




Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (12.50 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Small Business Commissioner. I wish to thank the committee members on both sides of the House for their consideration of the bill as well as the 13 submitters to the bill. I specifically want to mention the submission by Rural Solutions Queensland who are based in my electorate and have helped over a thousand small businesses since 2019. That is a commendable effort of their small business counsellors.

The Small Business Commissioner Bill seeks to establish a permanent Small Business Commissioner and a supporting office. It is intended to transition the temporary commissioner role from its previous arrangements, focused primarily on managing and responding to the COVID-19 impacts, to a role with a wider application to support small business. The proposed legislation will provide a statutory basis for the commissioner's dispute resolution functions relating to retail tenancy disputes and enable mediation for commercial leasing and small business franchise disputes on an opt-in basis only.

As the LNP shadow minister for family and small business outlined in his contribution—and I commend him for his contribution—the LNP will not be opposing the bill. We do, however, have some improvements, and the intention is to move two amendments. The first amendment seeks to omit clause 17, therefore removing the requirement for the Small Business Commissioner to receive ministerial direction. Bruce Billson in his submission identified that clause 17 conveys a potential for the role to be highly dependent on government and subject to operational instruction.

The second amendment proposed by the LNP would enable the Small Business Commissioner to have the power to obtain information from government entities. Like the shadow minister, I, too, have dealt with many family and small businesses in my electorate who have had issues with not being paid by Queensland Health. It just never seems to improve. The LNP amendment would give the Small Business Commissioner the ability to seek information for the purpose of a timely resolution to disputes. That would certainly help some of those small businesses who find themselves just not being paid by government departments.

I urge the government to take on board these amendments. They would improve the outcomes for family and small businesses right across Queensland. That is really important, particularly when we look at the situation that has occurred with recovery from COVID and also the flood situation here in South-East Queensland.

Small and family businesses are the backbone of Queensland and my electorate. Collectively across Queensland they are the biggest employer. In my electorate these businesses are crying out for more people. We have the jobs, but they do not have people to fill those jobs in skilled and unskilled positions. They are desperate for more workers and we need people to keep those businesses going. We need people to fill those jobs.

We have jobs in places like the butcher's shop and the coffee shop. People would be lucky to get a coffee in my electorate without someone coming forward saying, 'Do you know anyone who wants to work in my coffee shop?' I have a baker in Mitchell who is absolutely desperate for staff. We would happily fill some other positions, professional positions like nurses and accountants, where we have vacancies as well. The communities these jobs are located in have great livability and opportunity, but they struggle to attract staff to their businesses. Family and small business owners constantly ask me, 'Where can we find people for our jobs?' I will give some examples.

The sheep and goat abattoir at Charleville could employ another 40 people. I was talking to the managing director just last week. He said he could employ another 40 tomorrow in his business but he just cannot find those people. A local steel, retail and stockfeed business in Mitchell, Samios, need more staff. They could not even get someone during COVID who could just do general welding to come and work with them. In fact, the family members of that business say to their parents, 'Could you please have had some more children, because we're working so hard in our family business? We just can't keep doing this. We need to have more staff.' However, they just cannot get them to come to great little communities like Mitchell.

Another example is the coffee shop across the road from my office in Roma, Bear and Luca. Celeste is always asking me, 'Where can we find more staff?' She has gone to the extent of actually employing a nanny because she has so much work to do and she has small children.

Another example is the service station at the Moonie crossroads. They are always seeking staff. They found staff, but they could not get them across the border because of the border closures. They are absolutely desperate for more staff in Moonie, and it is a great thriving business.

There is also the Coffee Club in Dalby. I was talking to the owner last week. He does a great job in sponsoring staff and training them, but he needs more. His wife came to me and said, 'Can you please help us find some more staff because my knees cannot keep doing this?' because she is working in that business seven days a week.

I hope the Small Business Commissioner can help these small and family businesses with navigating the pathways with Migration Queensland. I have been working closely with the businesses in Dalby, and we found it is a very convoluted and complicated process for employers and employees. I will be helping those family and small businesses to reach out to Maree Adshead, the Small Business Commissioner. Hopefully she can help those businesses that are already sponsoring staff and wish to sponsor more staff, but come up against roadblocks in Migration Queensland, which is a part of Trade & Investment Queensland.

There is no doubt that family and small businesses have done it tough during COVID. The constant changes in restrictions and the complicated manner in which they have been presented have taken a toll on the patience of small business owners. They have taken a toll on some of our larger business owners as well. Some, though, have been lucky; they have had a good niche and excellent customer service which has enabled them to flourish during COVID. I have had some very good feedback from the hardware stores in my electorate when the travel restrictions were in place. They were very happy with the number of locals who were shopping locally on a consistent basis. I hope that continues and people do recognise that supporting your local small business supports jobs, supports families and supports your community.

I cannot say the same for those businesses located along the borders with both New South Wales and South Australia. Navigating three different states' COVID rules which do not change in unison was a nightmare for businesses. There was no border zone with South Australia. It may come as a surprise to some members of this House that parts of the far west of my electorate are by far closer to Adelaide than Brisbane.

Queensland has a Small Business Commissioner but what is also needed is a cross-border commissioner to ensure long-term solutions for the cross-border issues where businesses are hampered by two totally different state legislative regimes. That applies to South Australia as well as to New South Wales. I was at the Two Mile pub down near Mungindi. The family who own the pub in New South Wales have to navigate all of the different liquor licensing rules in New South Wales and in Queensland. It is complicated and it is different. That is why we need a cross-border commissioner; we need to have some seamless aligning of a lot of the regulation that impacts businesses that operate on both sides of the border. If anything, COVID has made it abundantly clear that those communities and businesses along the borders need a constant advocate for their cross-border issues that arise on a daily basis.

Earlier I mentioned Rural Solutions Queensland, a not-for-profit organisation established back in 1998. The service provides free financial counselling assistance to primary producers and small rural businesses across Southern Queensland through the Rural Financial Counselling Service Program.

The main office is just down the street from my electorate office in Roma. Both my staff and I have a lot of interaction with the rural financial counsellors and the business counsellors. They provide an excellent service to Southern Queensland. They made a very good point in their submission. The journey of recovery after the impact of COVID-19 will be ongoing for many businesses. There will be an even longer journey of recovery for those businesses that have been sadly impacted by the South-East Queensland flood event. They were already struggling with COVID. Now they have the losses of stock and income from floods.

I can see the Small Business Commissioner's work will dramatically increase over the coming months as she works with those businesses that have been impacted by COVID and the floods. I can see that there will be some need for a lot of support for those businesses. I know there are assistance measures in place, but with the increase in the cost of materials and the lack of trades and labour it will be very difficult for some of those businesses to get back on their feet. The assistance and advocacy of the Small Business Commissioner will certainly be needed by those impacted businesses.