

REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA — WORKFORCE

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson) informed the Assembly that he was in receipt within the prescribed time of a letter from the member for North West Central seeking to debate a matter of public interest.

[In compliance with standing orders, at least five members rose in their places.]

MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central) [2.58 pm]: I move —

That this house notes the critical skilled and unskilled worker shortage affecting regional Western Australia and calls on the state government to introduce immediate measures to address short-term challenges affecting businesses and key industries from operating.

We are fully aware that it has been a long and difficult time in our country and particularly in our state. It has affected communities and potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of small businesses. Some of those businesses have had to back-operate, some are just surviving, and others have been unable to weather the storm that they have had to endure, leaving some people financially ruined and others without jobs. As the Premier pointed out in Parliament yesterday, right now, many businesses in WA are in a fortunate position compared with others in Australia. Although the removal of regional borders and the increased movement of people within WA has been hugely beneficial to industries that were decimated and effectively shut down and accruing large fixed cost debts, we need to remember that this is still going on. We are a long way from “business as usual” when it comes to regional businesses. We need to celebrate the fact that there is a large number of visitors visiting our regional communities right across Western Australia, but we also need to recognise that the change in circumstances creates a new set of challenges, whether it be mobile phone coverage—using your phone in Kalbarri is difficult—or water constraints that are occurring in our regional towns because of the influx of tourists, or even wastewater treatments, as our sewage ponds struggle to cope with the demand in places like Exmouth. There is a need to be careful not to generalise that large numbers of people are moving around the state and therefore businesses are going well. Many businesses are going well but are still struggling with enormous challenges. Some rely on interstate and international markets, and they are still struggling. Some tour operators are not seeing the numbers they need to be able to survive. Many operators have been working seven days a week for the past month, unable to source workers; they are exhausted and have been forced to physically close for a day or two. In Exmouth, the Potshot Hotel and Grace’s Tavern are having to close one day a week to give their staff a bit of time to recuperate. Many businesses are also trying to source what they need to be able to operate, as well as looking at a rise in transport costs. One operator said that their transport costs have risen by seven per cent. The government has given credits of \$2 500 to businesses particularly in the north west that are with Horizon Power, but businesses have also seen an increase in their charges for power. All local governments have had their street lighting costs increased by 10.6 per cent. How is the government paying for the \$2 500 that it is giving to businesses? It has upped the costs for small businesses that are with Horizon Power and increased street lighting costs by 10.6 per cent for local governments that come under Horizon Power. The Minister for Local Government said, “Spend all your reserves and don’t increase your rates.” That is what local governments have done, but here we have the government slugging local governments with a 10.6 per cent increase.

Many businesses are still not able to capitalise on the increased number of visitors for many reasons, a main one being that they are not able to source workers. Even if they can source workers, there is no accommodation, particularly in the hot spots of Kalbarri, Shark Bay, Coral Bay and Exmouth. The Premier said, “When I was young, we’d just roll out a mattress or a swag”—I do not think he said “swag”, but I will say it—“and just go find somewhere to lay.” There is no capacity to do that, because people are visiting our regional towns. The campaign Wander Out Yonder has cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. That money has gone east and has resulted in a campaign to get people from Perth to visit regional WA. People from Perth have nowhere else to go; they are going to visit regional WA anyway, and that is what has happened. It is a questionable move to waste this money over east—that money could have gone into working out how we can provide immediate relief to our small businesses to enable them to provide a product for those visitors coming up from Perth to places like Kalbarri, Shark Bay, Coral Bay and Exmouth, to provide immediate solutions to the problem that we have.

The school holidays are coming up again. When we have somewhere in the order of 15 000 to 20 000 people in Exmouth, or an influx of 10 000 people in Kalbarri, or 6 000 people in Coral Bay, it puts pressure on those places. There is no accommodation available, which then puts pressure on those small businesses that cannot source the people they need to work. Backpackers are ending their working life here in Western Australia in a lot of regional communities because their visas are expiring. Has the government tackled the visa situation to be able to extend visas for those backpackers? Everyone says that we need locals to work, and I agree. This is a great opportunity to get local people and people from Perth to come to the regions to work, but what is the government doing to create a campaign to educate and offer ways in which people can work in a seasonal environment? What opportunity is

