

## SCHOOL BUS SERVICES

### *Motion*

**MRS HODSON-THOMAS** (Carine) [5.30 pm]: I move -

That this House condemns the Government over its inaction in relation to school bus services in Western Australia, and demands that -

- (a) the current negotiations be completed as a matter of urgency and that the remuneration adequately takes into account the level of capital investment made by contractors;
- (b) negotiations recognise that small, locally based services provide better continuity and quality of care for children and will also maintain employment in country areas;
- (c) contracts are issued to contractors on a sufficiently long-term basis to enable service providers to invest in upgraded equipment;
- (d) contracts will not be unilaterally altered and the investment by contractors into school buses will be taken into account in any renegotiations; and
- (e) the price of fuel and maintenance in country areas be taken into account when renegotiations on contracts take place.

I wish to place on record my concern that the Government has failed to honour its pre-election policy on school buses. The motion that stands in my name incorporates much of what the Labor Party's pre-election policy statement articulated. The Labor Party's pre-election policy statement on school buses states -

**Labor will ensure:**

the educational needs of students are the primary of focus of decisions made in respect of access to school bus services

contracts remain in local communities

school buses are of a consistently high standard and remain subject to the current regime of random inspections

the commencement of the long awaited trial of seat belts on school buses

contracts are issued to operators on a sufficiently long term basis to enable service providers to invest in upgraded equipment

contracts will not be unilaterally altered and the investment by contractors into school buses will be taken into account in any renegotiations

timely reviews of contract remuneration for providers of school bus services are carried out, that current negotiations are completed as a matter of urgency and that the remuneration adequately takes into account the level of capital investment made by contractors

an independent appeals mechanism for service providers who are aggrieved by the Department of Transport's decisions.

To date, the issue of rates of remuneration for school bus operators has not been dealt with except through the establishment of a task force to investigate the matter. As members can appreciate, there is considerable concern and unrest among school bus operators. Given the delays and the stalemate that seems to have occurred to date, they are concerned that the matter will not be dealt with in the forthcoming year. We are in the final term of the school year and school bus operators feel they are in limbo. We can all appreciate that this is of major concern. Sadly, as I said, the matter has not been resolved.

On Friday 12 October, I attended a rally at Parliament House about the matter. The member for Wanneroo, who is the chairman of the Government's school bus task force that is examining these matters, addressed the bus operators at the rally. She indicated her intention to resolve the issues as quickly as possible and, to use her words, she did not want to see this issue become the never-ending story. In fairness to the member for Wanneroo, I believe that it was never her intention to delay the matter. Historically, while we were in government we were not able to finalise the matter of remuneration for school bus operators and we will be criticised by government members when they debate the motion. The matter came close to being concluded in January. However, the election was called and, regrettably, as a consequence it was not resolved. Nevertheless, since taking office, the Labor Government has effectively been unable to resolve the matter. It is important that the current negotiations be completed as a matter of urgency.

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The school bus operators and Transport Forum WA members moved four motions at the rally. They are -

Motion 1

That the government act promptly to resolve the issue of school bus contractor remuneration.

Motion 2

That if school bus contract remuneration is not resolved to the satisfaction of the School Bus Division of Transport Forum within six weeks of this meeting further action will be considered.

Motion 3

That this meeting demands that the government separate the issue of remuneration to school bus contractors from all other issues relating to school bus contracting.

Motion 4

That this meeting calls on the government to remain faithful to the 2001 ALP (Executive Summary) policy on school buses.

The Opposition and National Party members support the school bus operators' desire to have this matter resolved forthwith, and I would like to believe that the Government is committed to doing so posthaste. However, I fear that that is not the case and that further stress will be placed on school bus operators and the great service they provide to the community. It is important to acknowledge the exceptional service provided by the operators of orange school buses. I know that my colleagues and National Party members will also highlight a number of specific cases in their electorates when they have an opportunity to speak on this motion.

School bus transport has operated in this State on a dedicated contract basis since 1918. The current system is underscored by an excellent safety record, stability and reliability that is much valued by metropolitan, rural and regional Western Australians. Contract school bus operators involve 850 small business operators who service approximately 750 mainstream schools and 100 special education schools. There is no doubt that these school bus operators provide stability, reliability, safety and loyalty to the service. The buses carry some 25 000 students over 270 000 kilometres on a daily basis. This service is an integral part of rural and remote communities. It also caters for the needs of students with disabilities who require that door-to-door service. Surely for these very reasons, this matter should be resolved posthaste, as I have said.

One of the most important considerations that should be acknowledged is the valuable pastoral care that regular drivers provide to these students and their families, who over time have obviously developed confidence and enormous trust in the bus operators and the contract system.

I take this opportunity to quote from a document provided to me titled "Recent Review of the school bus system - A Community perspective". It reads -

The contract school bus is an icon in WA and it is an integral part of the community fabric in country WA. Throughout both metropolitan and rural/regional WA there is a high level of satisfaction and an unequalled level of trust in the existing service and its delivery. Parents, schools and community groups hold the school bus system in the highest regard and have an expectation that the level of service, its inherent safety record, its efficiency and its reliability will be maintained.

Since 1918, there has never been a fatality on a contract school bus. This record is guarded jealously by those people who provide the service and embraced with a passion by those who receive the service; there is an enormous community dividend in this record.

These comments highlight the confidence and trust that the community has in, and the value it places on, the contract school bus service.

I understand that at the recent annual general meeting of the school bus division of Transport Forum WA held on 27 April, the minister assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure endorsed Labor's pre-election policy; yet there now appears to be doubt about whether the Government is willing to commit to deal with this issue as a matter of urgency. That doubt has occurred as a result of questions raised by the State Supply Commission about contracts. Why is State Supply suddenly raising these questions about the contracts of school bus operators; why is it taking so long for Crown Law's advice to be provided; and what is the reason for this delay, which is placing this service in jeopardy? This issue needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency, because contractors are continuing to experience economic hardship as a result of this ongoing uncertainty and delay. This uncertainty is placing stress on school bus operators. In essence, they have effectively had a caveat placed over their business, which means that their business cannot be sold.

