist with executive speed at activation.

### 3.7. Recommendation 7: Transparency and Safeguards for Administrative Modification Powers

**Type:** Implementation and practice

**Aim:** To ensure transparency, proportionality, and rule-of-law safeguards in the use of ministerial powers to modify administrative requirements.

**Recommendation:** Establish a consolidated public register of Section 15 determinations, maintained by a central agency; require each determination to include a necessity and proportionality statement; mandate timely tabling; ensure automatic expiry aligned with the declaration; and explicitly preserve legal professional privilege and personal information protections in the exercise of information-gathering and modification powers.

**Justification:** Section 15 powers are appropriately limited in scope but may have cumulative effects across portfolios. Consolidated visibility and sunset alignment strengthen accountability without constraining ministerial agility. Explicit preservation of legal professional privilege and Personal Information (PI) safeguards reinforces rule-of-law integrity and public confidence without impeding emergency response. Comparable emergency regimes in the UK require emergency regulations to lapse automatically unless renewed, reinforcing the importance of sunset alignment and legal safeguards for temporary administrative measures.

### 3.8. Recommendation 8: Standardised Public and Parliamentary Reporting

**Type:** Implementation and practice

**Aim:** To make the operation of national emergency declarations more intelligible to Parliament and the public.

**Recommendation:** Standardise minimum reporting requirements for declarations and extensions, specifying the trigger facts, consultation undertaken, intended effect, duration, and exit considerations, and require a concise plain-language public explanation. Reporting should occur on each declaration, each extension, and periodically while a declaration remains in force.

**Justification:** Transparency during the life of a declaration is critical to sustaining public confidence and countering emergency fatigue. Standardised and periodic reporting improves consistency and comprehension. Canada's framework requires regular public and parliamentary reporting during emergencies, demonstrating that structured disclosure supports legitimacy without undermining response effectiveness.

### 3.9. Recommendation 9: Mandatory Independent Post-Emergency Review

**Type:** Governance mechanism

**Aim:** To ensure lessons are identified and institutionalised following prolonged national emergencies.

**Recommendation:** Require an independent post-event review - conducted by a statutory reviewer, commission, or independent panel - to be triggered where a declaration exceeds a defined cumulative duration, with the review tabled in Parliament and subject to debate.

**Justification:** Retrospective accountability strengthens long-term legitimacy and supports continuous improvement of emergency governance without interfering with live response. Canada's Emergencies Act mandates a post-event inquiry following the termination of a declaration, providing a clear international precedent for institutionalised lessons-learned processes.

### 3.10. Recommendation 10: Reassessment of Ongoing Commonwealth Necessity

**Type:** Legislative amendment

**Aim:** To ensure national emergency declarations remain justified by ongoing Commonwealth-level need rather than administrative inertia.

**Recommendation:** Require that each extension of a national emergency declaration include an explicit assessment of whether the declaration continues to provide material national coordination or administrative benefit - such as cross-jurisdictional coordination or access to Commonwealth levers - beyond existing state, territory, or sector-specific mechanisms.

**Justification:** The Act is designed to enable national coordination, not to signal emergency status indefinitely. As emergencies stabilise or transition to recovery, the added value of a national declaration may diminish even if underlying risks persist. Requiring reassessment of continued Commonwealth necessity strengthens proportionality and ensures declarations do not persist once their coordinating function has been effectively absorbed elsewhere. Comparable emergency frameworks overseas emphasise periodic reassessment of the necessity of national-level intervention rather than mere persistence of underlying conditions.

### 3.11. Recommendation 11: Consolidated Reporting on the State of the Emergency

**Type:** Implementation and practice

**Aim:** To improve parliamentary and public understanding of the cumulative operation of emergency powers during prolonged declarations.

**Recommendation:** Require periodic publication - aligned with extension cycles or at least quarterly - of a consolidated “state of the emergency” report while a declaration remains in force, summarising all active declarations, extensions, variations, and Section 15 determinations, their purposes, and their current status.

**Justification:** Prolonged emergencies generate multiple interrelated instruments whose combined effect is difficult to assess when viewed in isolation. Consolidated reporting improves intelligibility, supports effective parliamentary oversight, and reduces the risk of fragmented or obscured emergency governance without constraining executive action.

## 4. Conclusion

The National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 provides an essential framework for national coordination in times of genuine crisis. Its overall design reflects a deliberate and defensible emphasis on executive flexibility at the point of activation.

However, experience over recent years demonstrates that the most significant governance challenges associated with emergency powers do not arise at activation, but during continuation. As exceptional arrangements persist, overlap, or recur, the legitimacy of emergency governance increasingly depends on clarity of justification, visibility of decision-making, and meaningful democratic engagement.

This submission does not contend that the Act has failed, nor that it has been misused. Rather, it reflects the reality that emergency governance frameworks must be designed not only for moments of acute crisis, but for prolonged and repeated use. Modest, targeted refinements can therefore strengthen confidence in the framework without undermining its effectiveness or responsiveness.

Clearer contemporaneous justification, consolidated visibility of emergency instruments, and structured parliamentary engagement over time would not only enhance democratic accountability, but also support decision-makers by providing an authoritative record of necessity and proportionality as circumstances evolve.

This submission does not recommend judicial pre-authorisation, rigid emergency timelines, or restrictions on the initial declaration of emergencies. If adopted in part, the most consequential reforms would be those that improve justification and parliamentary engagement as declarations persist, recognising that accountability risks arise primarily over time rather than at activation.

By reinforcing transparency, calibrating accountability to duration, and clarifying how discretion is exercised, the Act can remain fit for purpose while sustaining democratic confidence in national emergency governance.

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