



Mark Bouris: How do we build an economy when businesses are crippled?

A lot is being asked of businesses but no one has stood up to ask questions on their behalf. Mark Bouris has penned an open letter — to anyone who will listen.

Mark Bouris

July 10, 2021 - The Sunday Telegraph

I don't claim to represent anyone, but plenty of people talk to me and have been turning to me over the last 10 days.

These people — the majority of whom I don't know, have never met — have one thing in common and plenty that unites them: first and foremost, they're business owners, to a man and woman.

What binds them together right now and what unifies this group of people — not for the first time in the last year — is that they're stressed out (to the max), they're exhausted and they don't know what's going to happen — to their businesses, to their staff, to their customers; not just today or tomorrow but in whatever the future may or may not look like.

They're talking to me because they know that I'll listen and perhaps I'll speak up.

Businesses, small businesses in particular, are on their absolute f ... ing knees.

The lockdowns are no doubt designed to take potential pressure away from the health system. If we had a stampede of serious Covid cases no doubt the health system which are governments are responsible for would be overwhelmed as they are in India at the moment. But we can't continue like this.



A quiet street in the Sydney CBD as the city enters its third week in lockdown. Picture: NCA NewsWire / James Gourley

The questions I'm getting are ones like "How does this all work? Who makes these decisions and how? Where's the science; everyone knows no two scientists ever agree on anything? What you have in Melbourne is different to what you have in Sydney and different to what you have in Brisbane. They're all different and we've got one politician saying one thing and another saying something completely different."

Businesses are being asked to comply with something, but they can't see the consistency. Not one person has stood up for small business to ask these questions on their behalf.

Businesses are copping it, they're copping fines and copping lockdowns and having to shut their businesses down and let staff go but no one is actually speaking out on behalf of that small business community.

Which is why I'm here, now, doing this.

I actually don't know who's in f ... ing charge. I don't think anyone does.

It's confusing, to all of us.

This is not just me. This is the thinking of people I speak to.

We don't know who we should be sending this letter to?!



Mark Bouris in Sydney meeting with small business owners of Crown Street Grocer in Surry Hills Joe and Anna Polifroni.

SO, TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

I thought I would reach out to you on behalf of a loosely cobbled-together group of Australians, probably the most powerful army of Australian residents that exist today. I am going to say some things in this letter that many are thinking but feel they can't speak up about.

This army of people don't live off the public purse nor do they have the certainty of getting a pay cheque at the end of every month.

Whether they work from home or their office, most of this magnificent army of citizens get by without annual leave, sick leave or superannuation. They have no safety net for themselves and their loved ones, yet they work tirelessly and offer service to all and sundry, usually with a smile and gratitude for our custom.

They are often referred to as small businesses but their impact looms large over the economy, large over the taxes raised to support this country, larger than any other sector of our economy by number. They are fearless and formidable.

This is what they're telling me:

"There is a disconnect between us and those that are telling us what is best for us to do. Our businesses are suffering, we're having to put staff off and live with the crippling daily fear of banks cutting us off because of revenue pressures while those telling us to take the hits are taking none themselves.

"Business goodwill is being wiped away after years and lifetimes of building it up. Yet we have never seen it even recognised or acknowledged. Why is that?"

When you look at the lockdown decisions it's fair to say that the business sector is proportionately more affected financially than the rest of the economy.

In other words, the business sector is "getting it in the neck" for the betterment of our whole social/economic system. To a large degree, business has copped that on the chin. But the presumption that "they'll understand" that we'll understand, is starting to wear thin.

Kids not going to school ... that has an effect on business owners. Business owners can't run a business from home or anywhere for that matter if they've got kids to home school, especially coming off the back of two weeks of school holidays.

How are we going to build an economy when all businesses are crippled? Businesses can't be run at less than 60 per cent occupancy — cafes, restaurants, hotels, dry cleaners, whatever the business. What is the plan?



An emptied Sydney CBD where businesses are struggling, and no certainty in sight. Picture: NCA NewsWire / James Gourley

One thing that DOES help businesses is CERTAINTY. Businesses would rather know that there's going to be a problem or an issue in advance because they can work things out and work things around it. Right now, we live in UNCERTAINTY and kneejerk reactions one day, one hour, one minute at a time.

What I want is for this letter to trigger discussion, to start an open forum, to bring some intellect to this and to say “how do we get out of this?”

What I want to articulate for small businesses is this: “We don't know who to talk to, we're not sure who to listen to, everyone's giving out different stories, we're saying there's all these things that don't make sense to us and we feel a great sense of disconnect.”

But, I can tell you that every small business can connect with what's being said here.

From everyone who has gone through this torrid economical time together, the one sector who has taken it in the teeth the hardest – and received little support – is the small business community.

Businesses are told daily how much they matter as the “engine room” of this economy, and that they will be the engine room for our economy to recover. “Go and rebuild the economy for us, you’ve done it before, now do it again.”

Well, right now that engine is stalling.



Mark Bouris wants Sydney businesses to be part of the discussion of moving forward out of COVID.