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With regard to contracts in perpetuity, I understand that when we were in government, an agreement had been reached about the security of tenure of school bus contracts. Concern has been expressed to me about whether the Labor Government will honour that previous agreement in line with its pre-election promises. All these matters are causing an uncertainty that is placing stress on school bus operators.

Another issue that impacts on country school bus operators, and that must be taken into consideration when renegotiating the contracts, is the cost of fuel and maintenance. I have been provided with a copy of a letter that was sent to Mr Gary Hodge, Acting Director General of the Department of Transport, from Mr Maurice Silvestri of the Bus and Coach Association of Western Australia, dated 28 August 2001. I will not read all of the letter, but the first two paragraphs state -

The current system of determining fuel prices is cumbersome to administer and does not compensate for the actual prices being paid by Contractors outside the metropolitan Area.

The averaging of the price of fuel from 24 different locations does not adequately reflect the cost of fuel paid by operators, creating inequity between country and metropolitan operators. As the metropolitan price is also included in the equation, the metropolitan contractors benefit from this system and the country contractors lose.

I urge the minister to give closure to this matter and honour the Labor Party's pre-election promise to ensure that this valuable service is not jeopardised in any way. I hope the minister will give this undertaking today so that school bus operators can continue to deliver this much needed and highly valued service in the community.

**MR TRENORDEN** (Avon - Leader of the National Party) [5.45 pm]: I join this debate with a great deal of anxiety, because few services in rural Western Australia are more important than the school bus service. We were greatly alarmed to find in this House only a few days ago that there is no allocation for this issue in the state budget. We have heard the rhetoric of the Treasurer about the state budget. Where are we heading on this issue? When the Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure gets to her feet she will say we had our chance to deal with this issue when we were in government. That is true. We were close to finalising an agreement between the Government and the school bus contractors; but I admit that we did not quite get there. However, that is hardly the issue. We are no longer in government. The Labor Party is now in government, and in its pre-election policy it made a raft of promises about school buses. The previous speaker mentioned some of those promises, and I will run through a number of them also.

One of those promises was that Labor would ensure that school buses are of a consistently high standard and remain subject to the current regime of random inspections. That high quality of buses obviously requires a major capital component. Those bus operators need to have a flow of money to ensure that the buses are fully maintained and are kept in an as-new and strong condition, because this industry has a safety record that is second to none. If we ever want to talk about performance audits and a reward for performance, these people have performed outstandingly well for many years.

Another promise was that Labor would ensure that contracts are issued to operators on a sufficiently long-term basis to enable service providers to invest in upgraded equipment. Anyone who has been involved in business knows that people need time to recoup the capital that they have invested. We are talking about a cost of about \$250 000 for small and large buses. That is a sizeable amount of capital. We should ensure that these contracts are long enough and secure enough to enable the operators who supply this outstanding service to get a return on their capital and make a living at the same time, because in most rural areas - I cannot speak for the metropolitan area - these people do not have the opportunity to take on a second occupation. These people do the metropolitan bus run in the morning and at night, and that leaves them with only a small number of hours while school is in session in which they can do something else. The problem is also that in a country town of 600, 1 000 or 2 000 people, what else can these school bus operators do? One point that is raised constantly but that is not relevant for most school bus operators is that they can rent out their buses privately to the bowling club, the cricket club or the over-sixties club. However, in most country towns that is not possible. That is possible in some larger towns like Northam, but for most contractors the demand for their bus is very low, and when it comes, people usually want the bus for nothing or merely the cost of fuel and some gratuity, but certainly not at commercial rates. It is important that the contract be long term to enable the investor to get a return on his money.

Another point in the Labor Party policy document reads -

contracts will not be unilaterally altered and the investment by contractors into school buses will be taken into account in any renegotiations

Certainty is critical in the process. People in the department have always wanted to mess around with the term "school buses". A report published 18 months ago was sent to the joint party room of the previous Government, and its recommendations were thrown out. We must make sure that people have continuity in their contracts, so

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they can keep on giving the service. Not everyone in every country town will instantly decide to tender for the contracts for buses. The contract must generate enough income for people to sustain themselves.

The seventh dot point of the Labor Party policy document reads -

... remuneration adequately takes into account the level of capital investment made by contractors

I have already made the point, but it is important that the revenue take into account the cost of petrol and diesel, because most country contractors are paying way over the metropolitan price for their fuel.

Mr Omodei: Up to \$1.10.

Mr TRENORDEN: Yes, easily, and plus. I have had a few phone calls from people paying more than \$1.10. There must be a tiered contract so that different regions get a different allocation for the cost of their fuel, because fuel costs more in some areas. I was a member of the Select Committee on Petroleum Products Pricing in Western Australia. We found that sometimes the price in Kalgoorlie was less than that in Esperance, when the fuel came into Esperance. Sometimes prices in areas inland from Albany were cheaper than those in Albany, when the fuel came into Albany. In places in the north west particularly, fuel was cheaper inland than in Port Hedland and other places. The contractors must have the capacity to ensure that the extraordinary cost of fuel is met.

We are desperately worried that the current budget contains no allocation of money for these operators. That means the minister must go to Cabinet and extract an allocation to ensure that the overdue agreement is completed or - God forbid if it is true - nothing will happen until the next budget. That is not an option. As every day ticks by, people's contracts may be close to expiring, people may want to sell their business because they want to retire, are sick or can no longer get a licence. If they need to sell their business, they need to know how the business will operate. Uncertainty is death in business. People must have certainty. Therefore, we need the problem fixed as soon as possible.

The outstanding safety record of contractors must be rewarded. The contract must be long term enough to guarantee the quality of the bus and to ensure that pastoral care is also considered. We all know that bus drivers are handling even more difficult cases than they were a decade or so ago. Disabled children are travelling on the buses and a one year younger age group has been travelling on the buses for the past two years, so the age group mix on the bus is substantially greater.

