




Speech By
Lachlan Millar

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (12.18 pm): I am pleased to be speaking on this bill to establish a permanent office to be known as the Small Business Commissioner. The LNP has always understood that small business is the backbone of the Queensland economy, and that is nowhere truer than in regional and rural Queensland. It is small businesses that maintain the livability of our communities and sustain our local economies. To see that confirmed as simple truth, one only has to look at the role of small business in the Emerald flood recovery process in 2011 and the role of small businesses in nearly 10 years of drought in the central west—and, yes, the drought is still ongoing in Gregory, Warrego and Traeger.

In the central west we set up the Western Queensland Drought Appeal to help those small businesses over the last 10 years. The approach was deliberately chosen as a way of supporting our small businesses. Small business is key to the functions of daily life in outback towns. It is the doctor, it is the chemist, it is the vet and it is the newsagent who sells school supplies as well as news. It is the fuel distributor, it is the tyre shop, the mechanic and the hardware. It is the butcher, the baker, the chippie and the sparky. The drought was killing these small businesses in the west, and each small business represents a family—a mum, dad and kids—so that rolls on to affect our health, education and police services.

There was a study done by a committee of the Western Queensland Drought Appeal, which was set up in Western Queensland by locals, and I have to congratulate them for what they have done over the last 10 years. A lot of money has gone through that drought appeal to small businesses to help them get through. They may only get a \$200 debit card, but that is a little bit so they can shop. The most important thing about the Western Queensland Drought Appeal is that you have to spend your money in those local businesses. For the record, I would like to thank and congratulate Westpac for coming on board. Peta is the regional manager for agribusiness at Westpac, based at Toowoomba, and she has been marvellous at helping to set that up. It is fantastic.

The first recipient might spend the donated money at the butcher; the butcher then spends that at the servo; the fuel distributor spends that at the newsagent—it just goes on and on. I hope there are some helpful lessons here for those in charge of the flood relief appeal. With regard to this debate, what the experience highlights is that small business is central to the economic ecosystem of every community. Small business has direct links to big business and it has direct links to other small businesses. It is not just the engine of prosperity; it is the driver of community life. Lose small business and you lose not just a marketplace; you lose the vitality and the vibrancy of your small communities.

This has been obvious in the fallout from two years of COVID-19 restrictions. Small businesses have been asked to carry such a load. Decisions have had to be made with little understanding of their magnified impact on these rural communities. It sounds almost cynical to mandate vaccines for certain workforces. In the bush, these workforces constitute individuals, and not anonymous ones either. Workers and their bosses are often just family. The enforcement of vaccine exclusions has affected people being able to work when that is their only job out there. They have had to do that, and they have done it hard.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr MILLAR: No, I do not want that, but we need to understand that vaccine mandates have had an incredibly crippling effect on small businesses—

Mr Power: You support the mandates?

Mr MILLAR: I support vaccination—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hart): Through the chair, please, member. Member for Logan, cease the interjections.

Mr MILLAR: I support this bill. I certainly believe that we need to have some protections for small business. Small business is the backbone of every regional and rural community. Equally, the Small Business Commissioner needs to be unshackled from the bureaucrats of any government department and the games they seem to play. When small business owners seek help from the commissioner in resolving an issue with a state government department, they need to know that the Office of the Small Business Commissioner is truly independent and unshackled from both politics and the administrative elites of the day. If the dispute is with a government department, they want an independent officer who has the rights and resources to access information from the department on their behalf.

I do not see that in this bill. Often their dispute will not be with a government department at all but with another large business. I have helped small business constituents in such situations. It is the local country newsagent being threatened by large suppliers into spending a small fortune to display that supplier's products in a certain way. It is a small shop tenant being bullied by large out-of-town landlords. It is small suppliers and contractors being paid on unfair and extended terms by big business. They feel they cannot protest at the treatment or they will lose work.

I will give you an example of that. When we were building the Landsborough Highway north of Longreach about 30 kilometres to the Darr River, a small business—well, a medium business in Longreach—owned by a well-respected family who had been there all their life was caught up in a dispute with a head contractor that was not from Longreach. They went a long time without being paid properly. This is where I think governments do need to step in. Where the Department of Transport and Main Roads is releasing money to build roads, they have to make sure the contractor pays those smaller contractors on time. This went on for two years. The Moore family—a well-respected family in Longreach—had to endure trying to keep people on but they were not getting paid. There is a responsibility to make sure they get paid.

In order to prevent this from happening again, we need all of the things I have mentioned addressed: independence, a clear definition of the beneficiaries of the office and a clear definition of its duties to those beneficiaries. There also needs to be some muscle in the law to compel the release of information. Finally, it will need the staffing and funding to take this role on properly, including providing small business with clearly communicated advice.

I truly welcome this bill—I truly do—but the test will be in the tasting, as they say. I do fear this legislation, while well-intentioned, is too vague and will not do the job that is necessary for our small businesses. I hope the powers that be do not use it to run protection for themselves, and I hope the minister will fight to reinforce the office and give it some true muscle. I commend this bill to the House.