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the government providing for local people to be able to upskill to cover what is normally covered by backpackers, because locals just do not take those jobs? We need to attract 18 to 25-year-olds to the regions and encourage students to take a gap year from university or their studies to come up and fill that void, but there needs to be an education program by the government to say, “Here are those opportunities.” Whether it be in the Kimberley for three months, the Gascoyne for three months and the south west for three months of the year, the government needs to work out how to connect that up to offer 12 months a year employment. But do not forget our seniors. Do not forget our grey nomads travelling around regional WA who can still offer two or three hours of work a day. They want to work; they want to help out; they want to stay in the regional community. Has the government had any discussions with the federal government to try to change some of the requirements that mean they cannot earn X amount of dollars? Are we looking at ways in which we can utilise a workforce that is already travelling around regional WA to fill some of these voids? They are the questions. The government may say, “Yes, we’re fantastic; the borders are closed and we don’t have the COVID-19 pandemic here in Western Australia at the moment”, but this is the real test of the government. This situation may not go away, so we need to be able to tackle some of those desperate areas, and the dire impact that Wander Out Yonder is having on regional businesses. We need people to work in regional towns. We need workers’ accommodation now—a short-term solution with a long-term plan in mind to be able to build houses or villages to house our workforce, as we have done in places like Karratha and Coral Bay, but we need more. That is where the government needs to step in and help our businesses that are struggling. The mental health situation that is occurring is growing every day because small businesses cannot even get chefs in from the Northern Territory or Queensland, because applications keep getting rejected. We need a plan by government to be able to assist our small businesses.

Members, when we look at what is needed, we do not need talk. We do not need a campaign just to bring people out to the regions. We need a proper plan to be able to get people into the workforce in regional WA, but we also need accommodation for our tourism businesses, because we cannot cater for an increased workforce. People are stretched to their limits. This government will be tested in time, when small businesses can flourish, not under pressure, and the product of tourism is not going to be damaged because this government will not help our small businesses.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren–Blackwood) [3.09 pm]: I want to support the motion moved by the member for North West Central relating to the shortage of skilled and unskilled regional workers in regional Western Australia, which is affecting the agricultural sector. I have a lot of horticultural people in my patch. A lot of vines in vineyards are now being pruned, as members can imagine. The grapes were picked at harvest earlier in the year. Every time you have a glass of wine—every time you pour that lovely red, Mr Speaker, from Albany—do not forget that someone has been out pruning the vines. If that does not get done, we will not finish up with that bottle of wine. That applies right across the horticultural sector—in Margaret River, in the great southern and in Manjimup. We are coming up to the harvest season in the Manjimup–Pemberton area; it is in October and November, once the avocados come on. It will be a relatively small crop this year; nevertheless, those crops will be coming on and they will need to be harvested. Apple trees are being pruned at the moment. The apple harvest will come on with the new season. The member for Moore will talk about the general farm sector—the broadacre areas in particular. These groups typically rely on backpackers and the seasonal worker program. Essentially, visa workers from overseas come here for a short period and do a very focused piece of work, whether that work be simply hard labour or relatively highly skilled jobs such as pruning. It might not sound like it is highly skilled work, but, in fact, it is. A lot of jobs rely heavily on those overseas workers.

I want to pay tribute to the Shire of Manjimup, which did a damn good job of managing displaced workers when the COVID-19 lockdown was enforced. Those workers are getting a relative amount of support now. But we cannot run them into the ground. We have the potential issue of people being overworked—backpackers who are locked into the state because of the COVID restrictions.

A number of horticultural businesses in my area—I have letters here to that effect—bring workers in from Tonga, Estonia and Europe. They rely heavily on them and the nature of the work that they do. The typical question that gets asked—it will get asked in this place—is: why do we not employ Western Australians to do these jobs? That is a question that I have asked. Why is that not happening? In my area, businesses had a great deal of difficulty attracting workers. The seasonal nature of the work is one thing that goes against them. In some cases, it is very hard work and these businesses find it difficult to source people who are prepared to do the work. That is interesting. Reliability and consistency seem to be challenges in some of the regional locations. The fact that the work is in regional locations means that people need to move from areas with high populations to areas of low populations. That does not suit everyone’s needs. The bottom line is that these businesses would dearly love to have a seasonal workforce from Western Australia but they have not been able to achieve it. For that reason, they have relied on overseas sources.

There are largely two solutions. The solution that the government is putting up involves sourcing a workforce from Western Australia. The other option is bringing people in from overseas under exactly the same arrangements that

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we had for other sectors within our economy. We know that the resources sector is reliant on people coming in from outside. It has special arrangements in place to manage the quarantine restrictions that Western Australia has placed on them to isolate and do all that needs to be done for a skilled workforce and an unskilled workforce in the resources sector. We manage the transport of food and agricultural product that goes backwards and forwards across our borders. Why? It is because it is essential to Western Australia. We have a range of other essential services, including the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, for example. People come across our borders every day with no requirement to be holed up in a hotel somewhere for two weeks. We manage all these issues now.

I understand that Western Australia is also signatory to 500 people coming in from overseas a week. Some of them are COVID positive. We manage them in our hotels now. That is a process that we manage in Western Australia because we have responsibilities to take that on, yet for some reason we are not able to consider the option of a travel bubble for essential workers to support our agricultural sector and support food production in Western Australia. This is not just about accounting practices in West Perth or retail or whatever it might be; this is about food production in Western Australia, and nothing is more essential than that. It is a \$10 billion sector in Western Australia, as was highlighted by the member for North West Central, yet we are facing one of the greatest challenges that we have had right across regional Western Australia in being able to harvest the very crops that these farmers have put in the ground to not only support our economy, but also provide food for Western Australians. If we cannot put some sort of priority on a workforce for food production, we have lost the game.

