

NATIONAL VICTORIA **CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

COVID-19 becomes law; government to give itself sweeping new powers

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By [Noel Towell](#)

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The state Labor government will push through an unprecedented wave of changes to Victoria’s laws to allow the health system, courts, prisons, local government and the rental market to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Defendants in serious criminal trials will be able to have their cases heard by a judge sitting alone without a jury for the next six months to allow courts to comply with coronavirus social distancing measures.



Premier Daniel Andrews earlier this month. JUSTIN MCMANUS

The government’s massive “omnibus” bill will be put to MPs on Thursday as State Parliament returns for a special one-day-only pandemic crisis session. It will then

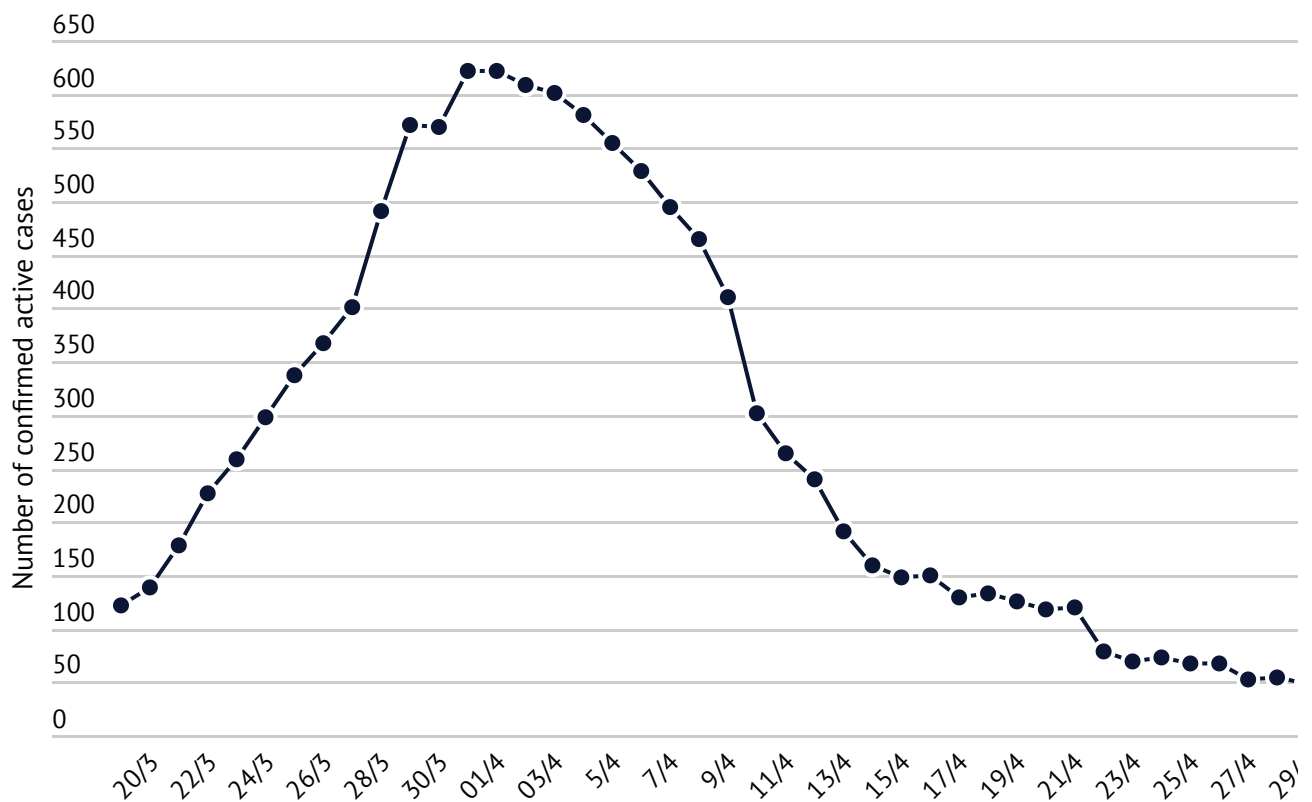
be adjourned until further notice.

The state opposition is unhappy that a 305-page piece of legislation that covers 14 portfolio areas was only provided to the Coalition and other parties three days before it was due to be debated.

The temporary ban on rental evictions and rent increases will be enshrined in law, with the land tax relief for landlords to be made law through a separate Appropriation Bill.

Thursday's legislation will amend the *Local Government Act* to allow virtual meetings for local councils and will also tweak the laws that govern State Parliament to allow the politicians there to do their committee work remotely.

Known active coronavirus cases in Victoria: running totals



Total number of known active cases

Data: Department of Health and Human Services. Active cases are defined as total cases minus the number recoveries. Figures on the number of recoveries started being published on March 19.

Long-term injured workers will be able to have their WorkCover claims paid for an additional six months under the changed laws, if they cannot go back to work or if the virus prevents them returning to their jobs.