One of the exercises that I thought was very successful early in my career was when Hon Eric Charlton, then in opposition in the other place, took some Labor Party members to Beacon and put them on a bus. It allowed them the experience of travelling for one and a half hours on a bus, which children experience when going to school. It was something that sitting members had never experienced.

I am sure you will recognise, Mr Acting Speaker (Mr Andrews), the difficulties with a four or five-year-old child on a bus in hot weather. The coalition Government introduced airconditioning, because parents worry very much about very young children on buses. The parents do not want them to be on buses for extended periods. It is a risk and development issue for those children that most others do not experience.

The bus driver has a substantial pastoral care responsibility. There could be a severely mentally or physically disabled child on the bus. Certainly in my electorate that is quite common. He might also have older children doing things that older children do. I can say that with a fair bit of sincerity, because I was kicked off my school bus three times.

Mr Templeman: How did it happen?

Mr TRENORDEN: The last time I tied a girl's ponytails to the rail of the seat and when she stood up she got a bit of a sudden shock.

Mr Templeman: That is most inappropriate behaviour.

Mr TRENORDEN: Very, and I got kicked off the bus for it.

Mr Waldron: You have changed since then, have you?

Mr TRENORDEN: I have reformed since then. Kids take part in those sorts of pranks on buses. I am not saying that my performance was spectacular, but I have seen a lot worse on school buses than I ever did.

It is difficult for a driver to concentrate on driving such a bus when things are happening behind him. There may be up to 50 kids behind him or only a dozen, depending on the bus route.

The National Party wants something done now. I know that the minister will say that we had our chance when in government, and we should have taken it, but we are not in government; we got thrown out.

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Mr Kucera: Because you did not do it.

Mr TRENORDEN: The minister should do it, that is his job.

Mr Logan interjected.

Mr TRENORDEN: What a load of -

Mrs Edwardes: Codswallop?

Mr TRENORDEN: I was not about to say that. I am a bit daintier than the member. What a load of nonsense.

Mr Logan interjected.

Mr TRENORDEN: I went to a meeting with the contractors last week. There were a number of problems. One was the way in which money was inappropriately allocated and tied. The allocation was based on the bond rate. I will never know what the bond rate has to do with running buses; it is irrelevant. However, those issues were resolved. What had not happened was the final negotiations. We had nearly agreed on the terms and conditions of the buses and the contracts. There was a task force and a review. I hope we will not have another task force and another review. The reviews were carried out by public servants - basically the same public servants in the departments right now.

We have gone through that process, and there have been lengthy debates; it is now time for action and contracts. There should not be any argument about it because the Labor Party said it would implement its policy on school buses.

The Labor Party policy provided for an independent appeals mechanism. We are now well into the term of the new Government; where is that process? The Labor Party said it would appoint an independent person to negotiate with bus contractors; where is that person? The best way that the Government can embarrass us is by implementing its policy.

**MR WALDRON** (Wagin) [6.00 pm]: I support this motion. The first two speakers made a number of points. I will not go over all of them except to say that this is about creating uncertainty, and with that comes worry, rumours and stress. I know that is happening in country Western Australia at the moment not only with the bus contractors and their families, but also with the schools and the families whose children attend those schools. The matter also raises health and safety issues for the children. We must maintain the community's confidence in the school bus system, particularly in country WA, where the orange school bus system commenced in 1918. There has not been a death associated with those orange buses, and we must maintain that safety record. Having attended a little country school and travelled quite a few miles on school buses, I have many fond memories of them. The main point is that people are happy with the service, and they want that service maintained. To do that, the Government must make a decision soon so that the bus contractors and the community know where they are going. I know a review is under way; it has been going for a while. We want to see the results of that, and we want the Government to get on with the job.

I raised a grievance in this place about school bus spurs, and I was lucky enough to speak to the School Bus Review committee. I have also spoken to the member for Wanneroo on a few occasions. I agree with the member for Carine that the member for Wanneroo is keen to progress this. I have met with members of the bus forum and other bus contractors, and they have asked for a decision to be made within six weeks. They need to know what will happen, because they need to plan for the 2002 school year, which will be coming around shortly. The uncertainty is causing them stress and anxiety.

The industry comprises 850 small business operators, which is a huge number. I will talk a little about the safety aspect of the industry and the other roles that school buses play in the country areas. The school bus operators are part of the fabric of the community, not only for the families of school children, but also through the other services they provide, such as delivering newspapers and dropping off a spare part when a machine breaks down. A lot of those contractors have been in the industry for many years. I know of some contractors from Dandaragan, whose family has had the school bus contract in that area for 70-odd years. They have heard the rumours about changes to the contracts and the perpetuity of those contracts. It would be disastrous for them if they were not able to sell the goodwill they had built up over such a long time because short-term contracts were introduced and they had nothing to sell. As the Leader of the National Party said, the school bus service is a costly business to purchase and operate. Bus contractors need long-term security before they make that investment. Those people who have invested their whole lives in small country communities need to be able to realise on those investments.

The main issues are contract remuneration, the proposal to integrate school buses in regular passenger transit systems, and the implementation of some of the recommendations of the Morrell review. I probably do not agree with all of those recommendations, but we should at least get a decision on them.

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I want to mention some of the pressures under which the school bus contractors operate and why they need a decision on this. They need to be looked after reasonably well in this situation. The first issue is the rise in fuel prices, and the fact that the contracts do not take into account the distance from the city and the different levels of fuel prices. As has been mentioned, as one travels outwards from Perth and fills up one's car or school bus, the difference in fuel costs surely must be taken into account. That needs to happen sooner rather than later.

I had some experience of dealing with the Department of Transport in its meetings with school bus contractors. It seems that some problems exist in negotiations between the contractors and the public service. Perhaps people are taking some things personally, which is holding up the negotiations. I hope these matters can be overcome sooner rather than later.