If the government is going to take a stand, as the Premier said today, and say that it will not be bringing in anyone from overseas, counter to what the Minister for Agriculture and Food said in the other place, what is the plan for Western Australia? How will the government ensure that people move down to Manjimup, the great southern, Frankland River, Mt Barker, Denmark, Pemberton and Northcliffe? How will we get people to move into those areas to pick crops when the time comes and prune when the time comes? I know it is a nice place to be, but when it comes to many of these issues, we do not have people prepared to take that step. What is the state government's plan to support that? I have not seen one yet. I have heard a lot of rhetoric on the radio from the minister for agriculture. We now hear that the Premier is not prepared to consider overseas options. We should not write that off. The Northern Territory has considered those options and no doubt it will consider options that allow it to manage the COVID risk. That is what we are doing; we are managing the risk of COVID. Why not manage it in the agricultural sector by supporting food production in Western Australia for our nation and as one of our key exports to overseas countries.

This government has been found wanting on this front. It does not seem to be a sensitised point for the Premier. Why? It is because he does not have to face down those people in regional Western Australia on the front line of food production in this state. He might be able to see what goes on down in Rockingham and Cockburn Sound and have a swim on the weekends, but he does not know what happens in Margaret River, Manjimup, Pemberton, the wheatbelt, as represented by the member for Moore, and the north west central areas as represented by the member for North West Central. That is the issue. There is no plan from this government. This is a key sector worth \$10 billion in Western Australia. We have not seen a plan. The government needs to put something on the table.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse) [3.16 pm]: I rise to support the National Party's motion moved this afternoon —

That this house notes the critical skilled and unskilled worker shortage affecting regional Western Australia and calls on the state government to introduce immediate measures to address short-term challenges affecting businesses and key industries from operating.

As a regional member, this issue has been raised with me and my office regularly. It is an issue that is widespread across the hospitality and tourism industry and also across the food production industry—the \$10 billion sector that other members have already spoken about.

When COVID-19 first struck WA, the hospitality and tourism industry took a significant hit with \$3.1 billion worth of bookings, or 30 000 jobs, lost. Six months' worth of bookings were cancelled and refunds were paid to customers following the regional WA travel restrictions. These businesses have been obedient. They have followed the necessary restrictions that were put in place, but a new challenge faces these businesses across Western Australia. One of the restaurants in my electorate, Wills Domain, is typical of many businesses across the broader Margaret River region that is experiencing a shortage of workers, including wait staff, chefs and front-of-house people. The local cleaning company cannot get staff to work. This is at a time when the unemployment rate in WA is the second worst in the nation at 8.3 per cent, well above the national average.

We have a significant pool of unemployed workers in WA who have the capacity to potentially fill these positions, but the plan that we have heard from the government so far is just an advertising plan. We hear from small businesses that that certainly falls well short of what is required to address this significant shortage. What it means on the ground is that our businesses are unable to operate for the hours that they usually operate and provide the business and the service that they usually provide. Wills Domain, which is usually open seven days a week, is locked

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into working significantly fewer days. As a result, other jobs are on the line. Overwhelmingly, the proportion of fresh produce sold in WA or Australian retail outlets is sourced domestically. As a result, the horticultural industry is not subject to serious restrictions impacting trade as a result of the COVID pandemic. A big component of the seasonal workforce in Australian horticulture comes from overseas, with working holiday-makers and the seasonal worker program making up a major proportion of those workers. Largely in the past, many backpackers would perform three months of horticulture work to qualify for their second year in Australia under their visas. With these visas now running out, this sector is facing a serious issue and a critical shortage of workers. Vinepower is one of the operators that has written to me about this issue. The next vintage is set to commence in February 2021 and Vinepower requires 450 workers for the wine grape-picking season. The Busselton Chamber of Commerce and Industry has also highlighted similar concerns from local businesses that are experiencing staff shortages—Computer West and Beyond Safety to name a couple, as well as our cafes.

We have heard the Premier talk in this place about an advertising campaign that will be introduced by the McGowan government, but the feedback that I have received is that it will fall well short of supporting these regional businesses in the agriculture sector, the hospitality sector and the tourism industry that have already been through a challenging period. Overwhelmingly, they have supported the restrictions that have been in place, but they seek some additional support from this government. We have seen this government support other industries such as the mining industry, and we have talked about the support that has been provided to other sectors as well. Some of the supportive remarks made by the Minister for Agriculture and Food have been raised in this place already, but it is of concern that when it comes to a real plan to address the significant skills shortage and challenges for these regional businesses, the government's only answer is an advertising campaign. We need incentives to attract workers for our small businesses.

Mr P. Papalia: What is it you're actually calling for?

Ms L. METTAM: We are asking for a plan.

Mr P. Papalia: No, that's not what you said.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! She has accepted the interjection.

