



EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms KE Richards MP—Chair
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr N Dametto MP
Mr JP Lister MP
Mr BL O'Rourke MP
Mr JA Sullivan MP

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE OPERATION OF THE TRADING (ALLOWABLE HOURS) ACT 1990

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

SUNDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2021

Mount Isa

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The committee met at 7.30 pm.

CHAIR: Good evening, everyone. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the operation of the Trading (Allowable Hours) Act 1990. My name is Kim Richards. I am the member for Redlands and chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee. I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the custodial land of the world's oldest living civilisation and I pay my respects to the Kalkadoon people, their elders both past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to live with two of the world's oldest living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

With me here today from the committee are James Lister, my trusty deputy chair and the member for Southern Downs; Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; Mr Jimmy Sullivan, the member for Stafford; and Mr Barry O'Rourke, the member for Rockhampton. I also acknowledge that we have the member for Traeger, Mr Robbie Katter, here with us. I also acknowledge the former Speaker of the Queensland parliament—and it is lovely to have you here—Tony McGrady and his lovely wife, Sandra. I also acknowledge the apology from Mayor Danielle Slade, who is being represented here tonight by Councillor George Fortune. Thank you for being here, Councillor Fortune.

On 14 September 2021 the Legislative Assembly agreed to a motion that the Education, Employment and Training Committee inquire into and report on the operation of the Trading (Allowable Hours) Act 1990. The committee is required to report its findings to the House by 31 January 2022. The terms of reference for the inquiry are on the back of our hearing program. The submissions to our inquiry, as well as written briefs the committee has received from the Department of Education, which administers the Trading (Allowable Hours) Act, are available from the inquiry website, including the department's response to issues raised in the submissions received by the committee.

We are extraordinarily pleased to be here in Mount Isa. We have just come from Cairns and Mossman today. The temperature is vastly different when you step out of that airport. We are very pleased to be here this evening. We want this hearing to be as informal and relaxed as possible, but I still need to remind everyone that this hearing is still a formal proceeding of the Queensland parliament and subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. I am also obliged to remind everyone that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

We have an excellent range of speakers who are here tonight. Hopefully we might get some time if there are other people who would like to speak. For now, I hand over to the member for Traeger, Mr Robbie Katter, to make a brief opening statement, to be followed by questions from the committee.

KATTER, Mr Robbie, Member for Traeger, Parliament of Queensland

Mr Katter: I speak as the member for Traeger, but I also have some 15 years of valuation experience which was mostly in regional areas. It included a lot of valuations of properties and businesses. I was privy to look into the viability of some of the businesses in town. I think that gives me a fair bit of authority to talk about the viability of some of these businesses.

To me, the principle issue here is the deregulation of trading hours. I think you will hear a lot of submissions tonight and deliberations about surveys and what people want. I think this transcends that in many ways. Civic leaders need to look at the future of our city and know what the principles are—and that applies at a national level, a state level and a local level. A lot of people lament the loss of the car industry and many manufacturing industries and wonder how all of this happened. This is how it happens—when you start tweaking things like this.

It is about a lot more than just surveying someone in the street and asking them what they want. If you surveyed me tomorrow and I had never really looked at this issue much at all, I would say that I wanted it. Everyone wants convenience and short-term gratification, but leaders need to think about what the impacts of that are. They might still hold a different point of view, but it is a more complicated issue than just asking people what they want—which has been the commentary on this. That is an important thing to acknowledge and to consider, but it is not the only issue. There are some very big issues at play here.

Small private owner-operators are disappearing. They are rapidly declining. That is unequivocal. There is heavy data to back that up. Large corporate retailer service providers are sucking up more and more oxygen in that market. It is very difficult for small private individual retailers to operate today and to compete. There is still a small level of regulation that protects space for them—one being Sunday trading. I want to focus on that because I think that is what is really important to me, providing a space for small private owner-operators. There are not many spaces left for them.

I came out here to Mount Isa. I did not come here because I wanted to live here. I did not come here to work in the mines. I came out here because I was attracted to owning a small private enterprise. I worked for a large valuation company in Townsville. Craig Stack was a valuer from Townsville, and I was working in Townsville amongst those valuers. I had an opportunity to live out here in Mount Isa and own my own business. There is a saying, 'It's better to lead your own pony than someone else's thoroughbred.' I was attracted to that. It is not for everyone, but it is certainly for some people. Bob Burrow is in the audience. He was another person who was attracted to come out here to buy his own small business. If those opportunities are reduced—and this is important for civic leaders to think about—people are not going to move out here. That is an important point.

The arguments coming up against it that I constantly hear are tourism and livability. The last tourism strategy I saw out here defined tourism—and this is important as to how you strategically consider the impacts of tourism and how you stimulate it—as about 80 per cent or 90 per cent corporate tourism, which is mining contractors and sales representatives visiting, not people coming to see Disneyland or to ride on water slides. It is important to stimulate that and try to develop that market. It is important to acknowledge that when you are thinking about tourism here. It worked out that about five per cent were bona fide visitors. The rest were family and friends visiting. That is another important thing to consider when you are thinking about tourism.

The argument for it is that Sunday trading creates additional markets for tourism because on a Sunday they can shop at the major retailers. There are still a lot of shops that are open or can open on a Sunday, but I think the proposition is that if you open the big shops then other shops will see some benefit in it and will open. I think that is a wobbly argument—that you are going to create an extra tourism market. There is definitely some argument there. I cannot write that off. I would argue though—and I say this with the experience that I have of looking at businesses' profit and loss statements—that the small businesses out here such as newsagents and corner stores are a very fragile ecosystem.

I have heard people say, 'I'm still going to buy my bread and milk from the convenience store.' That is a nonsense argument because Coles and Woolworths and the like are not expanding their ownership to give their market share to someone else. They are expanding their trading hours to consume more of the market share, to reduce the profitability and turnover of those other businesses. That is the only reason they do it. It must happen. It will not magically create this additional market of spend in the town. It will compromise those businesses and knock five or 10 businesses out of the market in Mount Isa in the long term. The cost of supposed stimulation of tourism has to be weighed up against the fact that you are going to kill some businesses around the town.

When it comes to livability, again, it is an intangible thing, but I would argue that you should be just as focused on providing small business opportunities for people and that that is as much an enticement to people as an extra day of trading. That is not to forget that the major traders already can open on five Sundays a year for major events. It is not like there is no Sunday trading here at the moment.

The only regulatory tool we have left for small business is Sunday trading. That is the only thing that small business have left to battle these big corporate giants, and that is now being looked at being taken away. I find that very difficult to comprehend. There are plenty of advocates for large corporate business. They do not really need any advocacy because they are winning anyway. Someone needs to be in the camp of these small businesses. That is why I urge the committee to consider the other side of this.

Coles and Woolworths have not expanded their buildings here in town for easily 40 years. They have closed one building. I would argue that this is what happens when you give too much market share to Woolworths. They had Food for Less at Pioneer and IGA closed down. It was not just because of IGA, but they just figured at some point, 'We can make more money if we drive everyone into the city.' Often people now comment, 'It is too crowded on a Saturday.' To solve that problem, do they need Sunday trading or should they expand the size of their premises and increase the number of staff who work there? Everyone blames that on the fact that there is no Sunday trading. I would blame it on the fact that these large corporate retailers have not expanded their premises.

Sure, they have done some upgrades. Until recently, the outside of some these buildings looked absolutely terrible for such big businesses. They do not sponsor anything in town. When profit stays in the town, it is of big benefit to the town.

Everyone says that this is all about service, short-term gratification and convenience. I am sure that everyone would want 24-hour shopping if you made it available to them. You will now have to make people work on Sundays and make some of these small businesses work on Sundays to try to compete. That is all for our convenience and that is good. Some people say that because we have shiftwork here we need it. That is as much an argument for as against.

