

**CORONAVIRUS — REGIONAL TOURISM — GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**

*Standing Orders Suspension — Motion*

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Nationals WA)** [5.09 pm] — without notice: I move —

That so much of standing orders be suspended as is necessary to enable the following motion to be debated forthwith —

That this house calls on the state government to provide a financial support package for tourism businesses in the midwest, Gascoyne, Pilbara, Kimberley and goldfields–Esperance regions impacted by extended intrastate regional border restrictions.

*Standing Orders Suspension — Amendment to Motion*

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Leader of the House)** [5.10 pm]: I move —

To insert after “forthwith” —

, subject to the debate being limited to 10 minutes for government members and 10 minutes for non-government members

Amendment put and passed.

*Standing Orders Suspension — Motion, as Amended*

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L. Mettam)**: Members, as this is a motion without notice to suspend standing orders, it will need the support of an absolute majority to succeed. If I hear a dissenting voice, I will be required to divide the Assembly.

Question put and passed with an absolute majority.

*Motion*

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Nationals WA)** [5.11 pm]: I move the motion.

I thank those members who have accommodated this motion in a rather odd circumstance. We have moved a motion that calls on the state government to provide a financial support package for tourism businesses, particularly in the midwest, Gascoyne, Pilbara, Kimberley and goldfields–Esperance regions because these regions have been impacted the most by the extended intrastate regional border restrictions. Members will note that we asked a number of questions today to try to get to the bottom of the rationale that the government is using to make these decisions. I think the Premier outlined where the advice had come from—the Chief Health Officer and the Commissioner of Police—and that two options were put before cabinet to make a decision on; that is, it could be left the way it was or we could have the regional boundaries that we see now. It is very difficult for us in opposition to interrogate that health advice. Certainly, throughout this whole situation, I and my colleagues have not sought to do that. It has been important that the government has been able to act and that all those decisions have been made on that advice. What we are trying to do now on behalf of our communities and people in the regions that have been most impacted is to ask those questions to more fulsomely understand that advice, given that the restrictions have been extended to businesses particularly in the north—I am not leaving out the goldfields–Esperance region—because they are experiencing their tourism season now and are not likely to get a normal season this year and, I expect, any income will be restricted for at least another 12 months. Many will not be around if some sort of financial support is not offered.

I have listened to the briefings and advice by the Minister for Tourism and the Premier when they have provided their updates to the media, and there have been questions about this issue, particularly in the north: When will there be more financial support? Do they acknowledge that there are significant challenges for businesses in the north? I hear the minister continually say, “Yes, I understand. We will do as much as we can. We are working on it.” In fact, during the last session, we asked a relatively simple question about some of the relief that could have been provided immediately, such as the toilet tax or the fees and charges that are being applied that particularly disadvantage tourism businesses with multiple sewerage outlets. We believe that those sorts of things are relatively easy for the state government to provide relief on now, especially when we consider that these businesses are closed, they still have outgoings but do not have any income and they are expected to continue to exist. I presume that the government wants them to be there, ready to kick on when those regions are open for business again. The real risk is that we will not have businesses there because they are being pushed to the brink.

Although today’s answer provided a very good rationale in that everything is being done on the basis of health advice, what I know—unless the minister stands up and provides greater clarity during this debate—is that at this time, there is no further relief forthcoming for those regions that are facing a contracted or no winter tourism season. It is our strong suggestion to the government that if there is no further support for these businesses, many more

will go to the wall. There is no shortage of evidence and advice, particularly from organisations such as Australia's North West Tourism and its chief executive officer, Natasha Mahar. They are using words like "extraordinary", "something out of a nightmare" and "businesses with up to 30 years' experience facing such a bleak future". There is example after example. Businesses understand that the health of their communities need to be put first, but because health has been given a priority, they are looking to government to make sure that they can survive from an economic perspective. That is what this motion is about. It asks the minister to put the plans of the government on the table sooner rather than later so that those businesses can experience some relief in what has been a very bleak time.

**MRS A.K. HAYDEN (Darling Range)** [5.17 pm]: It is my privilege to stand on behalf of the WA Liberal opposition and support this motion put up by the Nationals WA. As the minister is well aware, our tourism industry was the first one hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and the first one forced to shut its doors, and it will be the last to reopen and recover. Over the last two weeks, I have been having Zoom meetings with a number of tourism operators and small business operators in both metropolitan and regional areas in the state and no matter where they are situated, whether in the CBD or down south, their number one concern is for their northern region colleagues. They understand that they have a small window; they have a five-month peak period to make their money, and we are about to enter that now. If they lose even a little bit of that, it will be a massive chunk out of their potential to earn money. We have a sector that was the first to close and it will be the last to reopen, yet it has received no financial stimulus support or cash from this state government. To be honest, I find that appalling and disappointing. South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria have given a \$10 000 cash grant to small businesses. But in this state, a black hole has formed and a gap has been created for small businesses because they have had no support and no financial stimulus.

