




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (4.43 pm): When we are talking about small business, if the past two years have demonstrated anything, it is just how crucial strong advocacy is for our small and family businesses. The LNP is unapologetic in its support for small and family businesses. These businesses are the cornerstone of our communities. They employ countless Queenslanders and invest directly into their local neighbourhoods, sponsoring community sport, donating to fundraisers and supporting charitable drives, including rallying to support flood victims right now as we speak.

Small businesses are the very backbone of the Queensland economy and they give back significantly to our communities. Time and time again during the pandemic it was the LNP that led the charge advocating for our small businesses and their staff. It was the LNP that called for financial assistance when the state government imposed restrictions without adequately supporting businesses and their staff.

This bill, the Small Business Commissioner Bill 2021, seeks to permanently establish a Queensland Small Business Commissioner. The legislation will also provide a statutory basis for the commissioner's dispute resolution functions. The LNP will not be opposing the bill. We will be proposing two amendments to help ensure the Small Business Commissioner has the necessary power and independence so that all small businesses are treated fairly by the Queensland government.

Those in this chamber know that I have spent much of the past two years talking about small and family businesses. I will never apologise for standing up for the people who make up the fabric of our vibrant Currumbin electorate, especially after the struggles they have faced over the past two years. My community will never forget the burden they shouldered during the border closures so that the Palaszczuk government could say they kept Queenslanders safe.

We are a border community—we are one of the largest in Australia. Our small and family businesses, even in suburbs not directly on the border, rely on New South Wales residents for staff and patronage yet these businesses were cut off from this important part of our community for the better part of two years. Families were forced to choose sides, business owners camped out in their shops—unable to return home but desperate to remain open—and children were passed over orange border barricades just to go to school.

I shared many stories from my community in this chamber and, as a result, I hope the state government realises the immense burden that our border business community shouldered as a result of state government decisions. Unfortunately, the Queensland government's handling of the border gave my local business owners and their staff plenty of reasons to despair—from the bungled border checkpoints, including delays stretching hours, meaning staff were unable to get to their jobs to hardworking hospital staff and teachers being deemed not essential.

There were border reopening strategies that failed to take into account our border community and small businesses, and when we did reopen the state government told our community that they would have to stump up \$150 for a PCR test every 72 hours to cross the border. This would have crippled small businesses. So we started a campaign to ensure this border toll was rejected. Thankfully, common sense prevailed and our border community was exempt.

Small businesses were dismayed with the Premier's attempt to promote the Gold Coast play money vouchers for Queensland businesses because she showcased a New South Wales beach instead of a Queensland destination. The icing on an already stale cake: who could forget the Premier's fake visit to small businesses on the border. She took her spin doctors to take a photo but did not take the time to talk with these businesses. These small and family businesses were desperate for the state government to listen to them, for the Premier to listen to them, but it did not happen. I hope that the Small Business Commissioner will be in a position to listen to them.

While our small and family businesses have been battling to stay open for two years, the recent weather events only added to their struggles—closing roads, leaving communities without power and, of course, homes and businesses flooded. I wish to take a moment to recognise our amazing community that rallied to support those affected through the creation of our very own local Mud Army. Residents from across the Gold Coast came out in force, pitching in to help immediately.

As our community has been coming together to help with the flood recovery, it is imperative that our community receives the government support needed to recover from the floods. We must build back better. It is my hope that the Small Business Commissioner will be able to support and strongly advocate for our flood-affected businesses. If we can better support small businesses with advice and better support tenants and landlords to access fast and fair mediation through the permanent establishment of the Small Business Commissioner, then that is a good thing.

We would seek to protect the independence of the office by adding a power to obtain information clause. This will allow the commissioner to acquire information from government agencies and entities that would enable the resolution of issues. Indeed, feedback from industry stakeholders during the committee process indicated broad support for the Small Business Commissioner with some caveats, most notably arguing for the independence of the office to be protected from undue influence from the minister.

At a time when the state Labor government finds itself engulfed by the Queensland integrity crisis, it is telling that stakeholders also raised concerns about the influence of ministers on the role of the Small Business Commissioner. It is paramount that small businesses can trust the commissioner. For this to occur, the office must be free from any suggestion of departmental or ministerial influence.

I echo the concerns highlighted by my colleagues in their statement of reservation during the committee process that a conspicuously independent Small Business Commissioner empowered to conduct investigations report to parliament and publicly advocate for and defend small businesses in Queensland is essential.

I also wish to take this opportunity to implore those opposite to reflect on the unique situation of our Queensland cross-border communities and their businesses and the need for a cross-border commissioner. Businesses in my electorate often found themselves approaching the Small Business Commissioner during the pandemic to help with highly specific cross-border issues. This is because Queensland does not have a cross-border commissioner.

The New South Wales Cross-Border Commissioner is tasked with providing equitable access and opportunities and seamless service delivery for people and businesses in the New South Wales cross-border communities. The New South Wales Cross-Border Commissioner works closely with local, state and federal governments to identify, analyse and resolve issues for their New South Wales cross-border community. This is something I am passionate about for our Queensland cross-border communities. It is something that our Queensland cross-border communities are desperately crying out for. Industry representatives like the Southern Gold Coast Chamber of Commerce remarked to me during the border closures—

Currently the Small Business Commissioner has been doing a quasi-role of it, however that dilutes its power as it's not an actual position. It's something that Covid has shown we really need.

I would be pleased to work with the Queensland government in a bipartisan manner to see this role become a reality for our community. I urge the Premier and her government to commit to this vital role which would serve to champion our Queensland cross-border community. It would also alleviate pressure from the Small Business Commissioner, who does not have the resources or the scope in her role to identify, analyse and resolve issues for our Queensland cross-border community and their businesses.

Throughout the course of the debate on this bill we have heard members on both sides of the House talk about the foundational importance of small businesses in our community. This is indisputable. They are the very heart of our community. They are the backbone. They are our children's employers. Small businesses deserve the support of this government. I commend them for making the office of the Small Business Commissioner a permanent position. I implore the government to look at

the amendments to be moved by the shadow small business minister, because it is imperative that we do not stop there. We must ensure that the office of the Small Business Commissioner receives proper funding and support from this government.

After two years of watching the businesses in our Queensland border communities suffer, I urge the government to accept the LNP's proposed amendments to this bill. The office of the Small Business Commissioner must be independent and must be able to hold the government to account. Our businesses have been failed time and time again by this state Labor government, especially throughout the continuous and unrelenting hard border closures.

No amount of spin can cover up what our business community and our border community went through during the border closures. No amount of spin can take away from the burden that they had to bear so that this Palaszczuk Labor government could say they kept Queensland safe. No amount of spin will let our community forget what they had to bear during those two years when we had border closures and small businesses lost their staff, small businesses had to close their doors and small businesses did not get the support they needed until the LNP went into bat for them.

I call on this Palaszczuk Labor government to look at the amendments moved by the LNP, to ensure that the Small Business Commissioner has the funding it needs and the independence it needs to properly support our small businesses throughout Queensland.