




Speech By  
**Jennifer Howard**

**MEMBER FOR IPSWICH**

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Record of Proceedings, 17 March 2022

### **SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL**

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (4.18 pm): I rise to speak in support of the bill to establish the office of Small Business Commissioner. This is a commitment we took to the election, and I am very pleased that our state's 450,000 small businesses will continue to have the dedicated support and advocacy that the Small Business Commissioner provides.

Establishing a permanent commissioner will bring Queensland into line with other Australian states and territories that already have a permanent commissioner for small business. The Palaszczuk government has always put small businesses front and centre because we know just how valuable they are to our communities and local economies. They employ nearly a million Queenslanders and are critical to our state's economic growth.

In May 2020 we established a temporary Small Business Commissioner under the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act to provide advocacy and one-on-one dispute mediation services for small businesses impacted by COVID. We had so many calls in our office from people who were in a dire situation with their landlord. The Small Business Commissioner was a very sound appointment.

Maree Adshead was appointed as the temporary Small Business Commissioner and she has been an outstanding advocate for small businesses ever since. The one-on-one support provided by the commissioner not only has been critical in helping small business owners avoid costly legal fees but also has given them back precious time to run their businesses. Since May 2020, the Small Business Commissioner has carried out more than 6,000 activities for small businesses, commercial tenants and landlords. So far, more than two-thirds of leasing disputes have been successfully resolved by either informal resolution or mediation, thanks to the commissioner's office. This bill will not only establish a permanent small business commissioner for Queensland but also provide a legislative basis for the commissioner's dispute resolution functions relating to retail shop leasing disputes under the Retail Shop Leases Act and other small business leasing and franchising disputes on an opt-in basis.

As I say every time I get the chance to speak here about small businesses, they are the heart and soul of our communities. They are our family members, our friends, our neighbours and our employers. In my electorate of Ipswich, small businesses make up over 97 per cent of all businesses. The more we can do to support them to grow and create jobs in Ipswich, the better. The small business community in Ipswich is dynamic, agile and resilient and we have seen that after the floods. Importantly, they have many loyal supporters in the community who will get behind them when times are tough. Having the support of the Small Business Commissioner has been essential for my local businesses.

I want to share a story about how important that community support is, although this is not COVID related. In November last year, very early in the morning, I woke up to see several missed calls and messages on my phone from small business owners whose businesses were located in one of the beautiful old buildings in Ellenborough Street, at the top of Ipswich town. That morning they had arrived at work to find that the premises were locked. They were completely locked out of the building. There was just a sign telling them that the landlord was in arrears and they could not go in. All of their equipment—their mobile phones, their laptops, everything—was inside the building, but they could not

get in. About six or seven businesses were involved. The possession notices were posted on the doors. No-one had any warning. All the locks were changed. There was a security guard standing there. They were locked out of their businesses.

I immediately phoned our wonderful small business minister and asked for her advice. She followed the protocols and set the ball rolling for the Small Business Commissioner to intervene, which she did. Even though the businesses were absolutely devastated, within hours they were back in the building and they knew what side of the law they were on. We cannot just think about these people as collateral damage in a bigger dispute, which is why the Small Business Commissioner is so pivotal. As distressing as it was, our community really pulled together. It was great to see the council, the Ipswich Chamber of Commerce and others banding together to support those businesses. That was really fitting for a town that takes pride in supporting its small business community.

The Small Business Commissioner has been working really hard to strengthen localised engagement in the small business space by establishing small business friendly charters that commit city councils to nurturing and empowering their small business communities. In October 2020, Ipswich City Council was the first council in Queensland to sign up to the state's first small business friendly council charter, with Commissioner Adshead and both the Ipswich and Greater Springfield chambers of commerce co-signing. In our community, it is so important that we support this role.

I know that I am speaking on behalf of all of the small businesses in my area when I outline just how important the role of the Small Business Commissioner has been. The position was created during COVID and I thank the Attorney-General, who was the former small business minister, for that. I also thank the current small business minister. She has come to my area several times and spoken to our small businesses. She is incredibly engaged. I have heard from many members in the chamber about just how engaged our small business minister is. It makes a big difference to people, particularly in the last couple of years with COVID and now the recent floods, that they can have confidence in a minister who listens and who takes the time to hear about the needs of our small business communities and who meets those needs right across Queensland. I am very proud to support this bill. I commend it to the House.