




Speech By
Hon. Shannon Fentiman

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Record of Proceedings, 24 February 2022

SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL

 **Hon. SM FENTIMAN** (Waterford—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence) (5.26 pm): I rise to speak in favour of the Small Business Commissioner Bill. As we have heard from almost all members, we absolutely love the small businesses in our local communities. They really are the heart of our local communities and the engine room of our economy. They employ close to one million Queenslanders. They have worked incredibly hard during the past two years and I say a huge thank you to all of them for that and for working with us. We use these words all the time, but I do thank them for being agile and flexible and for making sure that the people they employ continue to be employed. They have done an amazing job.

The pandemic has changed all aspects of our lives and we know our small businesses have been hit hard. However, some businesses have been able to pivot to a new model of business that has seen them grow. There are a few such businesses in my local electorate that I want to talk about. Nick and Milly Christensen and the team at Flowerhub, Slacks Creek, have turned tough times before COVID into a fantastic business opportunity that saw them grow during COVID. With huge demand for online shopping, which is not going anywhere any time soon, and even more demand for beautiful local flowers, Flowerhub was able to step up production and grow their business during COVID.

We know that the impacts of restrictions and lockdowns saw many businesses reduce their hours of operation. I give a shout-out to Dean Forte, from Monkey Tree Brewing, who was impacted by restrictions. He came to me to advocate for a new artisan producer liquor licence, which has seen a huge growth in small businesses. When we announced the licence, Dean said that it would provide a framework for all microbrewers and microdistillers to work together and would help to see the sector flourish as COVID restrictions now begin to ease. I give a shout-out to those wonderful Logan businesses. They were both impacted in different ways but both have been incredibly successful.

During the early days of the pandemic, of course, as the then small business minister I met with a lot of small businesses. Even though their doors may have had to shut for some time, the bills, rent, wages and utilities did not stop. They experienced really challenging times. The government stepped up in that time of uncertainty with a suite of COVID support measures. One of those was the temporary Small Business Commissioner, established in 2020. The temporary commissioner and supporting office have become a huge resource for small business right across Queensland. They have helped so many, particularly mum-and-dad businesses, get back to what they do best.

Since May 2020, the temporary commissioner and supporting office have carried out more than 7,000 activities for small business including inquiries, disputes, outreach and advocacy activities. I particularly acknowledge Commissioner Maree Adshead and her team for their incredible work. Maree is one of the most professional, energetic, passionate women I have ever had the pleasure of working with. She is a powerhouse. She has never met a problem she does not want to solve. The success of the office is testament to her, her leadership and the wonderful team that really do go above and beyond for our small businesses.

Making the commissioner now permanent is really an important first step in supporting our small businesses to really thrive coming out of COVID. This bill will make it easier for them to grow here in Queensland. It creates that single point of contact for business owners. Let us be honest: it reduces the time that small businesses have to spend navigating the bureaucracy, and that is a really good thing. The commissioner will work alongside the Office of Productivity and Red Tape Reduction and continue to deliver small business regulatory reform, a huge issue for our small businesses. Having a permanent Small Business Commissioner brings Queensland into line with every other jurisdiction.

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. I remember being with the member for Aspley visiting one of his small businesses. We met with a franchise and that was one of the issues raised with me—franchising disputes and having somewhere to go. I thank the member for Aspley. Those conversations really did help and are addressed in this bill.

We know that dispute resolution can be costly and stressful for small businesses. Prior to the temporary commissioner being appointed, our small businesses had to navigate multiple pathways. It takes the pressure off our courts and streamlines the current pathways. Currently, both QCAT and the commissioner can undertake retail shop lease dispute mediations. This can be confusing. The bill created a requirement for retail shop lease disputes to undertake mediation with the Small Business Commissioner prior to progressing to QCAT for resolution under the Retail Shop Leases Act in the event that the dispute remains unresolved after mediation. This single pathway reduces confusion amongst applicants and also, importantly, reduces QCAT's heavy workload. As Attorney-General, I am very happy about that.

In terms of retail shop leasing disputes, the work of the commissioner and her office has been wonderful. Even my hairdresser accessed the service for some support during COVID. I know just how well they were able to work with small businesses and assist them during that time. I congratulate the Minister for Small Business. I know that she is so passionate about small businesses and making sure we have the supports for them. Really, this bill is a win for our small businesses. The Small Business Commissioner will play an integral role in ensuring small businesses are protected and will reduce the cost of doing business here in Queensland. I commend the bill to the House.