

CORONAVIRUS — SHOOTING SPORTS AND FIREARMS INDUSTRY

Statement

HON AARON STONEHOUSE (South Metropolitan) [9.36 pm]: It is time for the government to stop with the overreach, to stop its giddy power trips, to stop using worst-case scenarios as the justification for introducing draconian restrictions and to stop trying to shut down the proper processes of Parliament. Clearly, there is a need for some restrictions during this time—on that I think we all agree—but these restrictions must be weighed against our rights and freedoms. In statutory interpretation is a principle that there is an assumption that the legislature acts reasonably, having regard to its purpose in making a law—its constitutional role—and those of other branches of government, and to give regard to the rights, freedoms and immunities that the law protects, because they are seen as significant in a representative democracy. After three years in Parliament, I am not so sure that the legislature has regard to the rights, freedoms and immunities afforded in law, and most certainly the government does not. Liberty and human dignity, to me and many others, are just as essential as hand sanitiser and toilet paper. The government is rushing through poorly thought out new laws at an alarming rate, expecting Parliament to pass bills that it has barely had a chance to read. We will soon see drones in our skies, on-the-spot fines and imprisonment, extreme travel restrictions and the banning of assemblies and gatherings. The government is fundamentally changing the very nature of our society with little proof that its rushed policies will actually result in public health benefits.

There is perhaps no better example of that than the recent closure of firearm dealers across the state. Although I recognise that the Parliament of Western Australia cares very little, if at all, for the concerns of law-abiding firearm owners, it highlights the haphazard and heavy-handed tactics of the government. On Friday last week, the government, reportedly kowtowing to the Prime Minister's office, ordered all the firearm dealers in the state to shut down, giving them just 70 minutes' notice. The closure was so poorly executed that the written order by the Commissioner of Police had a typo in it. Many dealers were made aware of the order only when police officers arrived at their business to close them down—no prior consultation, no forewarning. These are legitimate businesses run by mum-and-dad small business owners who provide essential tools and equipment to our farmers, volunteer hunters and sportspeople. Shutting down duly licensed dealers who provide the only lawful means to buy, sell and transfer firearms and ammunition to the state's thousands of licensed firearm owners has already had unintended consequences. Farmers are scrambling to access important tools that they need to save their livelihoods. Volunteer hunters who protect our landscape from pests and feral animals will struggle to do their duties. To make matters worse, just this afternoon I learnt that Western Australian police are cancelling licensing applications and issuing only partial refunds to applicants. This has had the predictable flow-on effect of customers cancelling their orders and demanding refunds from firearm dealers.

The PRESIDENT: Member, I am just going to interrupt you briefly. I have been watching you deliver this speech and I hope you are not reading your speech.

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: No, Madam President.

The PRESIDENT: I remind you of the relevant standing order 36 that deals with reading of speeches. I know that you have been here long enough and are exceedingly capable to not read a speech.

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: Absolutely, Madam President. I have some notes, but I am not reading verbatim. Thank you for the reminder.

If it is the government's intention to shut down firearm dealers and run them out of business, it is certainly achieving that. The decision to shut down firearm dealers demonstrates the offensive mindset of this Labor government that law-abiding firearm owners cannot stay law-abiding during a pandemic. It should give everyone in the community concern that this closure was not implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19, despite the enthusiastic interjections from across the chamber. It was not implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19; it has nothing to do with COVID-19. It was implemented because Western Australian police are concerned that ammunition sales have increased in recent weeks. Surely, they must have increased quite a lot to cause such an overreaction. No, they only increased by about 17 per cent to 25 per cent of the figures from last year. This meagre increase was due to the fact that the importation of ammunition is likely to be affected by disruptions in the supply chain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, so consumers are, quite wisely, bringing forward their purchasing decisions in anticipation of prices going up, no doubt due to a scarcity to come. It is worth noting that although firearm dealers have been forced to close their doors, other retailers have not.

This clearly has nothing to do with stopping the spread of COVID-19. I urge the government to rethink this ill-conceived and haphazard policy. When firearm dealers raised their concerns in *The West Australian* in a statement just a couple of days ago, the Premier responded by calling their statement disgusting, and accused them of threatening him and other Western Australians. I implore the Premier to apologise for his mishandling of the situation. Is it

any wonder that firearm dealers out there are suspecting or perhaps thinking that our Premier is a “hoplophobe”? That is someone who has an irrational fear of guns.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: I fear the government will continue to get a free pass. People will say, “We have seen an expansion of the police state, but McGowan makes the trains run on time.” I do not think that will be the case much longer; I hear train and bus services have been scaled back. Unless we remain vigilant, demanding that policy is based on evidence, as clearly this closure of firearm dealers is not, and unless we insist that extreme restrictions when necessary are only ever temporary, we will continue to see haphazard policies such as this with unintended consequences, not increasing public safety, but rather, putting it at risk.

