




Speech By  
**Stephen Bennett**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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Record of Proceedings, 17 March 2022

### **SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSIONER BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.03 pm): In my contribution I want to focus on a recent meeting in Bundaberg and Childers with small business owners. The intent of the meeting was to hear from the small business owners. I will talk more about the results more later. I acknowledge the organisers and use their material in my contribution, which is mainly in the form of the contents of a letter that has been sent to the Premier.

On 10 March 2022, over 30 business owners in the Childers and Bundaberg area met to discuss lagging business confidence and the mental health challenges facing business owners in the region. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic business owners have been required by the Queensland government to help the government deliver their pandemic response by implementing and enforcing some of the following: lockdowns, social distancing, venue restrictions on customers, QR check-ins, vaccination mandate on owners in select industries; vaccination passports for customers in select industries; testing requirements on owners and staff; isolation requirements on owners and staff; and mask mandates on owners, staff and customers. These obligations have been in addition to the broad range of other regulations which businesses are already subject to. In addition, many in the service or technical industries have had to adhere to the varied and often complicated COVID policies of businesses and government bodies that businesses visit or service.

The financial, physical and emotional toll of complying with the COVID-19 response requirements cannot be overstated. There is no denying that the business community is suffering. Recent Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland pulse survey data shows business confidence in the next 12 months is at the lowest point since the start of the COVID economic crisis in March 2020. Business sales have dropped significantly in many industries, and many business owners are dipping into their savings to survive. According to the CCIQ, Queensland is seeing a perfect storm of uncertainty combined with poor consumer confidence and labour market shortages clashing to create a difficult business environment in Queensland. What is more concerning, according to the CCIQ, is that mental health challenges due to COVID impacts have affected over 60 per cent of Queensland business owners along with their staff. The financial and emotional impacts of business restrictions, mandates, low consumer confidence, supply chain disruptions and staff availability mean businesses have little optimism to see them through.

The businesses that attended these meetings last week, along with hundreds of other businesses in our region, have kept up their end of the bargain. We have implemented the COVID response policies as requested and businesses are hurting as a result. Now business is asking for something in return: a new era of COVID management. They ask for the removal of the onerous requirements that make it difficult for our businesses to function. They ask for greater certainty for our staff so they can plan for their futures. They ask for consistent and long-term strategies so that businesses can operate and plan for expansion without the fear of new rules being implemented. Most importantly, they ask for positive messages to be shared with the people of Queensland.

The meeting agreed and supported the Queensland government's tourism advertising campaign in Victoria and New South Wales—and I acknowledged the minister in the crowd when we were at a function earlier this week where he was very warmly welcomed—and they ask that that same message of positivity and safety be shared with everyday Queenslanders via daily messages on Queensland government Facebook pages, daily conferences, media releases and the like. We need to be positive as we come out of COVID-19, and Queenslanders need to be reassured that it is safe for them to get out and about in their communities, just as it is safe for interstate and international visitors to visit Queensland.

On behalf of the organisers and everyone who was at that meeting, I want to read out a list of points. Without repeating myself, I do want to say: consistent messaging between government advertising campaigns—and we are Good to Go, aren't we, Minister—and messaging to the general Queensland population would improve consumer confidence; Queensland residents being told to stay home so they are not spending in local businesses; consistent messaging on government websites regarding COVID guidelines et cetera; there are too many pages on different websites, it is slow and it needs to be updated as businesses do not have time to search through mountains of webpages to find what they need; messaging can be conflicting; the government hotline is often not up to date, with changes announced in daily press conferences with the Premier, Deputy Premier or Chief Health Officer; isolation policies are putting pressure on staff and business owners; owners end up working in the business, not on the business, because they are filling staffing gaps; more flexible working arrangements for staff in any sector who are considered a close contact but are well and have no symptoms, similar to the announcement made in January for critical workers.

Constant changes to rules are distressing and confusing for business owners. These constant changes are steadily eroding the community's confidence in the government. Many business owners asked when unvaccinated customers will be allowed back into businesses which currently have restrictions. I guess that is an issue for the Chief Health Officer, but I want to put on record that that is what small business owners have asked me to articulate here tonight. Staff shortages in many industries are at a crisis point. It is fortuitous that the minister for employment is here and acutely understands the challenges that Queensland faces. Many of these businesses are unable to employ suitably qualified staff who are unvaccinated. It is a major limitation.

Business owners support the CCIQ's call for the mandates to be reviewed and removed. Businesses which serve alcohol are concerned about the rise in violence, alcoholism and mental health challenges arising from unvaccinated patrons and their friends drinking at home, rather than at licensed premises. The counselling community is concerned about a rise in depression, suicide and mental health challenges amongst the broader community as a result of shortages in mental health counsellors, which has been worsened by the vaccine mandate being applied to counsellors. Counsellors are reporting an increase in the number of people not able to access mental health support due to a shortage of vaccinated counsellors. They are calling for unvaccinated counsellors to be able to offer this vital service again.

I want to finish with an actual example of a pub in Childers. They wanted me to highlight the struggles they have had over this period. This is a busy family owned and operated pub in my electorate of Burnett. It is a very successful business which has been owned by the current owners for decades, employing 12 staff currently. Through no fault of their own, their business sales have been stifled by a government policy they have no control over. It is virtually impossible to plan for the future because they do not know when restrictions will be lifted or what new restrictions may be enforced in the future. Four staff have lost their jobs due to the mandates. The uncertainty about the pub's future makes it difficult for staff to have any certainty for their futures—some of them have car loans and house loans and are constantly anxious about their job security.

Not only have the owners seen a significant drop in trade but also they have been accused by regular customers of 'not standing up for them' because they are enforcing the conditions of the mandate as set out by the Queensland government. The owners have watched other pubs in Queensland which have stood up to the mandates being pressured by police, and ultimately arrested, for allowing unvaccinated patrons to enter their premises and they do not wish to suffer the same fate. The owners are concerned about the rise in violence, alcoholism and mental health challenges arising from an increase in patrons drinking at home rather than in the protection of licensed premises, which are subject to strict liquor licensing laws and practises. If not for their bottle shop sales, they would be out of business by now. A lot of the suppliers they use are also suffering because their kitchen has been affected so the suppliers are missing out on meat and produce orders and the like. They feel there is a big disconnect between government policymakers and small business.

In closing, I want to do a shout-out to those people in my community who come together and have these discussions. It is important we are able to articulate the thoughts and aspirations of small businesses on the ground of what coming out of COVID looks like. I want to stress that they want to see more consistent and better messaging and, more importantly, we want to make sure our small businesses have a secure platform, which means being considered when COVID laws are in place.