




Speech By
Kim Richards

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

Record of Proceedings, 24 February 2022

SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Ms RICHARDS** (Redlands—ALP) (4.30 pm): I rise to support the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021. As chair of the committee, I can report that the committee made one recommendation and that was that the bill be passed. Everybody in this chamber knows that small business is at the heart of our economy. They have played a major role in our economic recovery and collectively are major employers that see us today with a lower unemployment rate than before the pandemic started. I know the introduction of a permanent Small Business Commissioner in Queensland will support our state's over 450,000 small businesses.

I thank our secretariat and all those who participated in the inquiry process. We received 13 submissions to the inquiry. We had a briefing from the department and we held a public hearing that included the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, the Queensland Law Society, Master Electricians and the Queensland Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

I want to briefly turn to the comments within the LNP's statement of reservation. The LNP want to talk about failures. The member for Buderim showed hypocrisy in his contribution in relation to the LNP's track record. He acknowledged in his contribution the sacking of the former Queensland small business commissioner, who had held that position for eight months. If they were genuinely listening to the business community of Queensland, they would have heard loud and clear from them at the time how important the role of that small business commissioner was to businesses. They are here lecturing us today about the independence of the role, but their track record speaks volumes. I spoke about this last night in the 'scream' and it is the same scenario again—do as I say but not as I do. It is absolutely incredible.

The member for Buderim spoke about the reason for scrapping the former Queensland small business commissioner and said in his contribution that it was because the structure and the framework were not good. Well, it is the government's job to set the framework and to make sure they deliver for small businesses. That is disappointing. He spoke about that test of time. As I said, the tenure of the former Queensland small business commissioner was eight months before they scrapped him. That is their track record.

I also want to be very clear about the inquiry process. The committee's program for the public hearing and the public departmental briefing on the Small Business Commissioner Bill on 15 November 2021 was agreed to by me, as the chair, and the deputy chair as had been resolved by the committee. Commissioner Adshead did not make a submission to the committee on the bill and was not included in the hearing program to be a witness. The commissioner did, however, sit in the audience throughout the hearing and the briefing.

The deputy chair only suggested that Commissioner Adshead be invited to make a contribution at the very end of DESBT's public briefing. I know all members on this side of the House absolutely respect all who participate in our inquiry processes. We all have a very deep respect of the process of participation and the courtesy that should be allowed in that sense. The briefing was provided by officers that DESBT had nominated. The department had not nominated Commissioner Adshead. As the chair,

and after conferring with the committee secretariat, I ruled it to be out of order for the commissioner to be asked to make a contribution to the department's briefing. There is a respect for the process. We usually have a very strong bipartisan committee approach. We work well together. We follow process. We all need to comply with that.

I thank Ms Maree Adshead, our temporary Queensland Small Business Commissioner, and her supporting office that was established as part of the Queensland government's response to the impacts of COVID-19. I take this opportunity also to thank all Queensland small businesses which have shown remarkable resilience throughout the pandemic and have come through due to their ability to adapt to very changing circumstances.

The Palaszczuk government has supported small business throughout the pandemic, with the COVID-19 economic recovery plan putting small business at its heart. The plan is underpinned by more than \$14.5 billion in recovery initiatives to support our COVID-19 response and is continuing to deliver jobs for our communities across the state. I also want to acknowledge that the ANZ-Roy Morgan consumer confidence report that was released earlier this week showed that consumer confidence in Queensland has soared by a nation leading 6.5 per cent.

The commissioner and her team have helped many small businesses get back to doing business and have carried out over 4,500 activities for small businesses, including inquiries, disputes, outreach and advocacy activities, and they have played a critical role in supporting Queensland businesses. This bill locks in the permanency of the Queensland Small Business Commissioner and the important work that her office will do. It acknowledges the success of the temporary office and the gap that existed in this important support to small business after the scrapping of it by the LNP.

The key objectives of the proposed bill are to enhance the operating environment for small business in Queensland and to advocate for them, to listen to them and to reduce the time and costs associated with resolving disputes involving small businesses. The permanent establishment of a Small Business Commissioner and a supporting office is also part of our Big Plans for Small Business Strategy.

The bill provides a legislative basis for the commissioner's dispute resolution functions relating to retail shop leasing disputes under the Retail Shop Leases Act and to other small business leasing and franchising disputes on an opt-in basis. We know that there is nothing worse for a small business than to be in dispute or legal battle. Dispute resolution can be costly and stressful for small business owners. Prior to the temporary commissioner, small businesses had to navigate a myriad of pathways in that process. It was clear from the inquiry process that the department and government had consulted widely with Queensland small businesses, with jurisdictions that have existing small business commissioners and with key industry stakeholders in determining the permanent commissioner model, framework and structure.

I want to talk about the Small Business Roadshow—that saturating roadshow in terms of its engagement with small business—that Minister Farmer conducted. I had the good fortune to participate in one, and it was one of the most outstanding processes I have ever seen in terms of consultation. They engaged with those stakeholders, they took that information away and they translated it into an actual plan that addressed their key concerns. I have had the opportunity to thank the director-general for the process in that roadshow out in the Redlands. It was a full house, a packed room, of diverse businesses that were able to have a frank and fearless conversation with many key stakeholders from the department and those officers. I know that all regions would have benefitted similarly from that process. Members may talk about a blitz, and that is exactly what it was. I commend Minister Farmer and the department on that work. What we are seeing today with our Big Plans for Small Business Strategy is a direct result of that feedback from stakeholders.

Small businesses want one-on-one support that is easy to access. Through the permanent commissioner's office, Queensland small businesses will have a clearly identifiable, single point of contact in Queensland to provide advice and assistance to help them understand their options in a dispute. The commissioner's office will also be able to provide initial advice and information to small businesses about any type of dispute and connect them to the relevant assistance and support. They will help them navigate what can sometimes be very complex pathways. The bill will allow the Queensland government to permanently establish the Small Business Commissioner role, delivering small business engagement and support, including advocacy and dispute resolution.

I want to talk about the work that the temporary Small Business Commissioner is doing in the Small Business Friendly program, which is an outstanding program. If anybody has looked at the website, they would have seen that the 25 councils that are participating have already nominated some of those works and it shows what it looks like to genuinely reduce red tape. When you talk about action on the ground, this program is absolutely delivering and it is engaging with whole organisations to streamline the process. I commend the commissioner on her work in that space.

As I said, you only need to go and have a look at the Small Business Commissioner's website to see the incredible work that her team is doing. We should all be very proud that it is only a Palaszczuk Labor government that will strongly support our small businesses by the permanent appointment of the Small Business Commissioner here in Queensland after its dreadful scrapping by the LNP. We will continue to listen to the 450,000 small businesses that make Queensland the place to do business. I commend this bill to the House.