Ms L. METTAM: We are seeking a real plan—something more than an advertising campaign—to actually support our small businesses. The attitude that the minister brings to this place is quite disrespectful to the many small businesses in the agricultural industry—a \$10 billion industry in Western Australia. I will conclude my remarks, but there is an opportunity for this government to show some interest outside the metropolitan area and support these small businesses and family-run farms as well.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Nationals WA) [3.23 pm]: I would like to contribute to this excellent matter of public interest brought to the house by the member for North West Central. In doing so, I would like to say that the Nationals WA very strongly support the measures that were put in place, when necessary, to protect our borders and to ensure that people do not come into our state and bring an unacceptable level of risk into Western Australia. Nothing I am going to ask for or talk about is in any way intended to bring about a situation in which we would be bringing people who may be a risk into the state.

The Nationals are very concerned about the agricultural workforce in the short term. The government has spoken about longer-term situations in which we might be able to train up shearers, harvest operators, truck drivers et cetera, but we need skills on the ground for the coming shearing season, which is getting underway right now throughout my area and will continue right the way through into summer. The harvest period is not very far off. I was in the northern part of my electorate last week and the crops are well out in ear, and it will not be very long before they start ripening and need to be harvested. We need staff and we need them very quickly. The Nationals have identified that we need around 1 000 extra skilled workers to come forward and help out the farming communities for this harvest. We need 200 more shearers than are currently in the state. We need 450 grape pickers and fruit and vegetable workers throughout the state. Moora Citrus, in my electorate, is a case in point. On *Country Hour* on 11 August, Shane Kay from Moora Citrus highlighted that he usually employs around 80 seasonal workers at this time; however, he is now running into difficulties all season, but especially now, in trying to fill those labour shortages.

The Premier, quite disparagingly, referred to bringing in workers from Vanuatu, which is something that the Northern Territory government has organised. There has been a longstanding arrangement for Pacific Islander workers to come into Australia to help fill these seasonal opportunities. In the case of Moora Citrus, it has a longstanding arrangement with Tonga. Tongans come in and help with that. In fact, I believe a community in Tonga now calls itself Moora in recognition of how important that relationship between Tonga and Moora has become. They cannot come in. I do not know the situation in Tonga, but it could well be that we need to investigate whether some of those South Seas people could come in and help with the harvest, because they have the skills that we need on the ground now.

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I am aware that just outside Perth, strawberry growers are advertising for people to pick their own strawberries right now. If people go up Indian Ocean Drive near Woodridge, they will see the signs telling people to come and pick their own strawberries, because no-one is available to pick the strawberries. We have a real skills shortage; we have a real worker shortage right now.

In mining, we know that the big miners have their own arrangements in place. They sit at the table with the government and make these arrangements, but what about the small miners? In yesterday's *The West Australian*, an article by Timothy Maslin-Davies highlighted the number of small mining contractors that are unable to provide staff because of the uneven playing field between them and the big miners in recruitment and the inflow of workers into the community. They have a great shortage at the moment. We have identified that about 8 000 people are needed to come into the state to assist with the mining industry.

Going back to shearers, New Zealand is the place where we normally get our shearers from. They are having a little spike of COVID-19 at the moment, and this community transmission is unfortunate timing-wise. Generally speaking, New Zealand has been lauded as one of those places that has successfully handled the virus, along with Western Australia. We desperately need to get some direct flights in from New Zealand. To our knowledge, only one shearer has successfully negotiated their way through from New Zealand. The problem is that there are no direct flights, which means that they have to come into Australia from Auckland or wherever, isolate in Australia for two weeks, then come to Western Australia and isolate for another two weeks, which is a month in isolation. That is impractical. We need to get direct flights from Auckland to Perth, even if a charter arrangement could be put in place, to get shearers here. They could go straight into either a bubble or an isolation arrangement so that it could be done safely. Nothing we are asking for is in any way meant to threaten community safety, but we believe that we need to look at ways of ensuring that we can get beyond these little hurdles that unfortunately get put in place—unintended, I am sure. But a four-week quarantine period for a worker who is coming to work in Western Australia from a country that has little or, until now, no community transmission to speak of and has two separate islands anyway seems to be something that we could help with so that we could arrange to have workers come as soon as possible.

We understand the need to make sure that young Western Australians have opportunities. I have a young grandnephew who has just taken up shearing, which is a bit of a strange occupation for his area; he lives in Albany. Not many of his mates are doing that. He is proudly working in the shearing sheds and learning that trade.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [3.29 pm]: I think we have arrived at peak wilful ignorance by virtue of this matter of public interest today from the Nationals WA and backed by the member for Vasse. It is extraordinary. We are in a pandemic. We have had possibly the best response to that threat of anywhere on the globe. I have consistently stated that I think Australia has had a great response, but I think that within this nation, Western Australia has had easily the best response in the nation and possibly the best on the globe as a result of excellent leadership from the Prime Minister, the national cabinet and our Premier down to our ministers and the senior public servants involved in this response. The governance model that Australia is served by is easily the best in the world, as is confirmed by our response. Federations have collapsed under the threat of this COVID crisis, but ours has stood up and demonstrated the worth of what we have inherited in the form of our system. Finally, the biggest contributing factor is the willingness of Western Australians to sacrifice self-interest in the interests of the welfare of their fellow citizens. That has driven our magnificent response in WA, and continues to be our most powerful weapon.