One other problem that is causing concern is the school bus spur rules, which was part of the review of school buses. I have talked to bus contractors, schools and families. We need a decision on this very soon because planning must be in place for the start of the next school year. I know that when I brought this matter up earlier, the minister said there would be a decision by the end of the year to be applied to the 2002 school year. The spur rules result in many families taking their children hundreds of kilometres a day to get them to a bus and back home. That needs to be resolved. It is not so much the rules, but their strict application across the board. People are telling me that they want flexibility, so that if every person from the bus contractor, the schools and the parents of children on that bus route are in agreement, it should be possible to allow for a spur route that might go outside the 7.5 kilometre rule that applies at the moment. This is about accessing education and providing reasonable access for all Western Australian families. I do not want to go through the whole spur route situation again, but it unfairly discriminates against rural families. It brings up safety issues, with kids being left alone on roads. More people are being affected, because more farmers' wives and partners work, and it is inconvenient to be at a certain place at a certain time every day because they have no other choice.

An increase in the conveyance allowance was mentioned. While that is good, it is not what people want. The families want reasonable access to the school bus and to provide for the safety of their children, so they are not stranded on major roads. The people need an answer on this as soon as possible. Once again, the uncertainty this brings is causing a lot of stress in the community. I have been approached over the past two weeks about this, and will meet this coming week with school bus contractors from my area. I asked them to brief me fully on this, because, like everyone else here, they want to progress the matter. I am sure that the Government wants some answers. As has already been pointed out by reference to the Labor Party's policy, I am sure the Government agrees with members on this side of the House on this, but it needs to expedite the matter.

Members talked about the previous Government. I was not here then, but I acknowledge that the previous Government did not finalise the matter. However, I understand from the former minister that it was close to finalisation.

Mrs Roberts interjected.

Mr WALDRON: The minister can talk to the bus contractors; that is the truth of the matter. From what I can glean, it would have been finalised in February of this year. I cannot say that for sure, but from talking to the former minister, reading the notes, and talking to the bus contractors involved in negotiations, I felt that was the case. I would support that. I support this motion, and encourage the Government to take heed of it, so that we can get some certainty. We are talking about families; it is the mums, dads and kids who are affected by this. I am sure that all members want to do the right thing.

**MR SWEETMAN** (Ningaloo) [6.09 pm]: In making my comments on this motion, I do not want to backtrack over ground covered by my colleagues. I will condense my comments as best I can to give other members a chance to speak. This is an interesting issue and the minister was right when he said that the coalition did not successfully put it to bed when in government. This problem has a long history. However, in fairness, we can say that the problem has intensified over the past 18 to 20 months. Having served nearly nine months, although it inherited some complex issues, this Government has stonewalled on this issue for far too long. It is not appropriate for the Government to say the Opposition did not put the problem to bed and therefore it cannot criticise the Government. However, the Opposition can do that. Prior to the election, the Labor Party issued many extraordinary promises. It said that it would solve the school bus problem! There was nothing too difficult for this Government when in opposition. However, the Government has made very few inroads into settling this dispute.

The Opposition has said much about some of the extravagant promises made by this Government. Over the past several months, the Government has effectively paved the way for its epitaph along the lines that it is a Government that promised much. That could be a brief summary of what could be a very short Administration.

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If the Government's actions over the past eight and a half to nine months are an example of what is yet to come, that epitaph will be realised sooner rather than later.

Pledges have been read out almost in their entirety by members who have spoken on this issue. The Labor Party made a pledge immediately after the election when it became the Government. The transport forum that coordinated most of the efforts to achieve a resolution has had various meetings on this issue and it has provided me with a letter. To cut to the chase, the minister said in the letter to the transport forum subcommittee representing the bus drivers that this Government will govern and not be controlled or dictated to by the bureaucracy. As if that was not enough, the letter further states that the Government will meet all the elements of the Labor Party policy as it applies to school buses. They are still waiting.

I intimated earlier that some of these issues are complex and significant. However, the remuneration issue is not significant. There is confidence in the standard rate formula that applies to school buses. I cannot see why the minister and the department cannot sit down with the bus drivers and renew the formula to achieve a fair and adequate remuneration. I appreciate that the complex issue of the contracts in perpetuity must be addressed. The largest school bus operator in my electorate does not have the same problems as many other bus operators. He bought his buses in 1986, prior to the implementation of the five-year contracts. However, at the same time, he is uneasy about what the State Supply Commissioner or the Crown Solicitor may advise on in-perpetuity contracts and short-term contracts.

If the minister agrees that the rates formula will be reassessed to give the bus operators some relief, in the light of the Government's proposals it should be made retrospective to the first term of this school year. That would be fair and appropriate due to the amount of time this matter has taken to settle.

In addition to the contract and remuneration issues are the approximately 69 operators who are likely to be absorbed from the metropolitan area into the regular passenger transport system. Clearly, those people deserve some redress. Whether it is in the form of compensation, such as being permitted to retain their buses, or whether the Government is obligated to buy back the buses does not matter. Those people must be looked after. They have provided a service for a long time under various contracts. It is reasonable for them to expect the Government to sufficiently remunerate them if they must leave the industry.

It is interesting that over the past 12 months or so, despite rising fuel prices, the GST has helped some of the bus operators survive. One of my operators told me that if it were not for the GST, he would have had extreme difficulty. I asked him to run that by me again because we have heard so much about what a calamity the GST has wreaked across industry in Western Australia. The rebate of 17c and the GST input credit have had the effect of reducing fuel prices for bus operators by 23c a litre in real terms. It does not mean there has been a net reduction in fuel prices because, as we all know, fuel prices have gone through the roof. However, the effect of the GST has been to bring fuel prices for those country bus drivers back to what they were in about 1998. That has allowed them to tread water. That does not alter the fact that they are insufficiently remunerated. Like some bus drivers, the largest operator in my electorate supplements his income with other contracts. In addition to his school buses, he runs a charter service and has a contract with various buses to take workers out to the Dampier salt operation 80 or 90 kilometres north of Carnarvon.

The standard rates formula has so much credibility that other businesses use it to devise charter rates or regular transport services. It may not be the answer to all our problems, but it is a reasonable reference point from which to develop a fair remuneration for the charter bus operators.