There is a really important factor here—and this brings a human element into this. I remember talking to Bob Burrow at the convenience store when the Food for Less was shut down at Pioneer. Woolworths said that, for whatever reason, they just shut it down. They also shut down their shop at Cloncurry for whatever reason. It is not like they are always going to be there. If you give them Sunday trading, do not think they have to open on a Sunday. If they pushed out the competition, they might decide not to open on a Sunday if it is more convenient. They have already shown evidence of that. They shut down the one at Pioneer. They shut down the one at Cloncurry. Bob said to me, 'It's a real shame because look the number of low socio-economic young mums pushing their kids in prams from Pioneer to my shop. It's good for my business but terrible for the town.'

That is a case in point as to where this leads. You have two stores to shop at in the middle of the town, the convenience stores disappear all around the suburbs and the people lose. We have to think about the long-term benefits. Sure, the benefits of Sunday trading and having those big shops there are absolutely obvious. What is hard to see and what surveys do not capture is the long-term ramifications of this. That is why I think these surveys are hopelessly inadequate in telling the story and running the debate on what is a really big issue and a really important issue going forward for this town and for this region.

The last point I would add is that a lot of metrics are applied by consultants and advisers saying, 'You need to improve livability because this is how we do it in Sydney or this is how it works in Townsville.' But it is much more complicated than that. These dynamics are a lot different. Like I said, these are very fragile ecosystems. You do not have this critical mass of investors of small business owners who will just flood back into that shop once it closes down. In some of these regional areas, they are a lot more fragile. If things close down, it is much harder to start them back up.

I ask the committee to thoroughly consider the long-term ramifications of these laws and the impact they will have on people's lives. This requires some long-term vision and some regard for the principles of what we should be about in government and the reason those regulations were there in the first place.

CHAIR: Thanks, Robbie. I might throw to the deputy chair.

Mr LISTER: It is good to see you, Robbie. It is nice to be in your electorate, on your turf. Thanks very much for your presentation and for your submission. I note that there is a line in your submission where you say—

I am of the firm belief that an entirely deregulated trading hours model, such as in Victoria, simply would not work for regional and rural Queensland and in the long-term would be to its detriment.

You talked about some competition factors related to that. Is it the case that the regulation of trading hours—that regulatory tool, as you have described it—is analogous to the regulatory tool of regulating the labour market to ensure equity and social and economic objectives?

Mr Katter: I am going to have to put up my hand because the last part of your question was complicated vernacular. Can you repeat the last part of your question?

Mr LISTER: We have a regulated labour market, and that protects people to make sure that everyone gets a fair go. Isn't that similar to regulation for the small guys in retail business?

Mr Katter: Yes, that is a good point. It is important to realise that the last time this came up, the last time we had a hearing in Mount Isa, it was not driven by people in Mount Isa: it was driven by one of the large retailers in town putting in an application to expand. Then it becomes a conversation about what is best for the community. Think about where it was driven from in the first place and think about their actions in the past.

It is a really good point. We regulate the labour market to ensure people have adequate wages. There is nothing left in the primary production industry anymore to regulate an income, as we used to have under the National Party and Labor governments in the past. We seem to have thrown that away with this obsession with deregulation we have now in the economy. Here is one little piece of remaining regulation that is left to preserve some part of the fabric that is eroding, and everyone

seems so quick to throw it away for their own convenience. That is where it comes to that principal issue about regulation. It is there for a purpose, and we need to cast our minds back to what that purpose is. Not everything new is great.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You briefly mentioned the five special Sundays per year. How does that affect local small businesses? Is it a positive thing? Obviously it is for special events. I am just curious about your opinion on that.

Mr Katter: This has come out in general conversation with a lot of people. People did not worry too much about what happened. Most of the conversations I have had with IGAs and independent small business is, 'They're going to win anyway. We'll be gone.' It is a really defeatist attitude. These big corporates are juggernauts. If you put yourself in their shoes, they are just up against it.

The comment from one convenience store in town was, 'We've already lost the five best days anyway. They're going to pick the five best days, and we can see that in our P and Ls. It's coming through right now, so we've already bled a fair bit. They're halfway there already.' I would turn that around and say, 'Can't we at least allow them some life support?' On the other side of the fence, there are already five big days, which are the rodeos, the big show days, the big tourist days or whatever it is, so we are already halfway there anyway.

Mr DAMETTO: I appreciate you coming in, Robbie, to give your starkly realistic view on what could happen if we erode Sunday trading regulation any further in Mount Isa. I come from a mining and construction background myself. The reason most people move to Mount Isa in the first place is for opportunity. They can see that moving to a harsh location opens up opportunities for them, whether it is in business or mining and construction. I see that you have done a fair bit of work on trying to work against a fly-in fly-out mentality for Mount Isa. You already have a diminishing population, which is not great. I know you are working very hard to push back on that. In terms of eroding regulations further to open up Sunday trading to the major supermarket chains and stores, how would that affect the viability of some of the small businesses that come out to the north-west and their competitive advantage to operate on those days?

Mr Katter: That is a good question. It is important to realise that none of this happens overnight. This could come in next year and everyone goes, 'Rob, you were talking nonsense. Everything's still open. Nothing's changed,' but it is a slow burn. Your profitability slowly erodes, and then when you try and sell the business in five or 10 years the person looks at the books and says, 'There's not much incentive here to buy that business.' When the vendor of that business bought it, it had this big profit, big incentive. We would all go, 'Yeah, that's worth going out on my own.' If you keep eroding profitability, everyone sees that the shop is still open and still trading and thinks, 'What are they worried about?' but they do not see the P and Ls at the end of each year. If you keep eroding that, it does not sell and it shuts down. I hope that does not happen. We will all do our best to stop that from happening, but they are the sorts of things we have to consider when we make these decisions.

Yes, a lot of people come out here for mining, but I know a number of people who came out here and did their 10 or 20 years in mining and then bought the butcher or the newsagent because they wanted to go into something else. You want those opportunities to be alive. A lot of those people did not start their own business: they bought an existing business from someone else. If you mess around with that, it can have some stark long-term consequences for those people who came out for mining and do not get the opportunity to do something else.

Mr DAMETTO: You said that about five per cent of the tourists who come out here are actually real tourists who come out to see the sights and enjoy the delights of Mount Isa. How many of those people have given you negative feedback on what is open or not open on a Sunday?

Mr Katter: Yes, there has been a bit of negative feedback. I find it is often people who I expect are not going to be here long term or have executive roles. It is more often itinerant workers who are here for a few years. It is definitely a complaint; I will put my hand up. Yes, it certainly does impact livability. It would be crazy to argue otherwise. My argument is: what is the alternative, what is the cost of that and what are the ramifications?

Mr SULLIVAN: Chair, I will just thank Robbie for his testimony. I am mindful there are other people here who have given up their Sunday night, so if I need to pick your brain, Robbie, I can do that in the next sitting week.

CHAIR: Yes, I am the same. Thank you, Robbie, for sharing the history of this legislation and the impact it will have on Mount Isa. Thank you for appearing before us today.

FORTUNE, Mr George, Councillor, Mount Isa City Council

KEENAN, Mr David, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Isa City Council

CHAIR: I acknowledge that Mayor Slade is now here. I welcome Councillor George Fortune and Mount Isa City Council CEO, Mr David Keenan. Thank you for joining us tonight. Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Fortune: I would like to acknowledge the Kalkadoon people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather tonight. Thank you for the opportunity, Chair and committee, and welcome to Mount Isa. I am here to express Mount Isa City Council's view.

In the last five years there has been a moratorium on seven-day trading rules for this region. The council has responded to the Education, Employment and Training Committee's request for submissions from stakeholders and residents in the north-west to look at the expansion of seven-day trading in the Mount Isa city. In developing our submission, council collated a range of views backed by survey data from Commerce North West, direct inquiries and canvassing by council officials of the business community. The council has arrived at what we believe is a collective view of residents, business owners and the industry workforce across the city.