Therefore, it was really disappointing to witness what I have this afternoon—the unpredictability of members of the Liberal Party in the upper house supporting Clive Palmer against the interests of their fellow Western Australians. Against the interests of every Western Australian, members of the Liberal Party of Western Australia in the upper house voted for that embarrassment of an individual from Queensland, yet members have come into this place today and demanded that, at the expense of young local workers, overseas workers be brought in, risking the state's borders and our capacity to ensure that we remain COVID free and able to have the most open economy in the country. That is what has been proposed. Consistently, every speaker spoke of the need to bring in overseas workers.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Moore, you were heard in silence.

Mr P. PAPALIA: It is understood right around the country that a significant element in preventing all Australians, but young Western Australians in particular —

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warren–Blackwood, you were heard in silence.

Mr P. PAPALIA: — from returning to the workplace or taking up opportunities has been the generosity of the JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes. They are great. I am so thankful that they were launched by the federal government when they were, but, undeniably, some elements of those schemes are inhibiting the ability to attract

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workers to opportunities. Some of that will play out in the regions. As members have indicated, we are asking people to make a considerable shift in their lifestyle, with a change in location and a shift from their home for a period, away from the metropolitan area predominantly, to any other region where there is potentially a job. They will need to go to a new location, find accommodation, undertake a new life and, in some cases in the agricultural sector, take on some pretty hard work. If people are getting compensated more significantly for not doing that, they are not likely to be enticed—so that is a challenge. But that will end shortly and there will be an adjustment in the JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs in September. I believe there is an opportunity for a good campaign to draw people's attention to opportunities in other regions in different sectors from those they may be employed in at the moment, or even in the one they are employed in but outside the metropolitan area. A marketing campaign, coupled with links to services that place people with potential employers, would be a very significant response, and we are working on that, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors.

All members would be aware that not that long ago, there was angst in this house and in some places outside this house that Western Australians would not travel and that there would not be great demand for accommodation and hospitality in the cafes, bars and restaurants across the regions. People were telling us that we had to increase grant schemes and put more money into subsidising people to survive because there was not going to be enough demand outside the school holidays. Firstly, they said that they would not go there for the school holidays, and when it became evident that that was false, people said that after the school holidays they were going to hit a cliff and there would not be any visitors. Now we know that that is not true. We know that the Wander Out Yonder campaign has worked and that Western Australians are travelling around the state in numbers like never before.

We are now confronting the reasonably recent phenomenon of the challenge of attracting people, particularly in hospitality, to the regions to support those businesses that are now fearful not of not surviving, but of being overworked and exhausted because they are confronting such increased demand. We are working on that. We have embarked on a range of supports for tourism businesses and other small businesses across the state. With respect to placement, the agricultural sector is already benefiting, and will continue to benefit, from a program that is being established by the Minister for Agriculture and Food. On 13 August, she reported that more than 10 900 jobseekers were registered on the Studium platform. We have 162 employers offering employment and 77 employers with an agrifood offering, with 67 of those 77 from regional areas. The number of jobs being offered by each employer varies from one to seven in the grant sector through to 150 to 300 for horticultural work. That program has been established by the government to support food and ag activities and to try to place people with employers. We will do a similar thing with hospitality, but we are responding to a challenge that was not here a little while ago. We are in a pandemic. When we do that, it will be effective, but I feel it will also need to be at a time when JobSeeker and JobKeeper have been modified a little to make the attraction greater.

Mr R.S. Love: That's great, but if you have a skill shortage, as in the shearing industry, it's not going to correct that.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am not familiar with those applications that the Premier referred to, but I think the member may have misinterpreted what he said. I think he referred to the two applications, but I do not know whether he responded to that. He was responding to a potential suggestion that far greater numbers from elsewhere might be required. What he did say about shearers in particular was that—I assume that he was indicating those from the eastern seaboard—they could relocate here, in the same way as miners have. That is an opportunity to grow the population of Western Australia and to grow the skill set and the level of skilled labour here in Western Australia. They would become Western Australians if they did that, rather than us assuming that they did not want to base themselves here. The suggestion that we are going to open up the borders to fill skill gaps right now is fraught. It is understandable, given that New Zealand is not like it was two days ago. There are a lot of challenges associated with considering bringing in people from the Pacific Islands.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I just say something?

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am going to let other people speak, but I will say that there are significant opportunities in the regions for Western Australians in a range of industries and a range of sectors. In the agricultural sector, not all the workers are skilled labour. Teams of backpackers are trained in horticulture. That happens every year. They may not have tried it in the past, but they might be more attracted to it in this environment in which people do not have opportunities in the city but there are opportunities in the regions.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I ask something about workers' accommodation? We have pressure in those areas that I mentioned.