I do not know why the State Supply Commission is examining this issue. The national competition policy and the requirement to competitively bid for various services throughout the State may have some bearing on it. If the national competition policy is the relevant issue, some of its requirements can be offset by a public benefit. In this case it is difficult not to see the great public benefit provided by the school bus contractors. Approximately 800 of them provide an excellent service throughout the State. As was said during this debate, many of them are regional-based small businesses, which are critical parts of the fabric and infrastructure of small communities. They provide a very valuable service and have done so for a long time.

It is high time that the Government acted on this issue. It is no longer appropriate to say that we need another task force or another review. This issue involves some aspects that are too complex for members to handle; therefore, it cannot be settled. It was easy for the Australian Labor Party to say in Opposition that it would solve the problem. It now controls the government benches and, in theory at least, Treasury. I am hard pressed to see why the Government cannot solve this problem. If the Government had the will, the remuneration issue could be solved within a week. I am sure the Government could put to rest some of the other issues by the end of the fourth school term if it applied itself to the task. That would give bus operators heart, particularly those on interim contracts and whose five-year contracts have expired. Some of them have old buses that they are waiting to replace. There is no question about replacing those buses until the operators have security of tenure; that is,

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until the caveat on their small businesses is removed by this Government. That would allow them to provide this valuable service and to be reasonably remunerated for doing so. I encourage the minister to honour the promises that the Government made to this industry to enable these operators to provide this vital service to regional Western Australia.

**MR BRADSHAW** (Murray-Wellington) [6.22 pm]: I support this motion. I find it interesting that only one member of the country-Labor coalition - that group of members opposite who have combined to look after the country - is in the Chamber. I refer to the member for Mandurah.

Several members interjected.

Mr BRADSHAW: I will give credit to the Acting Speaker (Mr Dean), who is also a member of the country-Labor coalition.

Mrs Roberts: That country-Labor coalition really worries you.

Mr BRADSHAW: It does not worry me one bit. However, it does worry me that the dedication of that coalition to people in the country is zero. They have disappeared; they have no interest in these school bus operators who have been denied a reasonable salary increase.

I must admit that I am very disappointed about how the former minister handled this issue. The coalition Government deserved a rap over the knuckles, and it got it. I am not proud of our record, but we were nearing a resolution.

The many promises that members opposite made have been read out in this place today. One promise was timely reviews of contract remuneration provided to school bus services. Most of those reviews have been carried out. It should have been a matter simply of tying up the loose ends and finalising it. Instead, the poor owner-operators and the owners are wondering about their future. Their remuneration today is less than it was five or six years ago because of the formula, which needs rejigging. It is sad that it has caused this debacle. That is no reason for people to sit on their hands.

From what I can gather, the Government had a position on this issue until the bureaucrats got into the act again. That was the trouble during our term in office - the bureaucrats had the minister by the whatever. The former minister should have had the guts to stand up and say what he wanted done within a certain time frame. However, it dragged on and on, and it is now dragging on again.

Members opposite made promises, but they have not honoured them. Members should think of the stress those people are suffering. They cannot renew their contracts because the Government will not come to the party. They might want to sell their buses and move on; they might want to retire. They are uncertain about their future and whether they will be absorbed into the regular passenger service. They do not know whether they will be bought out or told not to come back on Monday. Their contracts have been subject to add-ons. How are they feeling? They are under a great deal of stress.

Several members interjected.

Mr BRADSHAW: It is all right for the member for Wanneroo to shake her head. I can see the look on her face; she could not give a stuff about those people; she could not care less!

The ACTING SPEAKER: (Mr Dean) Order! I am not sure whether that was unparliamentary language; I have not been in this place long enough to know. However, I ask the member to desist.

Mr BRADSHAW: At least I have got the message across to the member for Wanneroo. She cannot sit there with a smirk on her face.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: The member for Mandurah will come to order.

Mr BRADSHAW: It is about time this Government got its act together. It should honour the commitments it made to these school bus operators. Members opposite should not sit on their hands or have inquiry after inquiry. I support the motion.

**MR EDWARDS** (Greenough) [6.26 pm]: I represent some of the school bus contractors in the Geraldton and Greenough area. What a sorry state of affairs this issue has become. One of our local newspapers pointed out that more than six months down the track the new Government has still failed to reach an agreement with these contractors. I can say this because I am a new member: this is a case of Governments sitting on their hands. Assurances have been made, but not delivered. The supposed new deal proposed by the previous Government



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was to be put in place prior to the election. That did not happen. This Government rode into power on broken promises and commitments. In January 2001, Hon Alannah MacTiernan advised that if it won the state election, the Labor Party would ensure that contracts would remain in local communities and that they would be issued on a sufficiently long-term basis to enable contractors to invest in upgraded equipment. What has happened with this very important issue? It has been referred to yet another review with no time limit. So much for election promises!

The contractors feel they have been given the run-around. To use a colloquialism, they feel they have been given the bum's rush by the Government and the bureaucracy. I am advised that meetings have been sought with the chairperson of the review committee - I have a lot of respect for the lady - and the minister. The contractors were told that the chairperson and the minister were not available or could not meet with them. They are frustrated and angry and they want some action. They are responsible for thousands of children every school day. This issue should be addressed swiftly.

We are talking about 850 small business operators who service approximately 750 mainstream and 100 special education schools. Historically, they have provided stability, reliability, safety and loyalty. In 1998, they carried 25 000 students over 270 000 kilometres on a daily basis at a cost to the State of \$46 million a year. We need a recognition of and an immediate decision about the plight of these school bus contractors. They should not be victim to the whim of the bureaucracy and ministerial delays. That is what is happening. The Government must act on its pre-election commitments.

As has been stated, we are facing high fuel prices. Geraldton residents pay more for their fuel than most people in this State. That is particularly evident in regional areas. That is another issue that this Government has woefully neglected. It said that fuel prices would be reduced. That has not happened in Geraldton. A raft of other issues needs to be addressed, such as airconditioning on buses, spur applications being ignored and inaction about contractors' remuneration. The minister should find the money.