We are asking the minister right now to take their plea seriously and start listening to them. As I mentioned, they have a small window in which to start earning money. They need the minister's support and they need it now. We need to get out there and support our northern region families and small business operators. This is a medical and economic fight. If there are medical reasons not to open the northern boundaries, let us know. Show us that medical advice. Tell us, because we will be sympathetic. Our tourism operators need a light at the end of the tunnel. Give them that light. Will they be reopening in June, July or December or in 2021? They need to know and they deserve to know. They need the minister's help.

**MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central)** [5.19 pm]: We need some support for tourism in the north west, which is one of its biggest industries. Tourism businesses in the north west make their money from April to September. Given the situation, they will not be making any money in the next 12 to 18 months. The tourism industry in the north west is facing that reality. They have large recurring fixed-cost debts. Some power bills for pubs or restaurants are up to \$3 000 a month. They have a toilet tax. If a hotel has 30 toilets, for example, it pays \$3 196.69 a month for the privilege of having a toilet. That does not include water going in or water going out. They pay four times the amount paid in Perth for water going in. Some businesses in the north west are facing overheads of over \$30 000 a month. Businesses such as whale shark tour operators need to make the critical decision of whether to walk away from their businesses or livelihoods because they are building up large debts of around \$150 000. Some charter boat operators have debts of \$1.5 million. There is no certainty for tourism in the north west. The minister says, "Don't worry. We'll look after you." Operators need a certain date to start the process of people being able to book to head north. The government has given certainty to the south west. We now need that certainty for the north west. We are not saying that it should happen immediately, but the government should give people a date. We are happy with some of the changes that have occurred that allow the Pilbara, the Gascoyne and the midwest to be put together, but they are at a disadvantage because the south west is getting the trade that people in the north west rely on during this period to get them through the next 12 months. We are potentially looking at it being 18 months before tourism in the north west is back to where it could be. We call on the government to have some packages to help businesses start up and get back going to assist them financially through this very difficult time. If the government does not do that, we will not have an industry to promote holidaying at home when Perth is opened up to the north. It is critical that people are allowed to head north in the future, but the government should give them a certain date of when that is going to happen. That will give certainty to the industry and people who have booked their holidays, and make sure that businesses in the north west can survive being at a tourism disadvantage. Please put on the table the medical advice stating that people from Perth cannot head to the north west. That is what we need.

**MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism)** [5.22 pm]: I thank members for their contributions and the Leader of the Nationals WA for moving the motion. At the outset, I can say that we are not going to agree to the motion. Nevertheless, I will address the matters that have been raised. A number of reasons are behind us not agreeing to this motion, but, primarily, the suggestion is that support has not been provided. That is not true. A significant range of measures have been advanced by both the federal and state governments to support all small businesses in Western Australia. In fact, many households and beneficiaries of state government support are also small business owners. Beyond that, a range of measures have been directly focused on small businesses. They were referred to by the Premier in his response during question time, and by other ministers, such as the Minister for Energy. Members opposite know that there have been grants to small businesses to support paying electricity bills, and fees and

charges for a lot of other areas across government have been frozen for households. There has been action to ensure that people are protected from predatory commercial tenancy behaviour during this time.

Some significant measures are also being implemented—without much fanfare—in the small business sector by the Small Business Development Corporation as a consequence of so much going on with regard to COVID-19. In legislation that passed the upper house during the last sitting, we gave it unparalleled powers. Nowhere in the country do entities like the Small Business Commissioner have the power that he now has in Western Australia to ensure that we do not encounter the situation that occurred the last time there was significant federal largess to support industry, at the time of the global financial crisis threat. We saw terrible outcomes as a consequence of Building the Education Revolution grants going out and contracts being put in place with prime contractors that, in many instances, failed to pass on funding to subcontractors who did work but were left in the lurch. Many thousands of people were impacted by that. We saw horrible outcomes, such as people losing their businesses and homes, marriages breaking up, and people losing their lives through suicide as a consequence of the sort of things that they encountered. In recent times, measures have been put in place to try to counter those sorts of behaviour and consequences. There is now an investigative unit that is available for subcontractors that can provide intelligence and enable the Small Business Commissioner to demand proof of payment, which will prevent, I hope, those sorts of things from happening.

There are many other initiatives by the state government across government, which are in the order of \$1.8 billion. We do not have the deep pockets that the federal government has.

**Mr V.A. Catania:** How much has been spent to date? What was that \$1.8 billion?

**Mr P. PAPALIA:** Ask the Treasurer; you are asking the wrong minister.

A significant amount of funding has been spread across the state, which has been very much, in some instances, focused on supporting small businesses in a range of sectors—not just tourism. I will repeat what I said earlier. As the Minister for Tourism, the Minister for Small Business and the minister responsible for liquor licensing, through the Racing and Gaming portfolio, I am acutely aware of the impact that this crisis has had on, firstly, tourism businesses, but also very much on businesses that the member for North West Central and others have been advocating for. The suggestion that people, particularly in the north, have gone through their quiet season and are now confronting an unknown period prior to being able to regain a revenue stream, I absolutely concede that and understand that. I, too, have done videoconferencing with a large number of operators across the state. I am very sensitive to that challenge, as is the government. I can only say that we are looking to do more and will do whatever we can.