Our submission is in favour of the full introduction of seven-day trading, and it flows from a concerted effort by council to reflect and meet the needs of the people of Mount Isa. The council's position is that it will bring a range of benefits to the city and its people. The take-up of seven-day trading will add more support to our industries, including mining and grazing and their workforces, allowing more flexibility and convenience for people, including many shiftworkers and those people living on cattle properties, to shop over the full weekend.

Seven-day trading in Mount Isa enhances the scope of business growth and opportunity, which ultimately is a key focus of what council is striving for. It will bring more activation to the CBD area over weekends for residents, visitors and tourists alike, which will result in more commercial and recreational economy into the city. It will also bring more punch and livability to the city by enhancing the character of a more modern and attractive city in this remote region. A healthy and vibrant CBD in Mount Isa goes a long way towards creating and maintaining a strong business community, which in turn provides extra services. This is at the heart of the city's livability.

The results of a community survey conducted by Commerce North West in September and October shows that Mount Isa residents want Sunday trading. The survey attracted more than 1,200 responses, with about 80 per cent of residents and about 78 per cent of small businesses supporting the relaxation of Sunday trade restrictions in Mount Isa. With more than 100,000 tourists travelling through Mount Isa each year, we are north-west Queensland's major tourist and shopping hub. Not having Sunday trading for major supermarkets has long been a point of contention for residents and tourists alike. It is likely that seven-day trading will assist in attracting a new demographic to the city, helping to keep new people in the city longer and may allow major supermarkets to employ more staff—in particular, trainees.

Bringing extra opportunity and foot traffic to the CBD on a Sunday will also send a clear message to all businesses from across Australia, as well as potential local businesspeople, that Mount Isa is a great place to set up shop and do business.

Mr LISTER: Councillor Fortune, you heard the member for Traeger give his appraisal of the potential impact of the full deregulation of trading hours. He talked about the capital value of those businesses and how they may be impacted. I note from the council's submission there is a FoodWorks store located out of the central business district and three independent supermarkets. Do you know what they think about the possibility of having unrestricted Sunday trading?

Mr Fortune: Our council officials have canvassed the business community in the central business district. The majority of the responses were favourable and the feedback that our officials received across the CBD was in favour of it.

Mr LISTER: Do you know what the particular businesses that have a capital investment at stake as a result of the regulatory changes said?

Mr Fortune: I cannot speak to those particular businesses. I can speak to the majority that were spoken to.

Mr Keenan: Page 4 in the first paragraph states, 'As part of the consultation process, local businesses consulted had mixed responses, with some saying it would encourage trade and promote the businesses in the city centre, while other businesses that are in direct competition for trade with the major supermarkets and discount department store quoted figures indicating that Sunday trade was their busiest day of the week and the introduction of seven-day trading would impact ...'

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question is similar to the one I asked Robbie Katter about the special events Mount Isa holds every year—for example, the Mount Isa rodeo. What type of tourism traffic does that bring to the area and what type of turnover, if the council is aware, is an economic bonus for the area for that period of time?

Mr Fortune: Anecdotally, without having an exact number for you, it probably triples in Mount Isa on that weekend. What you notice is that from year to year there is a shift around the businesses in Mount Isa that are frequented by traffic. The exact numbers have not been spoken about to council, but the demographic changes every year or from year to year. We think that a number of businesses across Mount Isa get anything probably up to a doubling in business, some see a quadrupling. It just depends on the demographic that comes in from year to year.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Further to that, it would have to do with the actual location of the business, so those closer to the rodeo would obviously be a lot more popular?

Mr Fortune: It is unexplainable. A business that was on the outskirts of the city was doing a very good trade out of rodeo weekends but it has moved closer into town. I cannot put my finger on it. I think it is the demographics of the people coming in. They are a younger crowd. I am obviously a bit too old to go out for those weekends. It is something that I cannot explain. It is around demographic changes. I think it is just a younger crowd moving to different businesses.

CHAIR: I know that the rodeo and the Mount Isa Show are the events that have been given special exemption. Is it only Woolies that opens on those Sundays or are other shops encouraged to also open when they can trade on those special exempted days?

Mr Fortune: Those days are open to everyone who wants to open.

CHAIR: Is it only Woolies that opens for the Mount Isa rodeo or do other shops take up the opportunity to be able to trade on the Sunday?

Mr Fortune: I am not sure, actually. I do not do the shopping in my household. I believe the opportunity is there for Woolies and Coles to open on that weekend.

CHAIR: What about the smaller boutique shops?

Mr Keenan: The answer is, yes, they do open up. Obviously it is at Coles and Woolies' discretion as to whether they open up, and that has not been consistent. With council starting the process of doing a master plan for the central business district, we are seeing more and more small businesses open up in the city centre on weekends, which is heartening. They are also starting to put street food furniture out, which is also heartening. There is a change that is coming through there. The master plan, which is probably halfway through, will have a focus on trying to activate, as the councillor said before, and energise those businesses that were set up in the CBD.

Mr DAMETTO: Councillor Fortune, when council was making its decision to push for seven-day trading, did they consider the negative impacts to some businesses that would be affected? How did the council reconcile that?

Mr Fortune: A lot of the councillors are small business owners. They recognise the impacts and the consequences long term of the seven-day trading. A couple of councillors have a perceived conflict of interest so did not vote. There was a passionate discussion because they are small business owners in the city. There was a councillor who did not believe they had a conflict of interest because they do not open on a Sunday. The feeling of the councillors and the decision that was made was on whether it is in the best interests of the city to go down the track of seven-day trading. They all, of course, had their own personal comments, but overall the majority decided to go down the track of seven-day trading.

Mr SULLIVAN: Thank you not only for your oral submission but also for your very detailed submission that we have been able to go through. You mentioned the wonderful multicultural history that Mount Isa and the region has. Your submission talks to the need to attract new demographics to the city to fill a void. Is there any update of the past year or 18 months as to how the population and the attraction of new workers is going? Is it still a live issue?

Mr Fortune: I can say that the demographic is not the same as it used to be. There has been a declining population in Mount Isa. It has settled down and plateaued, but due to the nature of a mining city it has peaks and troughs. The demographic has changed. It is still a very multicultural city. People who come to live and work in Mount Isa do make it home.

Mr SULLIVAN: Do you think the training and job opportunities that could occur from more trading hours would help the younger demographic to stick around a bit longer? If they get into the workforce and get more hours, would they be more inclined to stay and not go to the bigger towns?

Mr Fortune: Certainly there are numerous opportunities for young people to work in Mount Isa. I have noticed a lot of younger people these days want to spread their wings and move out of town, but certainly there is an opportunity in Mount Isa for work through different businesses and through industry.

CHAIR: I am trying to wrap my head around the size of the Woolies. Would you have any idea roughly of the number of employees at Woolies in Mount Isa?

Mr Keenan: That might be a good question to ask Mr Stack later on. He looks after the Coles which would be indicative because they both have about the same floor space, if I remember correctly. He should be able to give you the details on that.

Mr O'ROURKE: I will hold off until we hear from Coles and Woolies, because I have some questions to ask in that space.

Mr BOOTHMAN: On the last page of your submission you say you have been speaking with consultants about developing a master plan for the central business district. Can you elaborate on the potential plans to revitalise the area?

Mr Fortune: I am excited about it. Consultation was held just recently and a number of people came along to share their views on it. There were workshops and a visitation around town with those members. It was quite exciting to be involved with that detail. I can pass on to David.

Mr Keenan: The master plan will look at the infrastructure around the CBD. There has been no investment in recent years in any of the hard infrastructure around the CBD. It will look at traffic movements. At the moment there are still some areas in the CBD where it is a 60-kilometre zone, which is not good when trying to get a pram and a kid across a road. That needs to be potentially slowed down. It will look at freeing up spaces within the CBD. It will look at what sorts of shops are missing from the CBD. There is a list in the submission about all the ones that we have. It will look at how they can be better placed.