**MR MARSHALL** (Dawesville) [6.29 pm]: I will speak on the motion because I have a personal interest in Mandurah Bus Charters. During my life I have seen what family businesses mean to country communities; they are something special. The people in Mandurah who created this service are a truly wonderful family and generous contributors to the area. At the moment, they employ 35 people and run a 20-bus school bus service. However, a year ago they ran a company that had 40 school buses and double the current staff. The reason they lost that 20-bus group was the regional passenger transport contract. Admittedly, they put in a tender for the contract but, unfortunately, because our Government was running it and our ministers were in charge, the contract was given to a Melbourne firm. I jumped up and down because of that. For those members who do not know me well, I do not have much time for Victorians. These Victorians have come into the Peel, Mandurah and Rockingham regions. I could not believe we gave that contract to a company operating from the eastern States. However, our family group -

Mr Whitely: We've got a new coach from Victoria.

Mr MARSHALL: The member for Roleystone should never trust a Victorian when things get tight.

Mr Carpenter: Who is the family?

Mr MARSHALL: The Gillam family.

Mr Carpenter: My mother's a Gillam. It is Keith Gillam.

Mr MARSHALL: Keith Gillam is a champion. I think he holds the fastest century in country week cricket and he played reserves for West Perth. He plays off about a six handicap in golf and he is a champion bloke. The family came from Kojonup. They used to make buses in Kojonup that were used all over Western Australia. These people work for fun. They play and work hard and give something back to the community. His son is a chip off the old block - he was the fairest and best for the Mandurah Mustangs, he is the leading cricketer, and when he gets time to play golf, he goes around a couple over par without any practice. This kid is a champion like his father. He has taken over the business because what has happened with the contractual arrangements over the past two years has broken Keith Gillam's heart. I wrote him a letter and said that I was ashamed to be part of that Government because of the way the lease was let. Country people should have been given some advice about how to properly apply for the contract. They could have handled it, but they lost it to the regional passenger transport system. It is a concern to them, because as the business they built narrows, these contracts might go to Transperth operators again. There is no confidence among contractors in the school bus industry.

The Gillams put something back into their local town. They are generous people who contribute sponsorship to such things as the performing arts, schools and sport. They are not in there for the short term; they do not just get in, make something and take it away. They are relying on some continuity of this contract. They rely on the

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fact that contracts are awarded for 15 years - three times five years - which gives them time to replace the buses; to pay them off and have money in the bank for new buses at the end of the 15-year increment. These people are there to stay. However, we are making it increasingly hard for family businesses of this nature to stay because, as has already been mentioned - I will not reiterate the point for too long - the cost of running the contractual bus services has gone up. We are not matching them by coming to the party quickly.

In closing, I will quote the pre-election ALP promises for school bus services. One dot point states -  
contracts remain in local communities

I really hope that happens and that the school bus contracts will not be let to Transperth operators. I want to keep those contracts in our regional areas, so that people stay in the community and jobs are available for part-time bus drivers. Another dot point that is of grave concern to me states -

timely reviews of contract remuneration for providers of school bus services are carried out

Contract remuneration is important, but nothing has happened since January 2000. This is 2001 and the Labor Party has been in government for a number of months. I know that a review is taking place, but I do not believe that the review committee has enough interest in the task or that enough action is being taken. The committee members do not have a feeling for country people or understand that the bus industry involves around 850 small bus operators who service about 750 mainstream and 100 special education schools. They do not understand that those operators provide a stable and safe service. They do not understand that with a local regional bus service, bus drivers know the names of every person who gets on their buses. They do not understand that for these services to operate properly, the people getting on the buses must feel safe.

I say to the minister and to the member chairing the review that it is time for action. They cannot wait overnight. They have watched the instability of football clubs and know that it has taken time for the clubs to get coaches, but the season is now on. We are out for action; both the Eagles and Dockers are ready for action. So is Peel Thunder, which announced its coach today. Will that review committee be able to get a coach who will take it to a premiership and help all the bus providers in the country? I would like to see this happen in two months. The challenge is on; let us see whether they are capable of following through with it.

**MRS ROBERTS** (Midland - Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure) [6.36 pm]: I am absolutely astounded by the motion that has been moved today. It has attempted to link our Government with a claim of inaction on school bus services in Western Australia. In fact, this motion gives me a fantastic opportunity to explain to the public and bus contractors how poorly the previous Government handled the issue of school bus operations in this State. I will provide some of the history, so members can discover for themselves who should really be condemned for the inaction. This matter has been going on for five years, during which time members on the other side of the House could have made a difference but did not. In 1996, responsibility for the administration of school bus transport was transferred from the Education Department to the Department of Transport, which now comes under the planning and infrastructure portfolio. For the benefit of the member for Greenough, I will give the correct figures that the department now administers. It administers 715 school bus contracts servicing mainstream schools and 104 contracts servicing education support facilities. Those services carry some 25 000 students and cover a distance of about 143 000 kilometres a day. The cost to provide this service in 2000-01 was \$50 million.

The payment to operators providing these services is based on an indexing formula negotiated in 1994 between the Minister for Education and the then West Australian Road Transport Association. That association is now known as the Transport Forum WA. The formula is known as the standard rate and provides cost adjustments, which can go up or down and which are assessed and applied twice a year - at the start of the first and third school terms.

The House should also be aware that, thanks to the efforts of two former government ministers, two different types of agreement are in operation for bus service providers. One arrangement is for those who operated before 1995 and another is for those who began operating post-1995. Those two past ministers - the then Minister for Transport, Eric Charlton, and the then Minister for Education, Norman Moore - signed a letter in 1995 that agreed that all normal school bus contracts would be renewed with the existing contractor, should there be one. This is subject to the following points. First, the continuing need for the service; secondly, acceptable performance by the contractor; and, thirdly, the contract statement being signed by the contractor. The practice has been to review and renew these contracts every five years.

The House might be interested to learn that the memorandum of agreement on the security of tenure of school bus contracts developed by the two former ministers - Charlton and Moore - included the statement -

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This renewal will also apply to those contracts currently held by existing contractors that are transferred to another contractor.