Mr P. PAPALIA: This is a challenge that everyone will have to confront. I met a publican in Kalbarri who had rented a house for her staff because there are no accommodation opportunities in Kalbarri. That is what she is using to attract people. Employers will have to take measures to attract people, and they will have to assist in providing or identifying accommodation if they want to be competitive and attract people. Employees are more valuable now than they have been for a long time.

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I will give the opportunity for other members to contribute. This MPI does not say anything other than how well we are doing confronting a challenge that everyone on the planet would like to have; we have to find workers for jobs in a booming regional business sector, which is a good thing. That is a consequence of our hard borders and our successful response to COVID-19. It is a challenge that a lot of people around the globe would like to have right now. National Party members have just come in here and whinged about it. They are contradicting themselves. A couple of months ago, they demanded that their towns be shut but now they are demanding that we flood the place with foreign workers and make ourselves vulnerable to reintroducing community transmission. That is unhelpful. It would be helpful if those members focused, firstly, on acknowledging the fact that it is a pretty good challenge to have; and, secondly, instead of whingeing and whining and being negative all the time, maybe the Liberal Party should question some of its members in the upper house, because their behaviour today has been shameful.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury) [3.41 pm]: This matter of public interest is a pretty kettle of fish. I can only be thankful that we won office in 2017 and have a McGowan Labor government. From 2017, we started to take the finances of the state under control and position ourselves, even though this pandemic was unforeseen, for the sort of scenario that we have today and have the capacity to respond. That is what we have been doing.

I want to start by referring to the member for Vasse's contribution. She talked about the skills shortage in the hospitality sector in the south west. That is not a new skills shortage; it has been around for a while. I have heard that story over many years. I can tell the member for Vasse that one issue that has contributed to that is that the previous government ripped the guts out of TAFE as a disincentive for any young person to get the critical skills that we needed for the future as the economy started to grow. That is what the previous government did. There was no strategic foresight about what skills we needed or for industry or future employment.

The last MPI from the member for North West Central was about the dire situation of the economy, particularly in his electorate. I mentioned to the member then that I hoped to travel to his electorate if the internal borders were lifted. They were lifted and I took a Wander out Yonder road trip to Geraldton. It is a fantastic city; the people there are very buoyant. I went in my personal car, which has my name and "member for Bunbury" on the side of it. People came up to me and nudged my elbow for the work that the McGowan Labor government has done. Then I went to Carnarvon where people stopped us in the street and congratulated us for the work we were doing. I did not hear much about the member for North West Central, but they congratulated us for the work that we are doing. The town was humming. Then I went on to Exmouth where I saw the member for North West Central enjoying some of the local produce. That town was humming too; it was alive.

Clearly, the work that the McGowan government has done in managing the pandemic and managing to have only one active case of the COVID-19 virus in the state and being safe enough to open the economy far more than any other economy nationally is a real achievement. We did that with the people of Western Australia, because the people of Western Australia backed the work that we were doing. Then the calls came from the opposition, "Where's your plan for recovery?" We started rolling out the plan for recovery —

Point of Order

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The motion is quite clear. It is about regional Western Australia facing the lack of a skilled and unskilled workforce. The member needs to address those issues laid out in the motion that I presented.

The SPEAKER: I do not think it is a point of order. It is all about jobs and getting things for the regions. I think the member is talking about that at the moment, but if I think he is drifting, I am sure that I will pull him up.

Debate Resumed

Mr D.T. PUNCH: We know that the member for North West Central is not interested in the recovery plan because every time we roll something out, he wants more. The problem with the National Party is that it wants instant solutions. It is always looking for an instant solution—a quick fix. The National Party used to do that by dropping a bucket of money on communities without any regard to strategy and without thinking through the issues.

I heard the refrain that we need accommodation and we need houses—build the houses. We cannot build houses overnight.

Mr V.A. Catania: I didn't say that. I said accommodation.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The member did say that.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, I call you to order for the third time. You had a go and no-one interjected on you, so we will hear the rest of this in silence. You are on three calls.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: In his contribution, the member for North West Central made it very clear that these are complex times, the likes of which we have never faced, and they require a nimble approach and innovative solutions to

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address some of these problems. I am not taking away one iota from the challenges faced by the agricultural sector that has relied on transient seasonal labour over many years. However, we will not have that in the next six months. I heard quite clearly some of the contributions made by other members outside this place who called for a quick fix by bringing in people from New Zealand or Vanuatu and putting a travel bubble in place. What does a travel bubble mean? It means a commitment to managing the risks, and the stakes are incredibly high for not only one industry sector, but right across our community. That is what is at stake. People have come to Western Australia who we know have tested the capabilities of our quarantine risk-management limits. We have to continually manage the cost-benefit of allowing people to come here. It is a challenge and the sorts of solutions that this government has adopted have been to look at how we can connect the employment opportunities in regional and rural WA with people who do not have a job. I agree with the comments that JobSeeker skews that, but some of those issues will be addressed when the changes to JobSeeker come through in September. JobSeeker is having a significant impact on the market as it stands today. There is no doubt in my mind that over the next few months we will see that start to change.