It will look at the use of potential indoor malls. Obviously when it is hot it is about trying to make it a bit cooler. Those malls already exist at this point in time. It is about doing much higher level landscaping throughout the CBD. We need to make sure that we have replacement mature trees. There are some beautiful trees within the CBD, but they have limited lifespans and we need to plan ahead for those as well. At the moment it is scheduled to be finished by the end of the calendar year. It needs to go out to further community consultation. It has been to business consultation and, like Councillor Fortune, the majority of businesses have been very excited.

CHAIR: I have one last question and you might not know the answer to it. It is about the history of the amendments that were made in 2017 around the 23 regional towns that currently are not able to trade on public holidays and on Sundays. Do you have any understanding of why those 23 towns were selected? What was the methodology?

Mr Fortune: I am sorry, Madam Chair, I do not.

Mr Keenan: Chair, are you referring to the council's decision back then?

CHAIR: No, the state government and the amending legislation. That concludes our questions. Thank you very much, Councillor Fortune and Mr Keenan. We really appreciate your insights.

HARMAN, Ms Emma, President, Commerce North West

CHAIR: We will now hear from the President of Commerce North West, Ms Emma Harman. It is over to you, Emma.

Ms Harman: Good evening, Madam Chair and committee. I am here on behalf of Commerce North West. We are the local chamber of commerce. We do have membership outside of Mount Isa from Camooweal through to Richmond. We do aim to be regional, but we are Mount Isa centric.

When this topic came up for conversation some months ago, it became clear that we needed to have a position and that we would be asked for our position. When I say 'we', I mean the board in particular. When we sat around the table it became quite clear to us that in some ways we had split personalities: 'us' the consumer versus 'us' the business owner may have, in fact, two different opinions. We felt it was really important that in order for us to have a say we needed to survey. We needed to know what our members and our community felt in order for us to be able to make a statement that actually was a valid reflection of our membership.

We did do the survey. It was a deliberate move to do it in conjunction with the Mount Isa City Council. They needed information and we needed information and it seemed silly to go to the community with two different surveys. People are bad enough at clicking when you need them to at the best of times, so there was no point in running two surveys. The questions were written in conjunction and the information was then shared. The facts and figures in my submission should be the same or very close to what is in theirs.

We were actually quite surprised, to be honest. We were not surprised when we talked to the consumers. Like Robbie said, we expected the consumers would want seven-day trading. That was no surprise. What was a surprise to us in that area was that we had a large portion of respondents who were from out of town, from 482- postcodes, who rely on Mount Isa. A lot of them expressed a need to be able to access supermarkets on Sundays so that they can bring staff up for a weekend. We imagined that, hypothetically, they could come, spend two or three nights in accommodation, go to the movies, go for dinner, buy their shopping on their way out of town and everybody is happy. They have had a great weekend and we have picked up some cash.

What we were very surprised about was the section in the survey that surveyed business owners and business managers. Like I said, we knew we needed to know that answer separately. We were quite surprised when 80 per cent of them responded. Because of that, because of the results in the survey, we feel that that is the information we have to go on. In the submission we say that we are in support of relaxing the rules, but I want to say that, from a personal level and from a board level, we are deeply sympathetic to the businesses—some of whom are here and are members; not all of them are but we do have members here—that will be affected negatively. I cannot ignore that. I do not want to ignore that. I have sympathy for that. However, I have to speak on behalf of the group.

Mr LISTER: Ms Harman, thanks for coming along and I say that to everyone here. It is great to see so many people here. Thank you very much for your submission. Data is really important, so thank you for going to the trouble of doing the survey. Are you in a position to provide us with a copy of the questions that elicited the answers in the data?

Ms Harman: I do not have them on me.

Mr LISTER: We can take it on notice.

CHAIR: Yes, we can take that on notice. You do not have to provide that until afterwards.

Ms Harman: I believe we should be able to supply that. Yes, I am getting a nod from the council people with whom we collaborated so, yes, we can supply you with the questions.

Mr LISTER: Thank you very much.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for coming here tonight and for putting the survey together to give a bit of an overview. I go back to what I asked the council about the master plan. Did your organisation have any consultation with the council about the potential master plan to spruce up the Mount Isa area?

Ms Harman: Not specifically but I certainly have a good working relationship with the council and with the CEO, David Keenan. We have been included in the community consultation component of that as has everybody else.

Mr DAMETTO: You said you felt sympathy for those businesses that would be negatively impacted, especially the IGAs and smaller supermarkets. Have you also consulted with the butchers, the bakers—those sorts of smaller businesses that also would do a good trade on a Sunday? I ask this question as the Hinchinbrook shire has seven-day trading and we have seen a negative impact on the smaller businesses like the butchers and bakers. Some of them have shut down due to having to compete with Sunday trade.

Ms Harman: We have limited resources, so I have not been able to canvass everybody. I can really only go on the survey to say for certain. Our feeling is that, if we can help build the livability and the vitality of the city through things like the master plan and the more people we can attract and retain in the city, the better that has to be for businesses of every sort.

Mr DAMETTO: The issue I see with opening up to just the large supermarket chains on the weekend is that if they eventually take the market share they will push out the smaller businesses. If that happens, wouldn't Mount Isa look like the next city down the road?

Ms Harman: I do not think so. If you look out our window, you do not see the ocean. We are very different from most other places. We are a remote outback town. We do things differently out here to the way things are often done on the coast. As Robbie alluded to, what works in other places may not necessarily work here. I am not saying there are no similarities. We are all Australians and we are all similar in that regard. However, I believe we are different enough.

Mr SULLIVAN: Following on from the member for Hinchinbrook, I would like to put on the record that the council's submission gives some detail at the bottom of page 3 and the top of page 4. It specifically outlines the independent and small stores that were consulted. I just put that on the record.

Mr O'ROURKE: I used to live in Mount Isa for a few years.

Ms Harman: Welcome back.

Mr O'ROURKE: I absolutely loved it. I had a great time. Two of my children were born while we were here as well. We had a lot of good friends who actually lived out of town and would come into Mount Isa on a Friday night or a Saturday. They would do all of their grocery shopping and leave it in our fridge and then head back on a Sunday. Do primary producers et cetera currently come in and do shopping at the independent store on a Sunday or do they shop at the big grocery shops?

Ms Harman: I honestly could not answer that, but I am sure that when Bob gets up he will be able to answer that better.

CHAIR: One of the key parts of the terms of reference is point 3—the effects of trading hours regulation on the Queensland economy and on regional Queensland. From a Mount Isa point of view and in terms of economic impact of the trading hours regulation, would you suggest that it is providing a positive or a negative impact when it comes to that specific provision as it relates to Mount Isa?

Ms Harman: I am probably not qualified to say that. People have a disposable income. Whether or not we open Coles and Woolies on Sundays is not going to change people's pay packets and their disposable income.

CHAIR: I am talking more about the broader economic value to Mount Isa.

Ms Harman: I do believe that we can improve the livability, the vitality and the strength of our community. My hope is that, if we allow this, it can be one small part—and only one small part—of helping to attract and retain people to town and that can only have a positive impact. I took a couple of notes. Am I allowed to make a few more points?

CHAIR: Certainly.

Ms Harman: I believe when the last inquiry was held in 2017 one of the arguments for keeping things the same was that there was a lack of evidence and a lack of data. I was not involved in that inquiry. I was not part of that at all, but I do believe that this time we have at least tried to give you some data.

CHAIR: Absolutely and thank you for the survey. When you look at the population of Mount Isa with 20,000 people, a sample size of 1,400 people is a very robust piece of data.

