




Speech By
Barry O'Rourke

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Record of Proceedings, 24 February 2022

SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Mr O'ROURKE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (4.55 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021. First, I would like to go to the member for Southern Downs' comments surrounding integrity. I was working in the Queensland Public Service when the Newman LNP government came to power.

Mr Lister: When was that? Three terms ago! We are talking about now.

Mr O'ROURKE: Look, it is unbelievable for a member of that LNP government to be talking today about integrity. I saw some absolutely disgusting things happening in that government all the way through; it did not matter which department people were working with. They sacked the Small Business Commissioner. That is unbelievable; it is absolutely hypocritical of members opposite to make those comments around integrity. The Labor government under Annastacia Palaszczuk—

Mr Lister: Have you had your eyes shut for the last three months?

Mr O'ROURKE: The things that members have been raising are years and years old. I am not taking those interjections.

Ms KING: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I put to you that the member for Southern Downs is attempting to interrupt the speaker on his feet and I ask that you give him some guidance.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gerber): Member for Pumicestone, I was engaged with the Clerk at the time taking advice. I will keep an eye on it.

Mr O'ROURKE: Members of the Education, Employment and Training Committee were tasked to examine the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021. In the minister's introductory speech and explanatory notes the listed objectives of the bill are to enhance the operating environment for small business in Queensland; reduce the time and costs associated with resolving disputes involving small businesses; establish a permanent Queensland Small Business Commissioner and supporting office; provide a statutory basis for the commissioner's dispute resolution functions relating to retail tenancy disputes; enable mediation for commercial leasing and small business franchise disputes on an opt-in basis only; and enable a transition from the role of the temporary commissioner, which focused primarily on managing and responding to the impact of COVID-19, to a permanent role with wider application to support small businesses.

On 14 October 2021 the committee invited stakeholders to make written submissions on the bill. We received 13 submissions and a written brief about the bill from the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training on 22 October. Further written advice from the department regarding concerns raised in the submission was also received. All submitters supported the bill's objectives to permanently establish a Small Business Commissioner.

On 15 November the committee held a public hearing and a public briefing. The witnesses at the public hearing were representatives from the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, Queensland Law Society Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee, Master Electricians

Australia and the Queensland Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Queensland is home to more than 452,000 small businesses—and I am classing small businesses as those that employ fewer than 20 people—that are the core of every industry sector. They are in every community and every region and represent over 90 per cent of businesses statewide.

Small business employment accounts for approximately 42 per cent of all private sector employees. Small businesses are the backbone of Queensland's economy and the establishment of a permanent Small Business Commissioner role will help to support these businesses now and into the future. The office of the Small Business Commissioner provides assistance through information and empowerment and advocacy through promoting and enabling small businesses. I put on the record my thanks to the current Small Business Commissioner, Maree Adshead, for all of her great work in supporting small businesses throughout COVID-19.

Over the past couple of years I have been meeting with many small business owners in Rockhampton and I know that they have appreciated the assistance that the Palaszczuk government has provided, particularly through COVID grants, and I know that a few have had contact with the Small Business Commissioner and they commented on the great assistance that they received. I also support the comments made by the member for Redlands with regard to the minister's roadshows that she undertook across the state. In Rockhampton the whole place was full and it was about having that open and honest discussion, which is really great to see. It is not often that we see a minister who wants to get out there at the grassroots in order to understand issues on the ground, so I congratulate her on that initiative. It was absolutely wonderful that she was able to do that.

The Queensland government's COVID adaptation grants made a huge difference for our small businesses on the ground and lots of businesses in my area received those grants and really appreciated them. I cannot thank the department and its staff enough for the great work that they have done in rolling out programs like that to support our small businesses. In Rockhampton it is absolutely essential for me to support our small businesses. I always talk about buy local, support local. They are the businesses that employ our children and our grandchildren. They absolutely do a wonderful job and they are involved in so much more than just the business space; they are in our communities supporting our footy clubs and soccer clubs. Sometimes people underestimate just how great they are. Having a permanent Small Business Commissioner who is there to provide assistance is essential. Some of these people are mum-and-dad businesses that need help to negotiate their way through the system to get the outcomes that they need in dispute resolution.

I want to thank my fellow committee members and the secretariat staff who were involved in this inquiry. It was a really good bill to work on in that it was really interesting and it was well supported. I know that it makes a difference on the ground, and that is the important part to me. I commend the bill to the House.