Statement

HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural) [9.43 pm]: I rise this evening to make some comment on an answer I had to a question today, in relation to firearm club attendances, when firearm owners had their licences supported by the fact that they were a member of a club and they are required to make so many shoots or attendances a year. The answer that I got back today was —

Pursuant to the Firearms Act 1973, clubs have been advised by police that a requirement to shoot is a 12-month assessment and that a member can shoot later in the year to gain that proficiency. If a shooting club member cannot meet requirements for a particular reason, police will assess, and, if reasonable, will not take any action under their discretionary powers.

The problem is that we do not know how long the COVID-19 situation might be around for. Police are saying we have 12 months to undertake these attendances, but we do not know how long this will go on for. Most shooting clubs have closed. They are doing the right thing; they are doing their part in making sure that they do not spread this virus by having gatherings of shooters attending ranges. They have not really got a clear indication about what police are going to do about their required attendances. For police to come back and say, “It’s a 12-month thing. Maybe once this is lifted you can make up the attendances” is not good enough in my mind, because you cannot jam all these competitions and attendances in towards the end of the year. By contrast, South Australian police have a message on their website about COVID-19. It states —

In response to the evolving situation around COVID-19 and the Governments advice over self-isolation and social distancing, the delegate of the Registrar of Firearms has exempted shooting club licensees from the requirement to complete a minimum of four shoots per year. This exemption will initially apply from 1 March to 30 September 2020. A letter has been provided to all Firearms Clubs outlining this measure. For any questions please contact your club in the first instance, otherwise contact Firearms Branch.

At least in South Australia shooting clubs are well aware of the fact they will not need to make those attendances during that time. That will then be reviewed depending on how the COVID-19 emergency rolls out. It is a little disappointing that in Western Australia we are not given a clear indication about the suspension of those attendances until this emergency has been lifted.

I might just touch on a couple of matters raised by Hon Aaron Stonehouse about the closure of gun shops last Friday, which might have been a bit hastily arranged. I got a flurry of phone calls about lunchtime on Friday, when gun shops had been closed down. But it was not only gun shops. In fact, most of the phone calls I got were in relation to rural supply outlets, general stores, and multi retail-type businesses in regional Western Australia that were shut on a moment’s notice. To give members one example, there is a little general store in the town of Frankland called Foxy’s General Store, which I used to stop at now and again on my way to Rocky Gully. That general store sells everything from milk to alcohol, hardware, gas and a little ammunition. But because it had a firearms dealer’s licence to sell that ammunition, the whole store was closed down. People in that town had to then go to Kojonup, Boyup Brook or all the way to Mt Barker just to get a bottle of milk. Fortunately, the very next day, a second version had been issued to give relief to those businesses that were not predominantly a gun store. They were reopened and there was a lot of relief from those businesses, Elders at Merredin and others, which sell an array of products for country and rural people, such as chemicals, drench, barbed wire—you name it. They were able to go back into business. Those stores that are predominantly gun stores are still closed, but a lot of them are saying to me that they sell a lot of other articles, including camping gear and all sorts of things associated with the outdoors, but they are prevented from doing that. They know they have to do their bit.

There have been concerns about the stockpiling of ammunition, and I know that New South Wales and Queensland have also closed gun shops because of concerns over ammunition stockpiling. There are a number of reasons why people started to stockpile, but there could have been restrictions placed on the amount of ammunition that people could buy, rather than a complete shutdown, the same as the government has done with alcohol, to limit the amount

of ammunition that people are buying. We are now moving into the lambing season in rural and regional Western Australia. I am sure that everyone here is aware of the scourge of foxes in those areas. Quite often, farmers do not have the time to undertake the eradication or control of foxes themselves, so they have recreational hunters come out and assist them with a lot of that. However, they may not be able to do that because there is no ammunition available for them. I think it was a bit hasty to shut down these businesses without thinking this through. If there were concerns about stockpiling, sure, limitations could have been applied.

As far as firearms themselves are concerned, there is no doubt that police have absolute, total control over the firearms that are sold through gun shops and of the application process. The police could almost stop or slow down the processing of those applications. They have complete control over that, so it is really just the ammunition issue. I had a couple of phone calls today from some dealers who were very distressed about the fact that police are now saying to all applicants that they are cancelling their applications and will give them a partial refund of the application fee, which is about \$300. Of course, those people are then ringing the dealers to say that they want a refund for the rifles they bought because they can no longer get the applications processed. The dealers not only had to cease their businesses, but also are now having to start refunding money to these people. This decision was not really well thought out. Other mechanisms could have been used to deal with any concerns that there might have been.

I ask the government to reconsider this decision. It should allow gun shops to reopen but to either not sell or restrict the supply of ammunition, which would enable them to continue with the other side of their businesses. These are small businesses. They employ people. I know that a lot of businesses have been affected by COVID-19, with restaurants and beauty salons having to close because of the social distancing aspect. Social distancing is not a problem in most gun stores. Even though we have this emergency in front of us, we really need to minimise the impact it will have economically. One of the big things coming out of this is the economic impact, as much as the health impact. From that economic impact, health issues will arise, particularly mental health issues. People will be out of work, having lost their jobs. The lives and businesses of small business owners will be completely destroyed and ruined, never to rise again. It is not just the health impacts of this virus that we need to consider; it is also the collateral damage from this virus, and a lot of that will be economically driven.