Ms Harman: I sincerely hope that those who are going to be impacted positively or negatively, especially the ones at either end, have taken the time to fill out that survey because their voices are extremely important. In terms of the rodeo data, that is easily and readily available from the Mount Isa rodeo. Off the top of my head, the population increase is somewhat like George said—triple to quadruple—and the financial impact is \$10 million or thereabouts. The tourism association will be talking soon too, but you cannot park in Mount Isa for most of winter and certainly during the time of the rodeo. The caravan parks are full to overflowing. It has a huge financial impact on town.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You need to book in advance.

Ms Harman: I do believe that you have to book more than one year in advance in some cases because they are already booked out. I would be surprised if this hotel had rooms left.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contribution. We are very grateful. We have one question taken on notice with regard to providing us with the questions that formed part of the survey data that has been collated. Could we possibly get that back from you by Monday, 29 November?

Ms Harman: I certainly hope we can do so this coming week.

CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

COWPERTHWAITE, Mrs Nadia, President, Mount Isa Tourism Association

CHAIR: I welcome Mrs Nadia Cowperthwaite from the Mount Isa Tourism Association.

Mrs Cowperthwaite: I am the President of Mount Isa Tourism Association. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Kalkadoon people. Tonight I am speaking on behalf of Mount Isa Tourism Association and the feedback we have received from tourism operators and from the tourists themselves. I believe you received a submission from us as well, so I will not delve too deeply into it.

Firstly, there is such a wide distance between the supermarkets—so between Charters Towers, Katherine and Alice Springs. We are in the middle and people travel all over Queensland, especially this year, expecting the same thing everywhere they go. They end up here and say, 'Wait a minute, it's not open.' I know the local caravan parks and motels often have signs up saying, 'No Sunday trading,' so we can pre-warn people. I know all the local owners are definitely encouraging people to go to the bakery and the butchers. We all shop there ourselves, so we are big advocates of local shopping. However, there are always going to be some things you cannot get from a convenience store that travellers in their vans are going to need.

We have heard people telling us that they have not stopped in due to Sunday trading; they are just not even going to bother with Mount Isa this time. Usually August is our big month. This year with COVID we have seen that our normal demographic has changed, with a huge number of people in June, July and August. We are talking families as well this year, whereas it is usually more retirement age people. People with families are expecting that they can get nappies at a reasonable price on a weekend.

The other major point is the feedback we have had from the big guided bus tours. They often provide morning tea and lunch. They either skip Mount Isa or they have to change their route to get here on a day that is suitable. That is because Saturday and Sunday is often not appropriate to get a massive amount of food for them to keep going on their tour. We have also had some negative feedback from tourists doing their shopping on a Saturday when the shelves are empty because they just cannot keep up with restocking the shelves. Sometimes people are not very happy at the supermarket on a Saturday. There is that negative feedback as well that we have received.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question is along the lines of a comment the local member for Traeger made about the Coles supermarket. He asked: why is the supermarket not expanding its trade on Saturday to cater for the increase in population? What are your comments on that?

Mrs Cowperthwaite: I can only speak as somebody who has been to the supermarket on a Saturday and I avoid it at all costs now. Every till will be open and there will still be lines. They would have to remove some of the car park to make the store bigger. I cannot see how they could get around it with their current infrastructure. I do not see any need for the actual supermarket to grow; it is just getting those people out the door quicker. That is all I could see. I do not know how they could possibly do that with the space they have, but then I do not see it is feasible to throw in more tills. There is just nowhere to do it.

Mr DAMETTO: As a tourism body, is part of the main reason you want tourists to come to town to spend money in the town that then would remain in the town? Would that be correct?

Mrs Cowperthwaite: Yes.

Mr DAMETTO: Wouldn't opening Sunday trade for the larger supermarket chains be working in opposition to that?

Mrs Cowperthwaite: Not necessarily. I am not talking about corporate tourism; I am talking about actual tourists, fun time tourists. We are seeing thousands of people staying either 40 kilometres north or out at Clem Walton Park et cetera. It is just packed. We want to see them in town. We do not want them camped out there for weeks on end. We want them to come into town and have the convenience of being in a city, because we are a city. Katherine has 10,000 people; they have Sunday trading. We have 20,000 and we want to see those people here. They should have that convenience.

Mr O'ROURKE: If we do end up with Sunday trade, do you think other small businesses would open up as well due to having a major anchor tenant open and bringing people into town? Do you think that would help those small businesses?

Mrs Cowperthwaite: I would like to think so, yes. Yes, people might need to go to the supermarket. We encourage people to also grab a coffee and a doughnut. There are also big chains. I know Jay Jays will sometimes open up if there are a lot of people around. Just Jeans and all of those

types of stores as well as Discount Jeans, which is a local store, would then have the opportunity to open up and grab those people. We are not saying that the supermarket would get extra money. I would expect—and this is from previous business I have been involved in—that that trade would then be split over the two days. I would like to see then Discount Jeans and Donut King—all of them—make more money out of it.

Mr O'ROURKE: Further to the Saturday trade and avoiding those big shopping centres, with trading being opened up on a Sunday you would think that that would address some of those issues, because there would have to be people stuck in Monday to Friday jobs who just cannot get out.

Mrs Cowperthwaite: Yes. Some people do work Monday to Friday. Not everybody works at the mines, not everybody has different shifts. We would like our tourists to have a positive experience when they go to the grocery store and not be bumping into trolleys, not having people being mean to them or having issues in the car park. These are all things that we are seeing; it is very negative.

Mr SULLIVAN: Just a quick comment from me. This is not just thanking you for your oral submission tonight but the very detailed and articulate submission. We will take that on board as read.

CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you very much for your submissions. We are very grateful for your appearance before us today.

RUSSELL, Mrs Michelle, Franchisee, Brumby's Bakery Mount Isa

CHAIR: I welcome Mrs Michelle Russell, who is the franchisee of Brumby's Bakery.

Mrs Russell: My husband, Darryl, and I are the franchisees of Brumby's Mount Isa. A lot of people see a national brand and assume that we do not own it. We own the business but we pay a fee to be able to use the brand, the brand recipes, brand supply network et cetera. Our employees are paid by us, our suppliers are paid by us and our rent is paid by us. We have operated since 2016. It has been a long road, but just in the past 18 months we are finally making a profit—not much of one, but anything is a blessing. We currently employ five full-time staff. It was 6½ but, if you talk to anybody in town, staff are hard to get at the moment. There are five full-time and approximately 10 junior casuals plus myself. I am not on the payroll, though. I say 'approximately 10 juniors' as we have 13 on the books but we are transitioning the grade 12 kids out.

Sunday trade accounts for 20 per cent of our weekly sales and 24 per cent of our wages. All staff have a 75 per cent loading, and the retail staff working prior to 9 am get a 100 per cent loading. That is all part of the general retail award. We are open 6 am to 3 pm. Approximately \$2,000 goes into high school students' pockets each month just from Sunday. During December when the supermarket is open we lose approximately 20 per cent of our Sunday sales. Translated throughout the year, I would go back to five-figure losses; I am not going to do that at all. Rodeo week provides the biggest boost for the town, as has been explained to you, except for 2020. I compared this year's rodeo to 2019 because it was on a par. My figures are on a par. I lost 30 per cent this year when the supermarkets opened.

If this goes ahead, to maintain a profitable business I will close Sundays. I cannot afford to go into five-figure losses. My husband works elsewhere and I have spent 4½ years taking his wages to pay bills. It has to stop somewhere. Sundays also provide approximately \$17,000 worth of food to the Good Shepherd Parish in the last financial year because, at the end of every day, if we have any bread product left we donate it to charity. Sundays are for the Good Shepherd Parish. During the week, our end-of-day goods go to: the Salvation Army recovery centre, Mount Isa Meals on Wheel, Christian Outreach Centre, Seventh Day Adventist Church, and the men's hostel. Last financial year we donated \$4,000 in cash to sporting groups and charities.