About 670 school bus services operate under the memorandum of agreement put in place by those two former ministers. However, all new bus services since 1996 have been put out to open, competitive tender. Contracts for these new services have been let on a life-of-bus basis, which is usually 10 to 15 years, or for a specific period. Those services are re-let at the end of the tender period. The House should note that the Department of Transport estimated in February 2000 that if all contracts were competitively tendered, there would be a saving to taxpayers of \$5 million a year.

The standard rate is meant to be reviewed every five years, and history shows that the former State Government agreed to a review in July 1999. However, it did not set up the school bus remuneration negotiating committee until February 2000. That was a considerable delay.

Mr Omodei: The standard rate review was completed in 1994-95. It would have been logical to have a review in 1999, even though the Morrell report had been finished by then.

Mrs ROBERTS: The former Government agreed to the review in 1999, but it was not put into place until February 2000. An eight-month delay was built into that process.

Mrs Hodson-Thomas: We understand that we did not get it right. I said that.

Mrs ROBERTS: I will go through the sad and sorry history of the complete and utter inaction by the former Government.

Mrs Hodson-Thomas: What are you doing?

Mrs ROBERTS: I will talk about the current situation after I have been through this. The committee had an independent chair, Mr Tim Shanahan, and included representatives from the West Australian Road Transport Association and the Department of Transport. The committee met for six months to review the basis of remuneration for bus contractors. Both parties had strong and opposing views. The Department of Transport maintained that the standard rate in its existing form had little relevance to the actual costs incurred by operators and that the treatment of some cost elements was arbitrary and commercially unrealistic. To prove that, it highlighted the lower costs of tendered school bus routes. In contrast, the West Australian Road Transport Association sought a number of changes to the ways costs were constructed in the standard rate and in some direct increases. It maintained there were flaws in the methodology used to calculate the rate, resulting in some components being undervalued and others being overvalued. It developed a minimum rate model to address this. That model included recognition of the differences in costs associated with providing contract bus services in regional and remote Western Australia and metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas. The Department for Planning and Infrastructure estimated that the proposed alternative model would result in an increase to the cost of the transport assistance program of \$26 million a year - an increase of more than \$100 million over a four-year period. It was clear that the parties could not reach an agreement.

The independent chairman provided a report to the then minister in October 2000. What happened to the Shanahan report? We know that the Minister for Transport at the time discussed the report and its findings with the Transport Forum WA and Mr Shanahan.

Mr Omodei: And agreed to the findings.

Mrs ROBERTS: However, he did not do anything, and neither did the Government. We are told that he would have done something in February, a couple of weeks after the election. He received the report in October. He talked to the Transport Forum WA in October. He did not make any decisions and he took no action. He did not even make a press announcement. There was absolutely nothing. That is the real case of inaction. The people opposite must have come down in the last rain shower if they believe that the minister would have done something about it two weeks after the election, when he had not done anything in not just four months, but more than five years. They probably also believe there are fairies at the bottom of the garden if they think that this matter would have been resolved in another couple of weeks. Absolutely nothing was done following the release of the Shanahan report in October. That is the case of inaction. The significant findings of the Shanahan report included: the current level of remuneration of school bus contractors should provide for a commercial return; the standard rate formula was flawed in its methodology for providing a system for determining contractor payments; a composite rate system should be developed as an alternative system to determining contractor payments; and the principle of perpetuity is no longer appropriate and should be discarded in favour of a suitable contractual arrangement primarily based on the life of the bus. The former Government did not implement any recommendations of the report, apart from the indexation changes. As a result, the level of remuneration of contractors has not changed since 1995.

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Which Government has not delivered on its commitments? It is easy to see that the former Government completely neglected that constituency. No people should be more embarrassed than the National Party members, who provided eight years of transport ministers.

Our policy is very clear. It seems that members opposite had very few points to make, because they spent half their speeches quoting our policy.

Mr McNee: You are the Government.

Mrs ROBERTS: We have many either disinterested or lazy members opposite who were asked to fill in some time during private members' business. None had a speech -

Mrs Edwardes: They can tell their local newspapers that they made a speech!

Mrs ROBERTS: That is right. People will see that those members spent half their time quoting our policy and the other half telling a few amiable stories about how much they respect their local bus operators.

Our policy is clear. In June 2001 we set up a bus task force, chaired by the member for Wanneroo. The task force's terms of reference are to report on the preferred model and to determine the rate of remuneration for school bus operators.

Mr McNee: Why do you need another review?

Ms Guise: Your report was unsatisfactory and left too many unanswered questions.

Mrs ROBERTS: I suspect that most members opposite have not read the Shanahan report, because if they had, they would know that it raised many more questions than it answered.

Ms Guise: One of the opposition members supported the standard rate, which the report was against.

Mrs ROBERTS: That was the member for Ningaloo. He did not understand the report or the issue at all.

Three parties are involved in the task force - the Department for Planning and Infrastructure, the Transport Forum and the Bus and Coach Association. The task force has had some interesting meetings. It has considered the existing standard rate model used by the Department for Planning and Infrastructure and the alternative composite rate model put forward by the Transport Forum and the Australian Bus and Coach Association, using cost data gathered from members and other industry sources and suppliers. Other models have also been costed. This work showed that the models from industry would add an extra \$18 million a year to the cost of the transport assistance program, an increase of 36 per cent a year. As recommended by the Shanahan report, we are now engaging an independent consultant to benchmark the components of the model based on the composite rate model proposed by the Transport Forum. The outcome of this benchmarking study will be a recommendation on the structure, elements and total costs of the composite rate, which will be contained in the task force report.

The task force also is addressing the conveyance allowance and spurs, and I have been informed by my colleague, the member for Wanneroo, that I should be receiving this report within the next five to six weeks. I will look very closely at the report and its recommendations, and I will discuss it with my parliamentary colleagues. This is the Government's opportunity to fix a problem that members opposite created and left unattended. The former Government should be condemned for its absolute inability to deal with this problem. I am proud to say that we have tackled this problem head-on. We will honour our election commitments. I will receive the report in some five to six weeks, and we should be able to resolve these matters for the bus operators once and for all.

