



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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JUSTICE LEGISLATION (COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE—PERMANENCY) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (6.39 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Justice Legislation (COVID-19 Emergency Response—Permanency) Amendment Bill 2021. Earlier this week, Queensland reached a significant milestone, with 70 per cent of our state's eligible population becoming fully vaccinated against COVID-19. We have come so far since 29 January 2020, when we declared a public health emergency for the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time no-one could have imagined that almost two years later the majority of eligible Queenslanders would be vaccinated against the virus. We also had no idea that so many other aspects of our lives would change in response to the pandemic. We have had to adapt quickly to new ways of working, schooling and doing day-to-day business.

Since January 2020 the Palaszczuk government has put in an enormous effort delivering legislation to protect Queenslanders against COVID-19 including putting in place a range of temporary measures to support Queensland businesses and local communities. These measures have brought digital technology into our personal and professional lives to carry out business, legal matters, commerce and administrative functions.

We also put in place supports for small businesses impacted by the pandemic by establishing the Small Business Commissioner to advocate for and provide mediation services for small businesses facing commercial tenancy disputes. Arrangements were put in place to reduce physical contact between people seeking protection under the Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act or to respond to an application for a domestic violence order. The support shown by key stakeholders for these temporary measures has led us to making these measures more permanent.

Some of these measures will bring us into the 21st century such as permanent document reforms that will support the making, signing and witnessing of legal documents by electronic means. This will make it easier for people to make and sign legal documents without the need to be physically present. It will improve efficiencies in legal and commercial proceedings, reduce transaction costs and increase access to justice. The legal profession and broader community are supportive of these measures being made permanent, citing reduced costs and impacts on the environment. These measures will also reduce the time taken to execute legal proceedings from weeks to mere days. This is invaluable for people who are time poor due to work or carer commitments or for those living with a disability or residing in remote locations.

The domestic and family violence COVID regulation brought in during the pandemic last year provided alternative options to traditional methods of verifying and filing applications and appearances at domestic and family violence proceedings. For many women experiencing domestic violence, coming face to face with their perpetrator can be often intimidating and unsafe. It can also deter them from filing protection order applications in the first place. In order to increase access to justice for victims of domestic violence, we need to make the court experience safer and more comfortable. Being able to give evidence via an audiovisual or audio link will provide that.

The Palaszczuk government has been actively pushing reforms to try to end domestic and family violence through our *Not now, not ever* campaign, which made 140 recommendations which our government has delivered. We have also delivered on establishing the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, which will review the experiences of women across the criminal justice system and will examine coercive control and review the need for a specific offence of domestic violence.

The domestic violence and sexual assault statistics for Ipswich over the last two years are extremely concerning. The number of sexual offences reported to Ipswich district police over 2020 and 2021 is the highest we have seen since the year 2000. The number of DVO breaches reported to Ipswich police over the last two years has also been the highest in 20 years.

Since the start of the pandemic, domestic violence support organisations have seen a surge in demand for their services. The Domestic Violence Action Centre in Ipswich provided support to 8,900 individuals last year and provided over 15,000 individual appointments. They have provided court support to hundreds of individuals to help them navigate a complex justice system—a system which can be extraordinarily challenging and intimidating for many women who are at their most vulnerable. I do want to give a shout-out to our local DVAC. The CEO Amie Carrington is doing an exceptional job. She tells me that she is getting about 30 calls a day around domestic violence issues. Making the court experience safer and more comfortable for women through technology is one way that we can help women achieve the justice they need.

The bill will also amend the Liquor Act to permanently allow certain licensed restaurants to sell limited amounts of wine with takeaway or delivery meals. This will support our local restaurants, particularly considering they have borne the brunt of changing restrictions and abrupt lockdowns. Since the start of the pandemic, restaurants have seen their table bookings go down considerably, while takeaways and deliveries have skyrocketed from nine per cent pre-pandemic to 30 per cent afterwards. To ensure the right balance is struck between business interests and concerns around alcohol related harms in the community, the amendments in this bill have been delivered in consultation with key stakeholders including liquor and hospitality businesses, as well as community organisations and health research organisations.

While the bill reflects consumers' changing expectations and the desire for greater convenience, we also acknowledge that easier access to alcohol via delivery services can result in harm to some parts of the community. Providing limitations such as allowing up to 1.5 litres, or two bottles, of wine to be purchased with a takeaway meal up to 10 pm strikes the right balance of reflecting consumers' expectations while minimising alcohol related harm.

The bill also extends the expiry of the Retail Shop Leases and Other Commercial Leases (COVID-19 Emergency Response) Regulation 2020. This continues the good faith principles developed under national cabinet which guide commercial lease negotiations between lessees and lessors during the COVID health emergency. It also allows the Queensland Small Business Commissioner to continue in their role of advocating for small businesses and providing information and mediation services to small businesses in relation to commercial lease disputes.

Small businesses have had to be agile and responsive to a range of restrictions that have been put in place since the start of the pandemic. Many small businesses have risen to the challenge, but many have also faced significant losses in income. Queensland's Small Business Commissioner, Maree Adshead, is doing a fantastic job in advocating for small business in Queensland. Since May 2020, the commissioner has carried out more than 6,000 activities for small businesses, commercial tenants and landlords including dispute mediation services. Two-thirds of leasing disputes have been successfully resolved either by informal resolution or mediation due to the commissioner's efforts.

We have been very impressed with the work she has done. We see her in Ipswich quite a lot and we are very grateful for it. I want to mention her particularly today and the small business minister for their stellar efforts this morning in helping out many of our small businesses in Ipswich who came up against a real obstacle. We have been able to get some good resolutions for that.

Ms Farmer: Because their local member is such a great act.

Ms HOWARD: Thank you. I will take that interjection. We know that small businesses are essential to our local communities and they are the key to Queensland's economic recovery. In Ipswich, small businesses are the life and soul of our community, employing thousands of workers, enlivening our CBD and suburbs, and providing a personalised touch and friendly face which sometimes cannot be found in larger corporations.

Small businesses, as I said earlier, have also borne the brunt of the restrictions, and even the short, sharp lockdowns we have experienced here have had an impact on some of our businesses as they have been forced to shut during the lockdown period. Many of them have had to adapt quickly and utilise digital technology to ensure that their businesses can weather the storm—and they have done it really well.

I know many Ipswich businesses have risen to the challenge and have successfully made the transition to new ways of doing business. Last year almost \$740,000 was distributed to businesses in the Ipswich electorate through the Small Business COVID-19 Adaption Grants program. These grants were the boost that businesses need to help them stay afloat. The Palaszczuk government also introduced this year the COVID-19 Business Support Grants, with grants going to almost 30,000 businesses across Queensland already. We know that many small business owners have been under a great deal of stress since the start of the pandemic. Small business owners have employees to pay and families to support.

The Palaszczuk government is making sure our small business communities are supported during this challenging time because we know they not only strengthen Queensland's economy but also are crucial to strengthening our local communities by helping families to prosper. Through the Small Business Commissioner and the commercial lease measures provided in this bill, the Palaszczuk government is demonstrating that we are backing our small businesses all the way.

I thank the Attorney-General for bringing this bill to the House and for all the excellent work she does. I commend the bill to the House.