I cannot account for the amount of food that we give away where organisations ask us to donate. I do, but I do not put it through my books. Unfortunately at times like this I cannot equate it. People who currently and in the past have benefited from us include: Paws Hoofs and Claws Animal Rescue, Mount Isa Rugby League Canteen, City versus Country Comp, Good Shepherd Catholic College Confraternity team, the Spinifex State College Taipans Touch Football Team, Blackstars Junior Rugby League Club, Rovers AFL, Mount Isa Rotary Rodeo Queen Quest, Flynn Street Clean Up, Mount Isa Touch Football Competition, Barkly Highway State School, Saint Joseph's Catholic Primary, Reece Plumbing Buy a Bale, Mount Isa Eisteddfod, Good Shepherd Catholic College, NBHA District 11 Horse Club, QCWA Bouliia and Mount Isa Police Movember fundraising. That is all off the top of my head. I know that there are more but because I do not put it through the books I cannot do anymore.

The bottom line is that the cost of doing business on a Sunday is only worthwhile if we do not have to compete with the multinationals. I will not lose my customers who want my bread—I know that. What I will lose are the people who come to us on a Sunday who make Sunday our biggest day of the week and who will go to the supermarket instead. They will be going past the bakery section and, 'Oh, let's just go home. We'll grab the bread and go.' They are the people I will lose. On West Street where we are, our Sunday trade is mutually beneficial to the other small stores that open. If you take away my traffic away and that is going to be detrimental to them. There are no two ways about it.

Surely 75 hours a week is sufficient coverage for people to buy their groceries. That is what the big supermarkets are open for—75 hours a week. Even with that, we have convenience stores, and it is not as though you go in and there is nothing there. If I run out of something, I will go to Colonial—and Bob is here—and I know that I will find it on a shelf. That is not an issue. People will say, 'Oh, it costs too much.' It does not really. I do not find it outrageously expensive at all. Once you start negatively affecting us, the flow-on goes to the community organisations who will find the pool of sponsors and donors drying up because, if you take away 20 per cent of my trade, somebody will come and ask me for things and I will have to think really hard, 'Can I afford to do it?' It is already tough doing business in the current climate as a small business person. We do not need any more obstacles put in our way.

Mr LISTER: You talk about the 75 per cent loading that you pay on the Sunday. What are the arrangements under the certified agreement or the UEA that applies in the big shopping centres? Are you aware of what their people are paid on a Sunday?

Mrs Russell: I did research that. They are subject to the minimum conditions in the general retail award. They also have to pay that.

Mr LISTER: If you were not here, perish the thought, and the business had to go to the supermarkets, of the 15-odd people that you employ, how many of those 15 jobs would reappear in the shopping centres that were able to trade with their bakeries on a Sunday?

Mrs Russell: I could not begin to answer that. I do not know where they will find the staff, to be honest, because everybody, including them, in town struggles for staff. I am losing two baker shifts—not a whole baker.

Mr LISTER: I should have been clearer. Apart from staff difficulties, how many pay packets would disappear from where you are and how many would appear? Roughly 15 people work for you. Would you expect the same number or a different number of pay packets to emerge in the other places that the business went to?

Mrs Russell: I am not sure, to be honest. Having children myself, I would only let them work one day a week. I very strongly believe that people need a balance. If they are going to school five days a week, I do not want them working for me two days, unless it is school holidays, in which case my senior staff take the opportunity to take time off and then my juniors get more hours. Trust me, nobody minds the one shift that they get. It is generally between a six and seven-hour shift and they are happy with that. Yes, I will lose half my juniors because I cannot have 10 people on a Saturday.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I do not really have any questions because you have actually answered everything I could think of. Thank you for what you do for the community. I know that the local Brumby's in my electorate and the Bakers Delight make fantastic Christmas cakes. There is a bit of competition between the two. Everything you do for the community in helping sporting groups is something which is very precious. Franchisees such as yourself do a lot of work in those areas. Thank you for that.

Mr DAMETTO: I concur with the member for Theodore. I do not have a question but more of a statement. We used to enjoy the lovely bread of Brumby's in the little town of Ingham in the Hinchinbrook shire. We no longer do. Unfortunately, they just cannot compete. Thank you very much for what you do as a small business. We also acknowledge the tough road you have had to endure through the COVID pandemic. It must be reassuring knowing that right now you have a few constants like the trading hours to bank on when trying to run a small business. Unfortunately, if that is eroded, it is something else that might be chipping away at your viability. Is that correct?

Mrs Russell: That is so correct. Sunday is what helps pay the bills.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mrs Russell, for your submission. I am very lucky to have a Brumby's in my neck of the woods that do the best cinnamon buns with apple. My goodness gracious me, they are excellent.

STACK, Mr Craig, Senior Partner, Knight Frank, Shopping Centres Australasia Property Group

CHAIR: I welcome from Shopping Centres Australasia Property Group Mr Craig Stack, the Senior Partner for Knight Frank. Thank you for joining us.

Mr Stack: For context, I run a property management company based in Townsville. In late April, one of our clients purchased Mount Isa Village. Our familiarity with the village is now six months old. As I sit here representing Shopping Centres Australasia, it is in favour obviously of extending the hours over Sunday and those days that might be relevant over Christmas and Easter, similar to the other regional centres in North Queensland.

We commend Commerce North West and the council on their research in their survey. Getting so much of a response from the community was outstanding. The results of that survey probably guided us a little bit over the past two weeks in trying to understand the impact on community support for it here. It is no secret that the costs for operating a shopping centre are fixed. Extending into Sunday will be increased costs for our owners but, equally, if towns and traders wish to be trading on those days, we would be obviously supporting it. That is how it works for us.

The Commerce North West Queensland survey indicated quite overwhelming support, with what surprised me as roughly 80 per cent. In a similar survey—maybe not similar questions—the Shopping Centre Council of Australia provided me were some survey numbers which indicated more towards six to seven out of 10 people in support of the Sunday trade in those areas it was not in. Mount Isa seemed to indicate a stronger level of support for it.

Recently, I had the benefit of working with Mount Isa Council and its plans for the Mount Isa city centre. I commend the council on the initiative for enhancing the quality of the Mount Isa CBD with its imminent master plan. A lot of the discussion that I heard at that workshop centred around making the precinct, the city centre and therefore Mount Isa, more of an attraction for residents—and those residents extend outside of Mount Isa itself through to Cloncurry and other regions surrounding—and for those visitors who come to Mount Isa. That consistency of trading, that consistency of ability for people to be doing their shopping and having that capacity to time their visit to Mount Isa in a more practical or substantial manner, was evidently one of the objectives. This would be assisting in that.

I have nothing more to add. The surveys from Commerce North West and the Shopping Centre Council of Australia seem to be supportive.

CHAIR: With that new shopping centre precinct that you purchased six months ago here in Mount Isa, what types of tenants are in your shopping centre?

Mr Stack: It is Mount Isa Village, which has Coles and Kmart, and then there are approximately 18 specialty tenancies—pharmacies, banks, fashion—the standard specialty-type retailers.

Mr LISTER: If I could ask you to wear your hat representing the broader business, rather than just here in Mount Isa: is it common in industry for tenancy agreements in shopping centres to specify trading hours that must conform with the opening hours of the shopping centre?

Mr Stack: Yes, historically it is, and it still is the case. Again, for context, we are managing shopping centres from Cairns through to Gladstone and out to Emerald. As for size, probably Kmart and Coles would be amongst the bigger ones. They are usually a Woolworths or Coles and 10 or 12 specialties. In regional Queensland we found that, yes, there are what we call the core trading hours that we would anticipate most tenants would be compliant with. However, it would be fair to say in regional Queensland that the number of people wishing to operate in a small business is less. In fact, I have a story which would relate to the owners of Brumby's who were here before. If we were looking to lease space in a retail centre for a bakery 15 to 20 years ago in either Townsville or Mackay, we might have had three or four different operators we could go to. Even in those bigger centres, that is not so common now. That is going to be very hard.