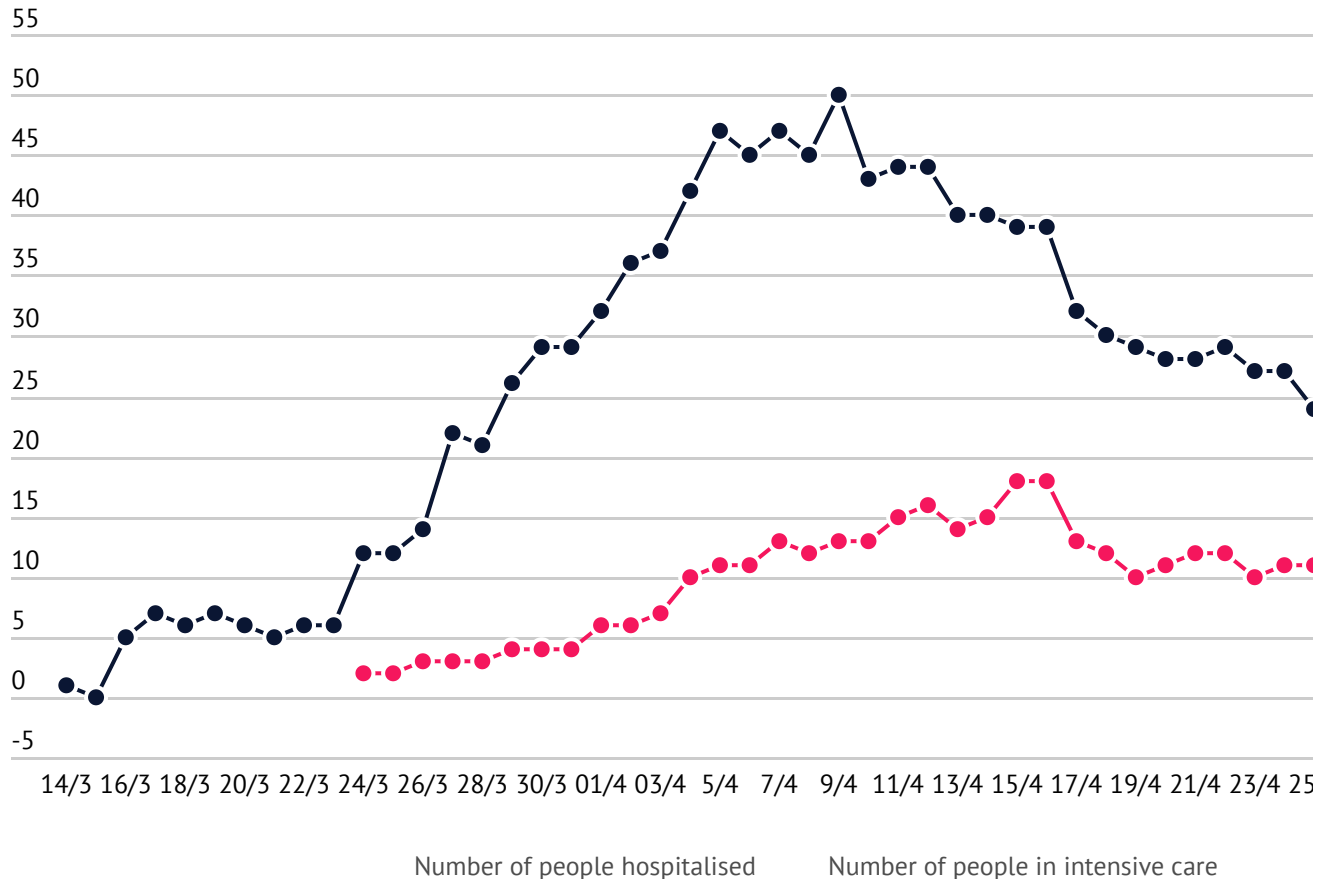
The government will also give itself the power on Thursday to make changes to the operation of the justice system by regulation, without having to bring fresh legislation to the Parliament, "so that justice processes can be quickly adapted to changing public health requirements".

But Labor insists that will be no relaxation on its tough bail laws or lighter sentencing for offenders.

Courts will have more scope to change the way they operate, reducing person-to-person contact and opportunities for the virus to spread.

The bill will allow electronic filing of documents and more use of audio-video links, telephone and other technology to conduct court cases.

Running totals: hospitalisations in Victoria



Data: Department of Health and Human Services

Magistrates will be given the power, currently held only by County and Supreme Court judges, to impose electronic monitoring conditions on offenders serving community corrections orders, and quarantine orders will be allowed in prisons and youth justice facilities.

Youth offenders and their parents will be able to attend conciliation conferences and counselling remotely instead of turning up in person.

The health minister will have the power to change nurse-to-patient ratios in the state's hospitals in the event of an acute COVID-19 emergency putting unprecedented pressure on the system.

Most of the provisions in the Bill will expire after six months except some environmental and rental market reforms, which will be pushed back to 2021 to reflect the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Attorney-General Jill Hennessy said the sweeping changes were temporary but necessary.

“This is about responding to the challenges of physical distancing and ultimately, saving lives,” she said.

But Victorian Liberals Leader Michael O'Brien said the massive bill was being rushed through without scrutiny.

“The COVID-19 Omnibus Bill is 305 pages long and covers 14 portfolio areas,” Mr O'Brien said.

“Any Bill that provides extraordinary power to Government, as this one does, requires careful scrutiny.

“However, the Opposition was only provided with the Bill on Monday night, leaving little time for consultation with the many Victorians whose lives will be affected by it before it is debated on Thursday.”

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