




Speech By
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SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Dr MacMAHON** (South Brisbane—Grn) (5.36 pm): The small businesses of Queensland have been through an awful lot over the last two years and this week we are marking the two-year anniversary of an incredibly difficult time for us all. On Saturday, 14 March 2020 Prime Minister Scott Morrison went to the football. By Sunday, 15 March it was clear we were heading towards our first COVID-19 lockdown. On 17 March 2020, exactly two years ago today, the state government announced loans to businesses to keep people in work and a payroll tax deferral in response to the reality that life as we knew it had changed overnight.

My electorate of South Brisbane went from being a bustling hub to a ghost town. As Queenslanders valiantly locked down in the name of flattening the curve, small businesses suffered greatly. People left their houses to get groceries and to get outdoor exercise and that was it. As the rest of the country stayed home, the red tape was completely cut for large multinational corporations. For the mining and construction sector in Queensland there was no lockdown. Work continued at sites at a massive pace, prompting many locals in my electorate to ask, 'Why do these sites seem completely unaffected by these lockdowns?' It seems that making pots of money ensured that their operations were considered essential.

We have come a long way since then and continual lockdowns combined with the COVID-19 vaccine rollout means that cafes, bars, restaurants, gyms, live music venues, art galleries, non-essential retail and other small businesses hit so hard by the pandemic can now continue under their own terms. They have had to make huge adjustments over time, dealing with snap lockdowns, the overwhelmed and often underused check-in system and enforcing things like masks and vaccine mandates. It has been incredibly hard for anyone working in small business and incredibly hard on those running them. From time to time there has been very good government support for this sector, but it has been nowhere near enough and nowhere near consistent enough. To be clear, this particular bill falls well short of the support that our small business sector really needs.

Providing a statutory basis for the Small Business Commissioner's dispute resolution functions is important and a great step, but what is the point of dispute resolution if you have to close your business because the impacts of the pandemic have finally taken their toll? Small business is crying out for help. February this year was a particularly tough time in my electorate, with a number of much loved local businesses closing in the space of just one week. In the week before the floods we farewelled the Three Monkeys cafe, the Rumpus Room and the Happy Cabin. The Three Monkeys was an iconic local institution which predated the arrival of cafe culture in West End. It was also an amazing place to wile away an afternoon with board games or work on assignments. It has been a real loss to West End.

Local retailer the Happy Cabin had to close its doors in the same week as the impacts of the pandemic finally claimed their toll. I dropped in there a few days before it closed its doors. The community had responded with sadness to its closure and the shelves were nearly empty. One of the staff there said, 'COVID has killed us.' The Rumpus Room was one of the most boisterous and inclusive night-life venues in my electorate and the scene of many a big night out. As the floodwaters rose on

26 February, people partied into the night to say farewell to this beloved institution. This is a stark reminder of how devastating the pandemic has been for so many. These businesses have been there for years providing local jobs and supporting West End's vibrant community culture.

In 2020 we had things like JobKeeper, the doubling of JobSeeker and grants for small businesses. In 2022 small businesses, like individuals, have been largely on their own, and that is not okay. At the big end of town there have been some businesses that have made a killing during the pandemic. The big banks have made huge profits off the housing boom. Coles, Woolies and their liquor chains have been popping up everywhere as they became the hottest destinations of 2020 and 2021 but now with vastly inflated prices. Mining billionaires have just gotten richer while tech companies and private pharmaceutical companies have cashed in.

Five years ago Pfizer was just the figurehead of big pharma; now its name is synonymous with the vaccine. Previous federal government decisions to sell off the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, leaving us with no state capacity to manufacture vaccines, has been shown to be a huge mistake. To be clear, Queensland is a wealthy state. Queensland is a wealthy state and the only resource we lack is the political will to make the big end of town and billionaires pay their fair share to support individuals, families and small businesses.

The Greens welcome a Small Business Commissioner, as do most of the organisations that made submissions on this bill. However, along with my colleague the member for Maiwar, we have been calling for more substantial support for small business and individuals. We have been calling for the small business emergency support to be reopened. Last sitting week I asked the Minister for Employment and Small Business when applications for the COVID-19 business support grants will be opened. We are yet to get a reply.

It is not good enough to say that you have a grants program when the program is not open, when it is open for a tiny time frame or when the money is exhausted almost instantly. So many small businesses that I have spoken to have been calling out for meaningful support with the things that they tell us that they need. To fund this we need a levy on the big banks. A modest levy on the five biggest banks in Queensland would raise a billion dollars per year that could be invested back into the community.

We have been calling for new licences for small bars to be able to sell takeaway liquor. It was a real boon for many small bars in my electorate to be able to do this during the pandemic, and there is no justification for putting them at such a huge disadvantage to big retailers like Dan Murphy's and First Choice in addition to the challenges that they are already facing. We have been calling for a phasing out of payroll tax. Some big companies are already exempt from payroll tax and in 2020 and 2021 the government offered payroll tax relief measures to businesses. Overall, payroll tax is an inefficient tax that unfairly hampers small business in particular. At the very least we could follow the example of WA and implement a progressive payroll tax that would alleviate pressures on small business and stop taxing the exact thing that we want to be encouraging—jobs and higher wages.

We need things like free public transport, which would not only help folks get around but also provide an easy way for people to access small business across the state. We have seen how successful free off-peak travel for seniors has been here in Brisbane. Let us make it free for everyone. Of course, we want to see JobSeeker doubled as it was in 2020. The stories from folks on JobSeeker about how they could finally afford to eat well and live without severe financial stress told us everything we need to know about our income support system. People are living in poverty simply because of a lack of political will at the federal level. Beyond that, we know that in hard times stimulus payments like this help to keep money circulating through the local economy and allow people to make use of local small businesses. Better income support means more customers for our local small businesses. In flood-affected areas increasing state government relief payments or at least matching the more generous federal payments would also have a flow-on effect for our local businesses.

The pandemic is not yet over, as members of this chamber would well know. We are still dealing with COVID-19 and we are heading towards winter. Queensland still has some of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. Underemployment, where people do not have enough hours to get by, is at over seven per cent. Small businesses are shutting their doors and people are struggling through a housing crisis that has been made worse and more severe by the floods. It is time for the government to step up.