There has been a greater willingness of landlords and tenants to work together to work out what practical timing might be. Certainly, there is an expectation that they would have as many hours as they can, but the strict policing of nine o'clock to five o'clock on a Sunday or any other time, even in the evenings, is no longer written. It has probably been more so over the last 18 months with the COVID circumstances.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question relates to foot traffic into your shopping centre at Mount Isa Village. How does it compare during the week versus the weekend and Saturday?

Mr Stack: We have no counters, so I cannot give you anything indicative, I am sorry, except anecdotally. What we have heard today about Saturday being very busy is what we understand it to be.

Mr DAMETTO: My first question is around the commercial value of a property. Does adding an extra day of trading actually increase the commercial value of a property?

Mr Stack: It is entirely indicative on the net operating income. It is going to be not necessarily an enhancement for specialty retailers. They will be paying their rent they would normally pay—whether it is six days, five days or seven days. It would be by agreement with what that business feels it is able to afford. In the majors—so a Coles or Woolworths—quite often we might have what we might call a turnover rent. I will not give you the figures, but if the target for a year was \$10 and they achieved more than \$10, there would be a slight percentage of every cent above \$10 that they would then pay to the landlord.

In the case of Mount Isa—and this is part of the deliberation why the survey by Commerce North West was so interesting and helpful—I do not think the amount of trade that a major supermarket would get over six days or seven days would be significantly different. It might just even out, because there is no leakage. There is a very limited capacity for it to leak locally. I appreciate with visitors coming here, trading here would be of benefit, but that would possibly be the benefit. The actual leakage for a Mount Isa resident whether they are buying on Wednesday or Sunday would not be there. When I say ‘benefit’, the trading benefit, the financial benefit, to a Coles, Woolworths or Kmart would be similar.

Mr DAMETTO: I had one more question but we are out of time.

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before us today. We are very grateful.

HYDON, Mr David, Private capacity

CHAIR: I now welcome Mr David Hydon. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Hydon: I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Kalkadoon people. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. A great deal has been written and spoken regarding Mount Isa's retail characteristics, especially its catchment and clientele. From anecdotal evidence and personal observations, I would like to make an additional point.

I am relatively new to Mount Isa, having moved here in mid-2018 from Melbourne via Brisbane. I am a qualified urban planner and practised for over 20 years in Victoria and Queensland. I moved to Mount Isa for a primary school teaching role and I am now working in the disability sector. Perhaps this makes me uniquely qualified to make observations about many things. One of those is how an urban community's retail performance can define its reputation, its sense of pride in itself and its capacity to build a community together.

I have deliberately engaged with many people in Mount Isa with diverse connections to the city. Those who have lived here since last century speak of a place with a very different feel. Bricks-and-mortar stores were well patronised and a fundamental and necessary social magnet to locals. In fact, nobody called them bricks-and-mortar stores. They just called them shops. Why? Because that was how retail was done. If you wanted something, you purchased it locally in a shop. There was no internet, no online sales, no ecommerce. Around 16 per cent of retail sales in Australia in 2020 was via ecommerce. This percentage first rose above zero around the turn of the century. Certainly, online retail did not exist when the act itself came into existence.

It is now common knowledge how well Australia Post have performed over recent years as they have positioned themselves to deliver the lion's share of online purchased goods off the back of a trusted organisation since its days as the postmaster general. The queue to collect parcels at the post office is testament to this. What percentage of online sales make up Mount Isa's retail spend is not known by me, but I suspect that it is above the national average. The remoteness of our city relative to other population centres and the demographic mix of its residents are perhaps contributing factors.

I say this as I have participated in conversations with a key Mount Isa demographic—perhaps one that has not been mentioned today—that have enthusiastically embraced online shopping, one that perhaps once upon a time almost exclusively embraced local retail. The demographic of which I speak are those professionals who have lived almost entirely in the internet era, especially gen Ys and millennials. People call these people digital natives. They think about shopping, ergo the internet.

Mount Isa attracts a disproportionate share of young, well-paid professionals into both the public and the private sector. My own experience is amongst the former. The stereotypical example is the 20-something female clinician or educator. They have a habit of talking about the things they purchased, and when questioned about its origin the most common response I receive is, 'I bought it online.' On hearing this time and time again, I reflected on how damaging this must be to that part of the retail sector to which we must now affix the descriptor 'bricks and mortar'. My own observations of vacancy rates in town and the painful experiences retailers have shared with me bear this out.

No doubt online sales are here to stay and will continue to grow. Perhaps one way that Mount Isa can make steps to achieve some of its positive economic and social goals is for its state government to provide a legislative framework that affords local retail the opportunity to trade with more flexibility and agility. Removing Sunday trading restrictions in particular for non-exempt shops would be a way to do this. Both Mount Isa's traditional Monday to Friday worker—and I use my experience example of a teacher—and shiftworkers—think of a nurse or a mine employee—would take advantage of a more diverse mix of retail activity in town every day of the week. Some stores may open on different days, coupling themselves with new opening hours of non-exempt shops. Shiftworkers might shop on a Wednesday one week and a Sunday the next. Monday to Friday workers might get together on Sundays and meet up at the shops with work colleagues or with travelling friends and family.

One or two good experiences would lead to repeat spending behaviour, representing a better balance of online and face-to-face retail. These additional sales would encourage a more diverse retail mix and a gathering momentum, as locals, business travellers and tourists alike collectively add vibrancy to the city via face-to-face retail. In turn, this activity contributes to greater retail occupancy rates and improved capacities for surveillance of public spaces. This leads to a feeling of greater safety and reduced crime. This bolsters patronage to public streets and parks, which in turn leads to greater retail activity and the cycle continues. Acknowledgement here must be given to the extraordinary 1960s observational work of Jane Jacobs in Greenwich Village, New York.

I urge the committee to be bold in its decision-making and remove the shackles of restrictive retail practices for the sake of the city itself and how it presents itself to others and how it is experienced into its second century of existence.

CHAIR: Thank you for a very comprehensive opening statement.

Mr DAMETTO: My question is in regard to the comment you made about the bricks-and-mortar stores. Looking around town at the moment, there are a lot of empty stores and empty shopfronts. We have heard from some of the smaller retailers today about the stress of running a business when competing against the large supermarket chains and the threat of actually shutting down. How do you reconcile opening seven-day trading to those large supermarket chains and that comment earlier?

Mr Hydon: There has been a lot of talk about these changes being somehow limited to supermarket operators. My interpretation of what the changes might mean would go beyond that. For example, I cannot go to Kmart on a Sunday for the same reason. It is a non-exempt shop, so it must remain closed. Anecdotally, I have given you some examples of the conversations I have had where people simply do not have time to get to Kmart. They could, would, might go on a Sunday if they could, but they simply say, 'I've lost the habit. I've moved away from that now. All of my shopping is done online.'

I have a friend who runs a fashion store. She tries desperately to compete with the demographic that I have described—the 26-year-old professional who simply orders everything online at ridiculously cheaper prices. They simply have not even walked into the door because they are not open at the times they may do that. These things are not proven, but there is potential there that if those opportunities were there, if they could sample those opportunities, go to Kmart, go to some other stores in the Mount Isa Village that has been mentioned, perhaps that would drive activity over the counter, face to face, and in turn drive other opportunities.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. It was a very comprehensive opening statement and we are very grateful for the insights you have given, particularly the commentary around online shopping and what that would mean in a Sunday sense. I apologise that we are running over time. It is important that we hear from everybody who has listed to submit and anybody else who wants to add further, so we will extend the session for as long as needed.