**MR OMODEI** (Warren-Blackwood) [6.51 pm]: I find this matter very interesting. We have a Minister assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure responsible for the running of school buses, and we have the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure with the responsibility for buying the school buses, and we all know the reasons for that. If ever there was a shambles in a Government, it is a combination of the two ministries - the Department for Planning and Infrastructure and -

Mrs Roberts: I have responsibility for both.

Mr OMODEI: It is a very confusing situation. The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure at one stage was in agreement with Tim Shanahan's report, but since the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure had her accident and there were problems as to how much she could drink when she was driving, there was then a split. If ever there was an embarrassing situation for a Government it is the situation that exists between these two ministers. I look at the Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure - the Minister for Police and Emergency Services - and every time the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure gets up, her body language is not very good.

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There is certainly no love lost between the two ministers. We know that but we have not exploited it; however, the Minister Assisting the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure should not tempt us. We have had plenty of opportunities to do that. I have been very kind to the minister. Her police ministry is not going too well at the moment.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Andrews): Order, members!

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr OMODEI: I presume that the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure was looking at buses at the time of the Oktoberfest. She was looking at public buses rather than school buses.

Let me cut to the chase and talk about this issue. This issue goes back to 1995 and the standard rate, and there have been developments since the various reviews. There was the Barbara Morrell report in 1995 which reviewed all the bus system. Later the independent chairman, Tim Shanahan, was brought in, and I thought he did a very good job. I understood at that point that the Transport Forum had general agreement for the Shanahan report. I also understood that the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure was in agreement with Tim Shanahan's report. Then along came the other minister, the minister assisting the minister. I am not sure what this minister thinks of that report, because I understand she failed to meet with the Transport Forum a few weeks ago and she has not explained why she did not attend that meeting. Maybe she could have explained the Government's position to the forum. The Transport Forum was obviously concerned enough to approach me and the Liberal Party spokesman for transport about this issue. There is a great deal of concern among the Transport Forum people about the future of the 850 businesses. That is why they approached the Liberal Party, and that is why we have raised this debate today in this Parliament.

Mrs Roberts interjected.

Mr OMODEI: Did the minister get an invitation to that meeting?

Mrs Roberts: I certainly was not aware of it.

Mr OMODEI: I apologise, because I was given the impression by the school bus forum that the minister was invited to a meeting and failed to turn up. If that is the case, that is poor form, but if I am wrong, I apologise.

Mrs Roberts: Anything that I agree to attend, I attend. I do not fail to turn up to anything.

Mr OMODEI: It was very important that the Shanahan report was acceptable to all and sundry. I understand that the member for Wanneroo has been appointed to further review that process. I understand that the school bus forum acknowledges the support from the member for Wanneroo and the chairman of that forum.

Let me refer to what happened during the previous Government and what is happening now. It is always the case when Governments change that issues are carried over from one Government to the next. Yes, this issue could have been dealt with in a far more expedient fashion. There is no doubt that it is a complex issue, and members here acknowledge that our preference would have been to resolve that issue; but we now find that there is no money in the budget to resolve it. The contracts will have to be renewed. These people want to know whether they have a future in the school bus industry, and that is very important. The fact that a lot of time has passed getting to the position we are in now does no credit to either the former Government or the current Government. This matter is dragging on. Why would the people from the school bus forum come and talk to the Opposition requesting us to raise this matter in the Parliament if they did not have genuine concerns? They obviously believe that if something does not happen very soon this issue will go over into the next budget and their businesses will be in an uncertain position for a long time to come. These people run genuine businesses in country Western Australia. They are part of the fabric of society. I have 23 schools in my electorate. We often deal with issues to do with school buses - eligible passengers, ones who are not eligible, spurs and so on. These businesses take up a big part of country members' time, particularly at the beginning of a school year. I have all of the Margaret River area in my electorate, and all of the Shires of Manjimup, Bridgetown and Nannup, with 23 schools that all rely on a regular, reliable and safe school bus system.

I will tell members of the extent to which these people go. My contractor in Northcliffe, Andrew Dempster, is very thorough. He comes up to the shire and we organise a bus trip with the shire people and the people from Main Roads, and we go right through the school bus route and we check for corners, the dangerous passing lanes and so on. That is a measure of the level to which these people will go to make sure that their school bus routes are safe. This matter has dragged on for quite a while and it needs to come to some resolution. The minister should respond to these people as a matter of urgency because they really need a response as soon as possible.

**Extract from *Hansard***  
[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 24 October 2001]  
p4822b-4834a

Ms Katie Hodson-Thomas; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Terry Waldron; Mr Rod Sweetman; Mr John Bradshaw;  
Acting Speaker; Mr Jeremy Edwards; Mr Arthur Marshall; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Paul Omodei

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Question put and a division taken with the following result -

Ayes (17)

Mr Barnett	Mrs Edwardes	Mr Marshall	Dr Woollard
Mr Barron-Sullivan	Mr Edwards	Mr Omodei	Mr Bradshaw ( <i>Teller</i> )
Mr Board	Mrs Hodson-Thomas	Mr Pental	
Dr Constable	Mr Johnson	Mr Sweetman	
Mr Day	Mr McNee	Ms Sue Walker	

Noes (26)

Mr Andrews	Ms Guise	Mr McGowan	Mr Ripper
Mr Bowler	Mr Hill	Ms McHale	Mrs Roberts
Mr Brown	Mr Kobelke	Mr McRae	Mr Watson
Mr Carpenter	Mr Kucera	Mr Murray	Mr Whitely
Mr D'Orazio	Mr Logan	Mr O'Gorman	Ms Quirk ( <i>Teller</i> )
Dr Edwards	Ms MacTiernan	Mr Quigley	
Dr Gallop	Mr McGinty	Ms Radisich	

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Pairs

Mr Trenorden	Ms Martin
Mr House	Mr Templeman
Mr Waldron	Mr Hyde
Mr Ainsworth	Mr Marlborough

Question thus negatived.

*House adjourned at 7.02 pm*

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