The connection of employers to potential employees, through things such as the Studium job-matching platform, has led to around 10 000 jobseekers registering on that platform and 162 employers offering employment. There are 77 employers with an agrifood offering, 67 of which are in regional areas. The number of jobs being offered by each employer varies from between one and seven in the grain sector through to between 150 and 300 in the horticultural sector. We are starting to put in place vocational training sector intensive courses to enable participants to develop agricultural skills by getting hands-on experience so that they can move into those areas. I have heard some great stories in the media about immediate training being offered in the agricultural sector and people connecting with employees. That has led to the take-up of jobs. I have also heard through the media some of the descriptions of the work that the agricultural sector has put out there. To be honest, I wonder whether it is not trying to discourage people, because the nature of the jobs, the hours of work, the pay and the conditions are put in the most graphic terms, with no attempt to modify them to what they need to be today to attract workers. Because I have spent my whole career in regional Western Australia, I know that working in regional WA can be incredibly rewarding. The connection with community can be incredibly rewarding and the resilience of the local community to find solutions locally is there. We can effectively connect people who are looking for work—with the potential future arrangements for JobSeeker—with willing employers who are prepared to look at how they manage the employment relationship and look at helping with accommodation issues. They can look at innovation and what capacity there is in regional towns to support seasonal workers who come in. We have always had seasonal workers coming through. They have always been accommodated, and that accommodation has not disappeared. We should look at tapping into that, capturing it and making the most of what this government is trying to do at a broad level with the recovery plan and positioning the state with the best opportunities for the future.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Mines and Petroleum) [3.50 pm]: I am very pleased to contribute to the debate today—that is, if it is a debate, because it does not seem that the Nationals WA or the Liberal Party could develop an argument, so it is very hard to respond. I make the point that half of them are saying that we should have fly in, fly out workers from other countries and the other half are saying that there is no accommodation in regional Western Australia. I am not seeking interjections, but I make the point that the question that needs to be answered is: where did the workforce stay last year? The member for Warren-Blackwood talked about the absence of workers to harvest in his electorate. Was there not a harvest last year? Where did the workers who did that harvest stay? Why can this year's workforce —

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warren-Blackwood!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Why can the workforce this year not stay in the same place that it did last year?

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warren-Blackwood, you have had your go.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The member for North West Central talked about building workers' accommodation. After eight and a half years in government and not building accommodation where it was needed, he now comes along and asks where the workers' accommodation is.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members, you had a go at the ministers on this side of the house and there were no interjections. You have continued to interject. Let the minister have his say. It is a fair and even competition here.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The workers' accommodation that he is talking about exists—the one in Port Hedland and the one in Karratha. I look forward to —

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, you now have three.

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Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I agree with one point that the member made—that is, that Western Australia is doing very well, and that regional Western Australia, in particular, is doing very well. I agree with that. As I keep saying, the National Party has come into this chamber on a number of occasions and said that there is not sufficient accommodation to house workers for the harvest. All I am asking is: where did they stay last year? The harvest happened last year, too. It happens every year. I come from a farming family. Although I am not a farmer, my family come from the land. It happens every year; there is a harvest every year! I invite people to accommodate the workforce for this year's harvest in the exact same accommodation they used for last year's harvest. The difference is that this year they should not use fly in, fly out workers from Germany and the Netherlands. They should give young Western Australians the opportunity to work in those locations. That is why the work of Hon Alannah MacTiernan is so important. Through the department, she has provided a forum to allow people who are looking for jobs to be connected with employers. There are over 10 000 registered workers and 142 employers on the job-matching platform. National Party members knew that because they quoted a different sentence from the letter that was sent by the honourable minister. This platform, which has been created by the Labor government to match jobseekers with job providers, is working. I look forward to it working even better when the government has the opportunity to run a publicity campaign to inform the community about this important job platform. Instead of using fly in, fly out workers from other countries, this is an opportunity to use Western Australian workers for these jobs. As I say, the National Party wants to walk on both sides of the street on the question of fly in, fly out workers. Its members complain about the mining sector, but they argue that the agricultural sector must use fly in, fly out workers. It does not make any sense.

Interestingly, I recently looked for the cheapest family house in Western Australia, and it was in the wheatbelt. People can buy houses for about a third of the price of a house in Perth if they want to go and live in the wheatbelt. It is not as if it is a struggle to live in the wheatbelt. I also make the point that Kalgoorlie is a great place to live. It is a fabulous town. It is our inland capital city for Western Australia. Bunbury is a wonderful place to live and is very well represented in this chamber. On a number of occasions, I have talked to people from the wheatbelt who tell me that they would not swap their lifestyle in the wheatbelt to live in the city. That is what they say. They say that it is an absolutely wonderful lifestyle. I cannot believe that the members who represent the wheatbelt come in here and run the place down. They come in and say that nobody wants to live there. How ridiculous!