BURROW, Mr Robert, Owner and Manager, Colonial Convenience Store

CHAIR: I welcome Mr Robert Burrow, owner and manager of Colonial Convenience Store.

Mr Burrow: I will keep it short and sweet. All along I have been hearing about polls and results of polls and that 1,000 people voted out of 20,000 people. I own a convenience store and I have never received any poll or been asked to vote on any of these subjects that have been brought up tonight. With respect to a lot of my customers who we deal with in my shop, I spend half the day sending emails for them and making phone calls for them. I deal with a lot of people who do not even have the internet. You mean to tell me that this is for the majority of the population? I beg to differ. I beg to differ a lot.

I was in Cairns for 14 years before coming here. I have been in Mount Isa for 14 years. Out of those years, I was a boxing coach here for 10 years and for 10 years in Cairns, so I have dealt with a wide variety of people. Since we have been out here, I have been in business 14 years. The shop that I am in currently has been trading for over 40 years. We have had IGA close down. We have had Woolworths close down. My ordering from week to week has been tremendously hard for me. It takes a lot of hours to get things right to look after everyone in town. Then, of course, along comes COVID. At one point, there was no flour in town. Because I am an independent, I deal with other distributors in Townsville and Cairns. All of a sudden I got a truck here with flour on it and nobody had any in town. That is just one example of the things we try to do. I have filled that many voids and gaps over the years, it has been unbelievable.

Along the lines of the lady from Brumby's, our Sundays are obviously our busiest day. As Rob touched on, 'Bob, you'll be right. Everyone still comes and buys their milk and bread and that.' Well, that is fantastic—we appreciate that—but the Sunday allows us to stay open on the days when we are not so busy and not making much money, which might be a Monday or a Tuesday or whatever it might be.

As was brought up earlier, I think it is not only four Sundays that the Woolworths and Coles are open now; I think it is seven. I think we start as of next weekend the four weeks leading up to Christmas. There is the rodeo, Easter and the show, which are all dates we really looked forward to years ago as being convenience store owners. Now, as much as we look forward to it for our kids and grandkids, the sales are not there in the shops that were there before. We are really fighting over the small piece that is left that this law has protected us from these guys, to be able to still make our earnings.

A few other points that have been around town on social media is that the shiftworkers do not have the time now. A lot of our shift guys are seven days on and seven days off. Can I be a bit real about it? If I have seven days off, mate, I will find my way to a shopping centre if I am hungry. That is one of the poorer reasons that I think has been brought up.

As I said, I think a lot of them, except for a couple of people, they are probably 50 per cent of my customers. My shop hires over 22 staff. I have from kids 14 years old through to adults who are 72 years old working in my shop. I currently hire 40 per cent Indigenous, not because I have to; I do that by choice because this is the town I live in.

In my office, I have football jerseys and posters. For instance, the other week I went to an All Blacks Rugby League carnival in Cairns. They came in on the Thursday and said, 'Bob, we're short of funds. We're having a bit of trouble getting there, mate. Can you help us out?' Well, with my shop, the buck stops with me. I go, 'Yep, no worries.' I am sure that you can ask a lot of people sitting here and you will soon find out the people that I help quite often. I want to be able to keep doing that.

I do not discount that Coles and Woolies help a lot of people with the things they do, but in this community a lot of the guys do not have the time to fill out the weeks of paperwork to be handed in to be approved or not approved for what they are looking for. They have organised something and they have to go. They come and see guys like us. Sorry, I suffer really bad anxiety. I am not a public speaker.

CHAIR: You are doing fine.

Mr DAMETTO: You have done an exceptional job.

Mr Burrow: I have been nervous for about five hours because this is not my go at all. The bottom line is, as I said, the piece of the pie we are trying to protect is extremely small. It would not even register as a bite, I believe. We love the town. I brought my kids here. My grandkids are here and I do not want them growing up to think, 'Mate, the best I have for you'—no offence to anyone who works out here, but I would like them to see that there are opportunities in town, as Robbie Mount Isa

touched on, to have your own business and go forward from there. I hope that was short enough. I just wanted to give you a different view from what everyone else has been saying because they took most of my script.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. You have done a very good job.

Mr LISTER: In terms of the playing field, if Sunday trading were available to the major operators—Woolworths and Coles, for instance—is it the case that they have competitive advantages over you in things like the cost of freight to get their stock here or the ability to manage their labour in a more efficient way because they are bigger?

Mr Burrow: Probably most certainly with the cost of stock, but I am an unbranded IGA. People would not realise that my pricing is done by IGA. If you come into my shop—I can only speak for my shop—the pricing in my shop is the same as an IGA anywhere else because I am governed through IGA. The only reason I am an independent is that that allows me to trade, as I said, to buy stock from Townsville or Cairns if I need to and allows me to run my own ship.

We pay big penalty rates on Sunday. We are happy to do that because it is our best day of trading. A lot of our kids who are at school specifically enjoy the Sunday work. As I said, I would hate to have to but, if things got that quiet and I could not have so many staff on, not many of them look like automated tellers, so I do not know how they would go getting a job on a Sunday at Woolies. I think that is what it comes to. I understand there would be more staff on there, but there would also be a lot more automated tellers from what I have seen over the last few years. In a town like this, a lot of people pride themselves on knowing the local shopkeeper, and we look after the guys around us, I like to think.

Mr BOOTHMAN: On Sundays, you have three other competitors—the FoodWorks, JR FoodWorks and the Happy Valley General Store. Are they a comparable size to you?

Mr Burrow: I think we are probably a little bit bigger than them.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Do you have any idea how many people they would employ?

Mr Burrow: If I have 20 or 25, I am guessing they would have 15 or 20. It is just mainly with the shiftwork set-up. My shop is open at 5.30 every morning and shut at nine o'clock every night, seven days a week. For the 14 years I have been there, we have not closed one second earlier. We have not missed a day in 14 years over that time.

Mr BOOTHMAN: If you add that together, that is a fair workforce.

Mr Burrow: Yes, absolutely.

Mr DAMETTO: I want to go back to what you were saying a little earlier about surveys. It is great to have the surveys and ask all these really important questions. I can only imagine what most of the questions would have been like: 'Do you want to be able to shop on a Sunday?' Most people would say surely, 'Absolutely, yes.'

Mr Burrow: Absolutely.

Mr DAMETTO: I wonder how many of those surveys that went around asked: 'Would you be happy to shop on a Sunday knowing that a local business was going to shut down eventually?'

Mr Burrow: Absolutely. You only need to put a few more words on the end of a question like that and people's perspective changes dramatically. As you said, yes, I am happy if everything opens on Sunday, but if it is to the detriment of people and they are losing businesses then of course I not going to agree with that.

Mr DAMETTO: That is what I would have thought.

Mr O'ROURKE: I live in Rockhampton. I cannot even think of the last time I went to Coles or Woolies. I always shop at the local IGA because it is convenient. I have the option of shopping at the supermarkets, but it is the service that I get from the local IGA and knowing that there are young people employed there which has created my loyalty.

Mr Burrow: Absolutely, yes. We find a lot of that as well. Were you going to say does that stop them going?

Mr O'ROURKE: Yes.

Mr Burrow: It stops a lot of people from going into town shopping. Obviously people new to the town do not have that rapport with us yet, and Coles and Woolies pick up them when we have not had the chance.

Mr O'ROURKE: You do a good job in that space. Thank you.

Mr Burrow: Sorry, I only speak North Queensland and a little bit of Aboriginal.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us. We are very grateful. You did a very good job. Robert was the last contribution from our speaking list. Is there anybody else who would like to make any further contribution to our inquiry before I close? No. Thank you very much for your attendance here today. It is fantastic to see such a passionate group of locals turn out for their local community about a really important topic. We have certainly received some divergent views and there is a lot to take away and consider. Thank you for having us here in Mount Isa and thank you for your attendance tonight. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 9.11 pm.