

ISRAEL VISIT

Statement

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [6.52 pm]: I rise very briefly to describe some recent travel I undertook to Israel in the last week of March. I was rather privileged to be part of a small self-funded delegation, along with my colleagues the members for Bateman and Cottesloe, in a program organised jointly by the Australia–Israel and Israel–Australia Chambers of Commerce. The purpose of that visit was primarily to gain an insight into Israel’s remarkable economic transformation and, in particular, to get a better understanding of its world-renowned start-up and innovation ecosystem. Nevertheless, our interest went beyond the financial and technological sectors to the agricultural, water management, government and higher education sectors. I believe that gaining insights into how other jurisdictions go about harnessing their particular strengths are instructive and should be the core business of all members of this Parliament if they take seriously their responsibility to ensure the continued development of Western Australia and the ongoing prosperity and welfare of our people.

We travelled to Israel during the recent election, which was quite obviously a period of heightened tension. There was a rocket attack from the Gaza Strip the week we were there. Thankfully, that did not result in any fatalities. However, serious injuries ensued from that. That was, frankly, a stark reminder of the unique security environment that applies in that part of the world. That environment, in conjunction with compulsory military service, the influx of nearly one million Russian immigrants at the collapse of the Soviet Union and, until recently, an absence of tangible, extractable natural resources, has created a very unique national disposition towards entrepreneurship, business risk and the acceptance of failure, which is quite inspirational in its own way. Although we cannot simply adopt that Israeli template as our strategy—its circumstances are certainly its alone—that experience should motivate us to think a little more seriously, critically and strategically about what is in Australia’s best interests and compel us to work in those interests in a way that is vigorous, courageous and unashamed.

I was particularly encouraged by the extensive business-to-business links between Australian and Israeli businesses, particularly between Western Australian and Israeli businesses, certainly in the agricultural sector. Although I appreciate the great awareness at the level of Australian and Western Australian businesses about Israel as a model for doing business, perhaps that same level of understanding does not exist even among the political class and it certainly drops off precipitously if we try to get a sense of what the general public might think. That is a shame because there is a healthy trade relationship with Israel worth in the order of \$1 billion. Western Australia is certainly a participant in that thinking. In 2018, the total bilateral trade between Western Australia and Israel was in the order of \$160 million. My firm hope is that that level of commercial exchange will continue to grow over time. I am optimistic about that for two reasons. First, our visit coincided with the announcement of a new tax treaty with Israel, which will create a more favourable environment for bilateral investment. The treaty will make it cheaper for Australian businesses to access foreign capital markets and technology, reduce double taxation and provide greater tax certainty to taxpayers in both jurisdictions. The second reason for optimism is that during our visit, we were made aware of discussions between an Australian-based major airline and its Israeli counterparts about the prospect of a direct route from an Australian capital city to Tel Aviv. Although I am not privy to the details of that commercial dialogue and it may well be at only a formative stage, I believe the concept would be highly desirable if only from the perspective of convenience and logistical efficiency. Travel to Israel is not easy to undertake; back and forth, I think our total transit time consumed about three full days out of an eight-day program. This will provide Perth with an opportunity. I believe that securing Perth as a terminal point for a direct flight would be of great strategic and economic benefit to this state. I sincerely encourage the Western Australian state government to deal itself into the game if that is a viable opportunity because I think there are benefits for all to be gained out of that.

Very briefly, in addition to those individuals and institutions that so generously gave their time and were surprisingly refreshingly candid in their dialogue, I want to identify a number of individuals for special thanks. My gratitude firstly goes to Paul Israel and the exceptionally patient and well-organised Shifka Seigel from the Israel–Australia Chamber of Commerce; John Cluer and Diane Horwitz from their counterpart organisation, the Australia–Israel Chamber of Commerce based in Western Australia; the Australian ambassador, Chris Canaan; our enthusiastic guide, Effi Yaakobi; the congregation of the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem; and especially Mr Jonathon and Mrs Nicky Newfield and their family who so generously hosted us for a traditional Friday night Shabbat dinner in their family home.

House adjourned at 6.59 pm