In respect of the questions that members opposite have posed, they have suggested tabling the health advice. That will not happen. As members have heard from the Premier, the health advice is provided by the same source as it has been all along throughout this crisis. There is the national cabinet and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, which comprises all the Chief Health Officers and the Chief Medical Officer of Australia. They are providing the advice. We have the best source of advice in the world. I think it is undeniable that Australia, as a nation, has had good leadership. The Prime Minister has been exceptional and all the Premiers and the Chief Ministers collaborating in the fashion that they have has been possible because of our governance system. I think that one of the greatest outcomes of what has happened is a recognition by the Australian public of the value of our governance system. Their faith in our system of government has been restored. In light of that, people should understand that we are not going to receive advice and then act contrary to it as we move out of this phase.

Going into all the restrictions and adopting all the measures that were recommended, we sought and followed the advice. I understand the anxiety, stress and pain that people are suffering as a consequence of what has happened, but there are a few things to remember. I met with a range of peak bodies just this morning, as I mentioned during question time today. I can confirm that I got the same response from them. Interestingly, the moment that lifting restrictions was announced, no-one was happy. Last week, we had restrictions, and people were lamenting that we still had restrictions. They were seeking that restrictions be lifted, but the moment that the new normal for this particular part of the process was articulated, no-one was happy. I can guarantee you it was a sad meeting in that regard. I sit on the State Disaster Council and in cabinet, and the advice and the way I see it is that the health authorities are looking at it and they want a staged process. It is a bit arbitrary. Some elements of it will look inconsistent, kind of like the member's position on whether we should lockdown or open up—I am being cheeky. From one week to the next, it will be inconsistent, or one measure to another might look like they are inconsistent. That is because the key motivator is to not move too far so that health authorities are not able to isolate where a problem is in the event that it arises. In the event of an outbreak, or a peak of some description, they want to firstly isolate it and then contact trace. Our success in Western Australia and the country, particularly Western Australia, has been in contact tracing. We have two hard borders, national and interstate, and then we had all the intrastate borders, and we have effective contact tracing. They do not want to compromise that. If we dropped all the borders immediately,

we would then confront the potential for the system being overwhelmed and us not being able to trace where there was an outbreak.

**Mrs A.K. Hayden** interjected.

**Mr P. PAPALIA:** I am just trying to respond to the motion. The member asked for dates. Part of that problem is that the Premier has given members an indication. We will be in the second stage on 18 May, and they talked about four weeks subsequently, but the Premier has also indicated that in the event that the outcomes are far more successful and it looks safer than we might have anticipated, we might move to other measures earlier. I cannot give members that specificity. What I know, and I understand people are begging for it, because they beg us too, is that people want certainty that we cannot provide. It is sad; it is just the nature of this incredible situation.

With regard to a financial package, we are looking at what we can do. I cannot tell members more than that. If we are able to do something, we will tell members as soon as we can, and then it will be available and transparent, and people will know about it if we can do that.

At every opportunity, I advocate for small business across the state, particularly tourism, and I think people understand that I am a champion of tourism businesses in this state. Just before this happened we had the best outcomes in history, and I understand that that massive drop has been incredibly challenging. All I can say to people is that we are here, we are trying to do what we can and as soon as we can, we will let people know.

*Division*

Question put and a division taken, the Acting Speaker (Ms L. Mettam) casting her vote with the ayes, with the following result —

Ayes (19)

Mr I.C. Blayney	Dr D.J. Honey	Mr W.R. Marmion	Mr K.M. O'Donnell
Mr V.A. Catania	Mr P.A. Katsambanis	Mr J.E. McGrath	Mr D.T. Redman
Ms M.J. Davies	Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup	Ms L. Mettam	Mr P.J. Rundle
Mrs L.M. Harvey	Mr S.K. L'Estrange	Dr M.D. Nahan	Mr A. Krsticevic ( <i>Teller</i> )
Mrs A.K. Hayden	Mr R.S. Love	Mr D.C. Nalder	

Noes (33)

Ms L.L. Baker	Mr W.J. Johnston	Mr S.J. Price	Mr D.A. Templeman
Dr A.D. Buti	Mr D.J. Kelly	Mr D.T. Punch	Mr P.C. Tinley
Mr J.N. Carey	Mr F.M. Logan	Ms M.M. Quirk	Mr R.R. Whitby
Mrs R.M.J. Clarke	Mr M. McGowan	Mrs M.H. Roberts	Ms S.E. Winton
Mr M.J. Folkard	Ms S.F. McGurk	Ms C.M. Rowe	Mr B.S. Wyatt
Ms J.M. Freeman	Mr S.A. Millman	Ms R. Saffioti	Mr D.R. Michael ( <i>Teller</i> )
Ms E.L. Hamilton	Mr Y. Mubarakai	Ms J.J. Shaw	
Mr T.J. Healy	Mrs L.M. O'Malley	Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski	
Mr M. Hughes	Mr P. Papalia	Mr C.J. Tallentire	

Question thus negatived.