Withdrawal of Remark

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I think there might be something wrong with my microphone. All I can hear is a buzz from the mouth of the minister.

The SPEAKER: You are on three calls of order. Unless you withdraw, you are going home. I want you to withdraw.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I withdraw, but there is a buzz just here.

The SPEAKER: Do it again or you are going home. Do it properly.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I withdraw.

Debate Resumed

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I can tell members that there is a buzz in regional Western Australia. In Exmouth and Carnarvon there is a buzz because this government has delivered for those regions. There is a buzz about looking for leadership in those communities so that they can send a genuine leader to this chamber. There is a buzz in those communities because they are looking for somebody who could come here and take the needs of their community seriously. At the moment, their local member does not do that.

Mr D.T. Redman: He did. He got royalties for regions!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The interjection about royalties for regions is interesting. I remind members that the member for North West Central was elected into this chamber at the 2008 election. He was elected as a Labor candidate. That was the second time he was elected to this Parliament—once in the other chamber and once here.

Point of Order

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The topic is clear. A motion is before us, but he is talking about something entirely different. I may point out that the member has been elected as a National Party member three times.

The SPEAKER: Is that your point of order, or do you want to get a plug in for the National Party instead?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I am asking you to bring him back to the agenda.

The SPEAKER: Okay. I think he is doing a pretty good job. He keeps getting interjected on by the member for North West Central, so that member is drawing himself into the motion.

Debate Resumed

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Mr Bill Johnston

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: In the resources sectors we have some really great achievements. There is Australian Potash at Lake Wells looking forward to a drive in, drive out operation from Laverton, and Beacon Minerals' Jaurdi goldmine just outside Coolgardie. Not all the workforce there is drive in, drive out because they cannot find enough labour in Coolgardie, but it is principally a drive in, drive out workforce. I make the point that if somebody wants to move to Coolgardie, there is plenty of accommodation for them and plenty of opportunities. There will be a \$45 000 grant from the federal and state governments if they want to go there. There is the Iron Bridge Magnetite Project, a revolutionary project for the iron ore industry in Western Australia. There is the rare earth project from Lynas, which is looking to make a decision before Christmas on a \$500 million investment in downstream processing that will again revolutionise the rare earths industry in Western Australia because that facility will be able to process minerals from other projects, not just from its own project. There are hundreds of construction jobs, but more importantly there are high-skilled high-wage jobs for the Kalgoorlie community.

There is Strandline Resources Limited with its Coburn project near Shark Bay. Again, that project will provide local job opportunities. The great news about all these projects is that they provide opportunities for an Aboriginal workforce. People should remember that the original regional workforce is the Aboriginal workforce. I am very proud of the fact that this government is paying attention to the needs of the Indigenous community. I remind people that at the moment the Minister for Water, through the Water Corporation, and I, through Horizon Power, are for the first time ever regularising water and power services in a range of Aboriginal communities across regional Western Australia. That is a genuine commitment to make those communities liveable. We are doing it in concert with those communities. We are making sure that when we deliver services into those communities, we provide jobs and opportunities for the development of those communities, and that it is done in connection and in co-design with those communities.

This opposition is a joke. That is why nobody in regional Western Australia takes it seriously and it is certainly why the government does not take it seriously. The opposition does not know what it stands for. One day it is complaining about fly in, fly out and the next day it is in here demanding fly in, fly out. One day it is saying that regional Western Australia is a great place to live and the next day it is saying that Western Australians do not want to live in the regions. The opposition does not know what it stands for. The National Party used to be a proud organisation, but now look at it.

Division

Question put and a division taken, the Acting Speaker (Ms J.M. Freeman) casting her vote with the noes.
Bells rung and the house divided.

Point of Order

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: The member for Balcatta was not in his seat.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms J.M. Freeman): I have just called the division.

Mr A. Krsticevic interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for Carine, you are on three. Do you really want to continue?

Division Resumed

The division resulted as follows —

Ayes (15)

Mr I.C. Blayney
Mr V.A. Catania
Mrs L.M. Harvey
Mrs A.K. Hayden

Dr D.J. Honey
Mr P.A. Katsambanis
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup
Mr S.K. L'Estrange

Mr R.S. Love
Mr W.R. Marmion
Mr J.E. McGrath
Ms L. Mettam

Dr M.D. Nahan
Mr D.T. Redman
Mr A. Krsticevic (*Teller*)

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY — Thursday, 13 August 2020]
p4995d-5005a

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Terry Redman; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Shane Love; Mr Paul Papalia; Mr Donald Punch;
Mr Bill Johnston

Noes (32)

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

Pairs

Ms M.J. Davies	Mr B.S. Wyatt
Mr P.J. Rundle	Ms A. Sanderson
Mr K.M. O'Donnell	Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr D.C. Nalder	Mr K.J.J. Michel

Question thus negatived.