




Speech By
Melissa McMahon

MEMBER FOR MACALISTER

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LIQUOR (RURAL HOTELS CONCESSION) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (5.58 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Liquor (Rural Hotels Concession) Amendment Bill 2018. I would like to thank my fellow members of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee and the secretariat for their work and assistance in preparing the report. I would specifically like to acknowledge the work of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee under the 55th Parliament, chaired by the member for Stretton, because it is on the back of the work that they did travelling around Queensland and holding public hearings with relevant stakeholders that we have tabled our report.

We stand here as 93 elected members of the Queensland parliament with a view to providing the best level of representation for our constituents, but do I not think there would be anyone here in the House who does not also consider it their role to make decisions in the best interests of all Queenslanders where possible. Regardless of whether we are from the south-east corner of this state or the far north, we must consider and balance the interests of Queenslanders regardless of where they live, work and play. It is with that approach in mind that I can stand here as a representative of my constituents in Logan City and speak to a bill that directly impacts those Queenslanders who live 1,000 kilometres away with a lifestyle vastly different to those in my local town of Beenleigh.

We are a large state and one of the most decentralised in Australia, but for all that a large percentage of Queensland is considered very remote. Having had some experience growing up and living in Western Queensland, I feel that to some degree I can speak about the importance of the local hotel in Queensland communities—even if I may have gone in there when I was not old enough. You cannot go past a more iconic image of Queensland than the outback pub. There is an entire trope devoted to what this image evokes. Other than the golden sands of our beaches and the colour of our Great Barrier Reef, there are few images as easily identifiable as Queensland as that of the outback pub. It is more than just an image which we can glorify to export our local brand on the world stage in film, stage and cultural events.

The role our hotels play in very remote Australia is a valuable one. In very remote Australia, where there are few viable commercial ventures due to limited populations and almost no government services, the role of the local is multifaceted, and to refer to it merely as a licensed venue downplays the many functions it has. Sure, it is a place to have a drink, but it is also where town meetings and local fundraisers are held, where tourists venture for the authentic experience and valuable local information is exchanged. It plays a central role in any community, and in areas where it is the only commercial venture it has its own challenges.

A liquor licensing structure whereby a hotel which supports a local population of 75 or even less is required to pay the same licence fee as an urban hotel that has 75 walks-in per hour is not a fair one, and that is what is at the heart of this bill. It is about acknowledging that in this state—a state as large and diverse as Queensland—a one-size-fits-all approach is not always a fair one. In a submission from the owners of the Prairie Hotel, Mr and Mrs Duddy stated that the licence fees may sometimes represent an entire month's takings.

This bill proposes a concessional licence fee for hotels which operate in very remote parts of Queensland, and it would see a 90 per cent reduction in their base annual license fee. Based on the 2018-19 licence fee, this would see the amount drop from over \$3,500 to just \$376 for a year. This would impact 112 commercial hotels that operate in very remote Queensland. I note that a minor amendment presented in the previous parliament represents a tightening of the definition of the term 'very remote Australia'. Where the previous bill fixed the definition, the 2018 amendment bill allows for the area classed as very remote Australia to vary as and when the Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes variations. The most recent variation to the definition was in 2016. Further amendments to be moved will go further. I thank those who made submissions which outline the impact that small community clubs also have; that is, golf clubs, RSLs, bowls clubs and social and rec. clubs in these areas. The Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation annual licence fee concessions will also apply to them.

I acknowledge that while most submissions, particularly from the roundtable meetings held at locations across Queensland, were supportive of the bill, submissions from the Queensland Council for Action on Alcohol did not support the bill. It was their submission that nothing should be done that reduces the cost of alcohol and that decisions should be made which have the best impact on health outcomes. As someone who has spent a significant period of time directly responding to alcohol fuelled violence, it does sound like a simple conclusion to draw; however, I feel it simplifies the roles that hotels play in these remote communities. Firstly, the concession will apply only to the base licence fee. Licensees that have risk criterion fees around the service of alcohol or that have a poor compliance history will still pay the applicable amount for those additional fees.

As I said earlier, the role of the hotel is more than just a drinking venue. I would like to share a lesson that was learned the hard way on the valuable role that social gathering destinations play in society. On deployment to a remote part of a foreign country, a well-meaning troop of soldiers observed that villagers walked from miles around, sometimes up to two hours away, to gather at one water pump and wait their turn to collect water every day. The troops decided to take it on as an engineering and humanitarian aid project and set about creating water pumps throughout the region. People no longer had to walk distances and wait their turn at that one water pump, but while this project delivered convenience it also resulted in reduced social cohesion and increasing health and violence issues. Where once villagers gathered and shared information, sought advice, swapped work opportunities and checked up on each other—both physically and mentally—social isolation now hid violence and deteriorating mental health. Young women could no longer turn to their elders for advice or help.

Our hotels in very remote Queensland are valuable community hubs and gathering destinations. Yes, they serve alcohol, but they are more than just that. The loss of these hotels in these communities—which operate on thin margins at best—would have a far greater effect on the social cohesion and health of its community members than the mere loss of an establishment for drinking alcohol. They are an integral part of the mental health and wellbeing of very remote communities, and measures like those proposed in this bill will provide a modicum of relief for those business owners who continue to operate for the good of their community rather than for some imagined large commercial gain.

Overall, as it stands there will be 112 commercial hotels and 42 small community clubs that will benefit from this legislation. It has been assessed that the reduction in licence fees will cost the government just over \$395,000 annually. I am quite confident that, while the owners of hotels and managers of clubs in my electorate will not benefit from this legislation, they will see the importance and the fairness of it. A Queensland where we support decisions that are fair for others, not just for ourselves, is exactly the direction in which we want this state to be heading. I commend this bill to the House.