

EMPLOYMENT LEVELS

**519. Mr I.M. BRITZA to the Treasurer:**

The people in my electorate, like those in many of the electorates represented in this chamber, are concerned about their jobs. I notice that the latest unemployment figures have been released today. Can the Treasurer update the house on the implications of these latest figures for Western Australian jobs, and also reconfirm the government's commitment to keeping people in jobs?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL replied:**

I thank the member for Morley for his question, and for his interest in employment matters. The Australian Bureau of Statistics earlier today released the May unemployment figures. I have to caution the house that it is not always wise to interpret figures on a monthly basis, because the sample size has been reduced and the figures are somewhat more volatile.

**Ms M.M. Quirk interjected**

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** What was that? Sorry. I saw a gap open up between the member's lips, but I did not hear what came out.

Those figures showed that in the month of May, the unemployment rate in Western Australia increased from 4.6 per cent to 4.9 per cent. That can be compared with the unemployment rate across Australia, which is 5.7 per cent, and in other Australian states—New South Wales, 6.4 per cent; Victoria 5.9 per cent; and Queensland, 5.3 per cent. That shows that although maintaining levels of employment is a fundamental challenge for government, we are doing well in Western Australia in comparison with other Australian jurisdictions. That reinforces the positive view that the Premier and I, and many members of government, have articulated many times publicly—that is, that as the economic tsunami that is the global financial crisis smashes against Australia's shores, Western Australia is the best state to be in.

It is challenging. I will share some figures with the house. In the past 12 months, the number of people in full-time employment in Western Australia has increased from 827 000 to 833 000. That is an increase of 6 000. In the past 12 months, the total number of people in employment has increased from 1.138 million to nearly 1.173 million. At a time when the global financial crisis is raging around the world, the total level of employment in Western Australia has increased by 34 500 people. That is positive outcome. What has also happened during that time, unfortunately, is that the number of people in Western Australia who are unemployed has increased by 20 000. The great challenges for us in government are, firstly, to provide opportunities to those 60 000 Western Australians who are looking for work; and, secondly, to do all we can to keep in work those nearly 1.2 million Western Australians who are currently in work. I should point out also that, interestingly, in the past 12 months the population of the state in the over 15-years-of-age category has gone up by 47 600 people. In other words, the unemployment rate has gone up because of participation rate factors and not necessarily employment factors.

While we are focusing on employment, this is an opportunity to compare and contrast the approach to economic management that is being taken by this government with the approach that is espoused by the opposition. This government has a clear determination to put a floor under the falls in employment in Western Australia. I want to share with members a chart that shows the level of employment in Western Australia. I am sorry that this chart is not laminated, but I am on a cost-cutting binge. I will hold it up and move it around slowly so that all members can see it. I could not make it any bigger, because I did not want to do a Joe Hockey and have to cut it in half. This chart shows the total level of employment in Western Australia. This chart shows that, going back six, seven or eight months, a floor has been put under the level of employment in Western Australia and employment has been consolidated at a high level. That is a great outcome for Western Australians. However, we have a lot of work to do to keep that floor in place. That is why as a government we are borrowing money. That is why we will be carefully running up state debt over the next few years to \$19.1 billion. That is because every single dollar that we borrow will support Western Australian jobs. That is what we intend to do. For example, next year we will fund a record \$8.3 billion of capital works spending, which Treasury tells me will keep at least 20 000 Western Australians in work. That is why we are borrowing money, and we are happy to do that; that is why we have invested in infrastructure; that is why we have cut payroll tax for small business; that is why we are focused on keeping apprentices in training; and that is why we are focused on supporting small businesses.

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** If this level of debt is so good, would double the level of debt be any better?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** We have to carefully manage our level of debt. Our level of debt is not assessed by the opposition; it is assessed by Standard and Poor's, which gave this state its AAA rating. What did the opposition, when in government, seriously offer as a comparator? It cut debt without offering one cent of savings, except for the \$400 million local government fund, which is currently employing hundreds of people around regional

Western Australia. It is the only thing it offered up while we do things to keep tens of thousands of Western Australians in employment.

I love to pull out this plan. It is the Leader of the Opposition's plan to protect jobs. What has he offered by comparison? The opposition wants to set up a task force, conduct an audit and pull a committee together. When we look at our massive efforts to keep people in employment, we know that we are doing the right thing by the people of Western Australia, both those in employment who want to keep their jobs and those unemployed who are looking for jobs. We make no apology.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** In a minute, member for Warnbro, or you will pull a hamstring.

We make no apology for borrowing money to keep Western Australians in employment.