




Speech By
Samuel O'Connor

MEMBER FOR BONNEY

Record of Proceedings, 29 March 2022

SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Mr O'CONNOR** (Bonney—LNP) (11.56 am), continuing: To continue my contribution, the permanent commissioner and their office will improve their tailored support and advice to Queensland small businesses, aiming to provide timely and affordable access to justice through their dispute resolution functions. Like many members of this House, I have heard some great feedback on the commissioner from my local businesses. One example I want to raise is Darren from the fantastic Frigg Cafe on Frank Street in Labrador, and with locations at Ascot and Manly as well, who said this about the commissioner—

Maree and her small team have been exceptional in support ...

He said that the commissioner came to their shop and met with them for 90 minutes and followed up on their issues afterwards, raising their concerns with the top levels of the departments that they related to. That is exceptional advocacy and service. I understand internally the Small Business Commissioner and her office describe their powers as being derived from the 'bluff act 1954', but from the feedback I have heard from Frigg and a number of other local businesses they are certainly punching above their weight.

One submission to the inquiry on this bill I want to highlight is from Bruce Billson, the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman. A good point it raised was on ministerial interference, saying—

In order for Queensland's small business community to have the full confidence in the Commissioner to fearlessly and consistently represent their small business community, it is important that the role has an appropriate degree of independence from government.

The suggestion from the federal ombudsman was to remove the clause providing ministerial direction because of the potential for this to make the functions of the commissioner highly dependent on the government and subject to operational instruction. He basically said this extra power was going to be overkill and that the statement of expectations provided for in clause 18 should be enough to make the commissioner understand what the minister believes their functions and role should be. As such, I support the shadow minister's very reasonable amendments because I think they would go a long way towards fixing the inadequacies in what we have before us.

The second opposition amendment in particular would help the commissioner immensely. If the government does not support this, it again shows its reluctance to open the books. It shows it is against open data. We want a Small Business Commissioner who has the power and independence necessary to ensure the Queensland government treats small businesses fairly. The Small Business Commissioner has done a fantastic job and we want to make sure this position has the right powers to succeed so it can hold the faith of and best serve small and family businesses across our state.

I do also think we need to look at how business-to-government disputes are dealt with. Currently when these arise it can only be looked at by the ombudsman and they can only really investigate whether the proper process was followed, not many of the specifics of the dispute. I do want to

commend the Small Business Commissioner again on her engagement with councils across Queensland. The Small Business Friendly councils program is a fantastic initiative. It is a very simple charter, generally signed by the mayor. There are five steps involved—reveal your blind spots, share and engage, do a stocktake, take action, and get involved.

It is all about making clear commitments to bring consciousness to the work large organisations or governments are doing to be small business friendly. It also provides guidance about where to focus improvements across the organisation. The whole point of signing the charter is for it to be an intentional act showing clear intent and to focus on improving systems, processes and the customer journey for small businesses in that area. The promises and principles which guide improvements will be across the organisation. The whole idea is to streamline and reduce red tape, to improve regulations and to prioritise Buy Local purchasing from small businesses within that local government area.

So far, examples of local governments that have signed up are Ipswich, Townsville, Southern Downs, South Burnett and Gympie. Hopefully Brisbane will sign up soon, although they already do a really good job of supporting small businesses. I very much hope to see our mayor Tom Tate back home on the Gold Coast make this commitment in the near future. A good example of this program came from Ipswich. It is one that the commissioner told me of to illustrate how important it can be and how it can be a catalyst for cultural development. It was about food trucks. An issue was raised with how difficult it was to get one registered in Ipswich. Their local events were suffering because of it. Because the council then got all the key parts of their bureaucracy in the one room to work out their key issues, the process was reduced from a pile of forms with a six-week turnaround to a single form with a response time coming within 24 hours.

I conclude by saying that I support making this important body permanent, but it should be given the additional, justifiable, sensible powers that we have suggested. That is the only way the Small Business Commissioner can properly advocate for the biggest issues facing our small businesses, for disaster support from floods to COVID, red-tape reductions, cost reductions to improve operating conditions and to generally help drive cultural change within our regulators. I commend all the small businesses in my part of the Gold Coast. I hope making this body permanent will help them survive and thrive as we go through these challenging times.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hart): Before calling the next member, I will correct a statement I made a minute ago. The members for Maroochydore and Mudgeeraba have been ordered out of the chamber and so their warning is no longer valid. We will proceed on that basis.