




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MOUNT OMMANEY

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SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Ms PUGH** (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (12.37 pm): Like the member for Maryborough, I too am a proud former small business employee. I am proud to support this bill and the role of the Small Business Commissioner. It is a very important one.

I had the great pleasure of having a fantastic conversation with Small Business Commissioner Ms Maree Adshead at the Diwali festival, of all places, last year. That is remarkable for a few reasons. First is the fact that our Small Business Commissioner understands the value of attending not just business events in the community but more general community events where she has the opportunity to engage more broadly and promote the work of the Office of the Small Business Commissioner in the community not just in small business. She knows, as we do on this side of the House, that everyone knows a small business owner and it is only a matter of time before those small business owners may need assistance. That is where the role of the Small Business Commissioner comes in.

As we have heard, the role of Small Business Commissioner is wide and varied. The temporary commissioner functions include, but are not limited to: providing information and advisory services to the public about matters relevant to small businesses, particularly recently in relation to COVID response measures; assisting small businesses in reaching an informal resolution for disputes relating to small business leases; administering in a mediation process prescribed by regulation for responding to the COVID-19 emergency in relation to small business tenancy disputes; advocating on behalf of small business to the state, the Commonwealth, another state or local government or any other entity involved in administering a matter that is in any way relevant to small businesses; and working collaboratively with the equivalent of the commissioner in other states or the Commonwealth to enhance conditions for small business.

The Office of the Small Business Commissioner provides a monthly newsletter which is accessible online or small businesses can subscribe as well as check the social media channels that provide updates and information for small businesses on a wide range of topics and across agencies. This is not just limited to COVID or flooding support; it is all about the everyday issues that impact small businesses.

The Office of the Small Business Commissioner has a contact centre that small businesses or their advocates are able to call. They can also submit an inquiry online if they prefer to do it that way. They can talk to a staff member and receive personalised information and advice. The Queensland Small Business Commissioner has received feedback that small businesses are delighted to be able to speak to someone who can listen and help and not just be referred to a website for information. That has certainly been the case in my community, and I will touch more on that later.

As I said, when I called the commissioner's office to get a little bit more information on behalf of a local business owner, the person I spoke to was so kind and helpful. She had an excellent customer service ethic. I still remember our call about a year later because our interaction was such a positive

one. Something that really struck me in our conversation was the statistic that she shared with me on the phone—that, by playing a mediating role, the Office of the Small Business Commissioner were able to work through well over half of their cases to reduce the rent where a business owner was in distress.

By playing a mediating role rather than coming in heavy-handed they were able to work through that at an early stage. It is critical that the Small Business Commissioner's office likes to get involved when that relationship is still a positive one, when it is still a good relationship. This is key because in my experience once a relationship is frayed it is that much harder to reach an outcome or a consensus. Members of the House will be aware that I worked in my family restaurant for many years.

Ms Grace: And what a great restaurant!

Ms PUGH: Indeed it was. I take the interjection from the member for McConnel. In working with many other restaurateurs I quickly came to realise that many small business owners do not own their business because they love the HR, the management and the business side of things; they love what their business does. My dad did not open a restaurant because he loved rostering and paying bills; he loved to cook and his partner loved to be front of house.

For many small business owners, not only is the bookkeeping and the management not their favourite part but a lot of them really dread it—so, too, with the difficult and delicate tasks like speaking with their landlord to negotiate in tough times like we saw during COVID or getting the best rates from their suppliers so they can be competitive with the bigger players who do get those lower prices on their supplies and can offer lower prices in the market. It is really tough for a lot of these small business owners to do that. These are not skills that necessarily come naturally to many business owners. Having the Small Business Commissioner not just for the advocacy but also for the support can be invaluable.

I would like to share a story from my community during COVID that involved the Small Business Commissioner in some small way. I have a very popular local business owner. Her business, because of the specific nature of it, was profoundly affected by COVID. In this particular case, this business owner is very business savvy. In fact, she used to be an accountant. In terms of qualifications and being across the numbers, there is nobody more qualified than this particular person. It was for this reason that she had come to the conclusion that she needed to ask her landlord for a small discount—about \$50 a week—in order to make her business viable going forward. It was going to be enough to help her while she worked her way out of COVID.

Her business had gone from being fully booked pre-COVID to being unable to operate for periods of time. She contacted me because she had confidence in her financial ability but not in her negotiating skills. She asked me for some advice. I reached out on her behalf to the Small Business Commissioner's office, who provided us with a template letter to help her ask for a rent reduction. She decided not to get the Small Business Commissioner's office involved at that stage, but I can tell the House that she felt incredibly comforted and supported knowing that if she needed the Small Business Commissioner they would be there.

She sent the letter, which I read—it was very well worded—and the landlord did not take it well. They told her there were other tenants lining up to take her place and she would not be getting the reduction and how dare she even ask. She called me very distressed and told me that she believed she would be evicted and she was already looking for an alternative location. She was quite distressed and we spoke a number of times over that week. I was concerned about how she had been treated. As I said, I thought the letter she sent was very reasonable and very respectful.

I am pleased to report to the House that this story has a happy ending. The lovely local business owner received a follow-up call from the landlord a week later accepting her request, albeit begrudgingly. I am really proud of her for stepping out of her comfort zone and starting the process, knowing that if she needed the Small Business Commissioner they were there to help. I thank the Small Business Commissioner for providing that template letter because it was incredibly useful, even though it was a difficult thing for my small business owner to do.

I cannot overstate, as I said, the importance for many small business owners of knowing they have that support there, somebody they can turn to for advice if and when they need it. I think for a lot of people just knowing that there is someone they can call on gives them the confidence to take that initial step themselves. That is certainly what I saw in this case.

I love to promote the work of the Small Business Commissioner far and wide. I know that she has a wonderful supporter in our fantastic Minister for Small Business, who loves coming to my electorate of Mount Ommaney because, member for McConnel, we do have the very best small businesses in the whole of Queensland!

Ms Grace: Hear, hear!

Ms PUGH: It is true. I have said it on the record in this House, so it must be true. I cannot mislead the House. Mount Ommaney has the best small businesses in Queensland.

I have some time left on the clock, so I will put in an early pitch for my small business awards that will be coming up later this year. As I said, the Mount Ommaney small businesses are so fantastic that we need an entire awards ceremony. They are like the Logies of Mount Ommaney. All members are welcome to attend.

Mr Power: Without slapping!

Ms PUGH: That is the Oscars. This year for the first time I will be delighted to invite our Small Business Commissioner to attend those awards. Having spoken to her about them last year, I know that she was very excited by the concept. Right across the length and breadth of Queensland we do have wonderful small businesses. I know that our Small Business Commissioner and our Minister for Small Business are so engaged in making sure that those small businesses get the assistance and the information they need. I commend this bill to the House.