

CORONAVIRUS — INTERSTATE BORDER RESTRICTIONS

1. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Premier:

Before I ask my first question, with your indulgence, Madam Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the communities across the state impacted by the fierce bushfires we have seen reported. I offer my thanks to those volunteers and professionals who have worked tirelessly and know that all levels of government and the Liberal–National opposition will be working to support them through recovery and clean up.

Noting the Premier’s announcement on 20 January that Western Australian borders would remain closed and his failure to announce an alternative date, will the Premier now tell Western Australians when our borders will reopen?

Mr M. McGOWAN replied:

I welcome back members, particularly those of us in the chamber, and those of us outside the chamber, for the first sitting of the Parliament in 2022. I realise that these are unusual circumstances and we are back to where we were in 2020 at some points in time, but I am sure that the Parliament will operate effectively.

Can I also acknowledge the communities impacted by bushfires, and there were many, over the Christmas period. It was obviously a traumatic event for many communities. I would especially like to thank all the people who were involved in fighting fires, both career and volunteer firefighters, and all those who provided support. I visited some of them last week and I would like to thank them all for everything that they have done.

On 20 January, we announced that we would defer the full reopening of the Western Australian border to the eastern states pending a review in February. That review is currently ongoing to work out the optimum time in which to fully reopen the borders to the eastern states. But we did say on 20 January that from 5 February there would be opportunities for people to come into Western Australia, particularly for family reunions, subject to quarantining and testing. As of today, over 30 000 people have taken advantage of that subject to quarantining and testing. The opportunity is there for people to come home and 30 000 people have taken that opportunity to come and visit family or to come for other reasons—compassionate reasons and the like—over that period from 5 February until now. Of those people who have returned, 25 000 have come in by aircraft and around 5 000 by road. Many people accept that seven days’ quarantine plus the testing regime is acceptable for them to come home given the circumstances we face. We obviously changed the 5 February date based upon health advice.

I take members back to December when I announced the 5 February date. What I said then was that it was subject to whether there was a catastrophe or an emergency. Thousands of people have died in the eastern states. Their hospitals have had at various points in time 5 000 people in them. The intensive care units have had hundreds of people in them. Many people were on ventilators in the eastern states. To deliberately bring in thousands of cases overnight while our third-dose vaccination rate was, at that point in time, quite low, would have been absolutely reckless and irresponsible. I did exactly what I said I would do in December: if there is a catastrophe or emergency situation, we reserve the right to change our position. That is exactly what we did. We did what we said we would do. Had I followed the pigheaded route and said that 5 February is the date no matter what, then lots of people would have died unnecessarily while we got our third-dose vaccination rate up.

That would have been a shocking thing for a Premier of the state to do. Having known what Omicron was doing to hospitalisation death rates in the east, it would have been a shocking thing for a Premier to do. We did what was necessary to preserve lives, to save jobs and to preserve Western Australia in the very good state it is in while we get our third-dose vaccination rates up.

I urge people to understand that at points in time in these roles, we need to do difficult things and to make difficult decisions. We are subject to all sorts of criticism—I know, I get criticised at length each and every day. But I say to everyone out there, all that we are trying to do is to save Western Australian lives at the same time that we save jobs. I am amazed, actually, that I am criticised for trying to save lives. I am absolutely amazed. The opposition criticises me for saving Western Australian lives. The world has turned on its head. When we save lives and save jobs we are under attack. I am proud of the fact that we have saved many Western Australian lives and many Western Australian jobs at the same time that we have got our third-dose vaccination rate up and our children’s vaccination rate up. At the same time, we did not open when case numbers were peaking in the eastern states. Tens of thousands of cases each and every day would have been deliberately seeded here. It would have been irresponsible to have done such a thing and I am so pleased that we did not.