




Speech By
Charis Mullen

MEMBER FOR JORDAN

Record of Proceedings, 16 March 2022

SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Mrs MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (6.44 pm): I am very pleased to rise in support of the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021, which confirms our government's commitment made at the 2020 state election to make the role of Small Business Commissioner a permanent position. As was noted in the parliamentary report, the complexity of the operating environment for small business increased considerably in 2020 following the impact of measures to reduce the spread of COVID—and we are now seeing even further impacts through these recent floods.

In March 2020, when our state—and, indeed, the country—went into its first significant lockdown, I was contacted by a number of local businesses in my electorate who sought assistance and who specifically had concerns around their retail leases. It was very stressful for those businesses. I recall making individual calls to leasing agents and centre management representatives to see what assistance could be provided.

Some were fantastic to deal with. They understood the pressures being faced by their tenants during an unprecedented period and at that time what was a real unknown. We were not sure when things would resume. They supported those tenants with rent relief, delayed payments and other measures. There were some landlords, frankly, who were very disappointing and, if anything, made it more difficult for their tenants during this time.

Certainly, when national cabinet endorsed the mandatory code of conduct SME commercial leasing principles, which applied to all tenancies that were suffering financial stress or hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, things did settle, but it was really the decision of our government to appoint a temporary Small Business Commissioner to oversee and implement this national code that proved most helpful. Maree Adshead was a fantastic choice for Small Business Commissioner. She and her office hit the ground running by providing the dispute resolution support that many small businesses were seeking, including the provision of mediation for leasing disputes rather than a more costly and time-consuming court process.

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. Importantly, the legislation will also broaden the role of the commissioner from its previous arrangements focused primarily on managing and responding to COVID-19 impacts to a role with wider application to support small businesses, including an advocacy role.

The current commissioner continues to administer mediation for both eligible COVID-19 affected leasing dispute matters—retail shop leases and other commercial leases—and small business tenancy disputes. We know the percentage of matters received by the temporary commissioner's office involving small business tenancy disputes has increased over time, and we do anticipate that these disputes are likely to increase further as the economy progressively recovers and the services of the commissioner

become more widely known. I think anything we can do to provide a clear pathway tailored to our small businesses in Queensland to get the information they need and to resolve disputes faster and more easily is welcomed and will support them to reduce costs and red tape.

From our government's perspective, we want to do all we can to drive Queensland's private sector employment. In my own electorate, 97 per cent of all businesses are small businesses, and I work closely with our small businesses to further their requirements and needs. I am very fortunate to also have three very effective and constructive chambers of commerce—with the Ipswich Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce and the Logan Regional Chamber of Commerce—who work hard and advocate for their members.

I do wish to single out the Logan Regional Chamber of Commerce and president Chyerl Pridham, who is an incredibly strong supporter of training for young people in our Logan region, particularly in new and growing areas like mine, Flagstone and Yarrabilba, which is in the member for Logan's electorate. In fact, Chyerl and the chamber have gone as far as to get a Queensland government grant for a chamber bus that helps to transport our high school students to training opportunities when they have no access to transport. It is such a fantastic initiative and I was really pleased to be there when they launched the bus. Importantly, Chyerl and the chamber see the benefit for their members—which is trained workers who can then take on available jobs in those businesses.

The Queensland government supported this initiative, and of course over the last two years we have seen significant funding to support our small businesses—though, if you were listening to those opposite, you would think that the Queensland government did not provide one single cent to small businesses over the last two years. In fact, it is quite the opposite: \$1 billion in COVID-19 job support loans were delivered between March and September 2020. They were able to directly assist 7,000 Queensland businesses, supporting 86,000 local jobs. We provided up to \$950 million in payroll tax relief including refunds, payment holidays and deferrals for eligible businesses, and we ensured that all JobKeeper payments were exempt from Queensland payroll tax.

We also delivered \$400 million in support for retail and commercial tenants as land tax relief and payment deferrals. Our Small Business COVID-19 Adaption Grant Program was highly successful. Close to \$900,000 was handed out in the Jordan electorate to support businesses to pivot their work practices, adapt to new ideas or simply assist with keeping their businesses going and, of course, the \$600 million in COVID-19 Business Support Grants jointly funded with the federal government. I was pleased to see almost \$2 million for Logan small businesses and over \$960,000 for those in Ipswich. Many of my local businesses told me how helpful those grants were following the last lockdown in SEQ.

Of course, we are also providing funding beyond COVID-19 support. Our \$100 million Business Investment Fund is specifically targeting government investments in small- and medium sized businesses that are creating Queensland based jobs, have a proven product, but require significant capital to aggressively build scale or grow market share—companies like Gilmour Space Technologies, which is supporting our burgeoning space industry; Buildsafe on the Gold Coast, which is looking to add an additional 40 staff to its company; or Brisbane sports technology company VALD Performance, which is on the cutting edge of musculoskeletal testing for health and performance.

Businesses that are just starting out are also being supported by our government, and I have had great feedback about our Business Basics grants. One of our local Jordan business owners told me that getting the grant gave them the boost to believe in themselves, knowing our government was backing them as well. I have seen the value of our small business grants across my electorate, and whether it is the Business Basics grants, the Business Boost grants or the Social Enterprise Growth grants, small businesses know that our government is here to support them with ongoing financial assistance and support.

One measure I have been really happy to see is the growth of the Small Business Friendly Program. I know it is something the current Small Business Commissioner has certainly been championing. Local governments, Queensland government agencies and large enterprises all play a part in either enabling or restricting the growth and prosperity of small businesses throughout Queensland. We also know that in Queensland there are more than 452,000 small businesses. Small businesses employ more than 914,000 people—around 42 per cent of the private sector workforce—and they contribute around \$120 billion to the Queensland economy. We know that, whilst they may be small in size, small business makes a big impact and their value cannot be ignored. Small businesses are significant job creators and employers and they contribute to our economy, so it makes sense that we help them succeed.

It has been fantastic to see a number of local governments in Queensland join the program and become Small Business Friendly councils. In fact, Ipswich City Council in my patch was the first council to sign up. I was there along with my Ipswich-based parliamentary colleagues and the Small Business

Commissioner for the official ceremony. Logan City Council has also signed up, which is fantastic news. The program is really driven by a series of simple yet powerful commitments by Small Business Friendly members to improve the way they transact, interact and support small businesses across Queensland. There are around 25 local governments in Queensland that have joined the program, and that is encouraging. It is great to see that some state government departments are also taking on the commitment to be small business friendly and join the program.

We know that the economic effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic will continue to be felt for quite some time, so it is more important than ever that we support small businesses within our local communities. I would like to thank the Minister for Small Business, who has always been a strong and passionate advocate. She is continually out there spruiking and supporting our businesses. The minister and our government recognise that the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021 is one way we can provide tangible assistance and long-term support for our local businesses. I commend the bill to the House.