

CORONAVIRUS — SMALL BUSINESS — RELIEF AND RECOVERY MEASURES

Motion

MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central) [4.02 pm]: I move —

That this house calls upon the Labor government to immediately address the shortfall in support for Western Australian small businesses and industries suffering because they are unable to access relief and recovery measures.

We have moved this motion today, and I am going to outline the reasons that small businesses, particularly tourism businesses in regional Western Australia, are suffering at the moment due to, obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected everyone from all walks of life. Every which way that we operate in society has been affected.

I want to talk about small business. More than 224 000 small businesses operate in Western Australia, employing around 490 000 workers and contributing billions of dollars to the Western Australian economy. There are more than 50 000 small businesses in regional Western Australia. Nearly half the jobs created in Western Australia are created by the small business sector, and small business accounts for half of WA's private sector industry employment. Small businesses in regional towns and communities support local economies and communities, and that is why we want people to buy local and support our businesses. Before COVID-19, small businesses were faced with a range of challenges.

The higher cost of doing business is generally different from region to region, and I will explain the difference between the southern and northern parts of Western Australia. Due to the geographical location, remoteness and distance, and low populations, a growing number of small businesses were already struggling to cope with the rising costs of doing business in some regional areas. These businesses are required throughout the regions to underpin the economic growth of a town and tourism growth and to ensure that we can grow our populations. As I said, in the south west we now have the cooler season and in the north west we now have the warmer season. During the warmer season, occupancy in the north west of Western Australia can be five to 10 per cent. That rate is higher in the south west, because it has a cooler climate and people go there. During the period of April to September, tourism in the north west is at its peak. That is when people make their money for the next six months to ensure they are able to pay their bills and continue on to the following year.

There are rising costs for businesses in many regional areas with small populations and low occupancy rates, and there is therefore less ability to absorb them. Infrastructure in some locations is not keeping up with demand and increased visitation. Maintenance of roads and recreational facilities is one of the issues that regional towns face. Water costs for regional businesses can be more than three times higher than those of an equivalent business in Perth, making them uncompetitive, unsustainable and beyond industry benchmarks. One example is a caravan park enduring a 50 per cent increase in water costs in a four-year period. Insurance premiums are enormous. Sometimes insurance does not provide adequate cover, but insurance costs are going through the roof in regional WA. In some cases, businesses cannot find an insurance provider to cover their business. One issue I am dealing with is a business that has four-wheelers that is unable to get insurance, which obviously affects how it can run, if it can at all. Staffing and changes to employment requirements make it harder to attract people to remote locations. That also tests business owners to ensure that they can work those long extra hours to make the business work. There are electricity, fuel, transport and freight costs. There are increasing lease costs, and rents and rates. There is an inability to get training without significant cost. Often people have to travel to Perth to do that training.

I turn to airfares. The National Party has been leading the charge to try to reduce airfares. Before COVID-19, when a lot of towns had a regular air service, people were paying \$1 000 return to fly to Carnarvon. People living in Paraburdoo or Tom Price would sometimes pay \$2 000. People in Karratha pay \$1 000 for a one-way flight. That is unaffordable and unimaginable, especially when transport in metropolitan Perth is subsidised to the tune of \$1 billion a year to make sure that bus and train tickets are affordable. Aeroplanes are the buses and trains of regional WA, and now with COVID-19, having a regular transport service catering not to tourists or workers, but to people coming from regional towns to visit specialists in Perth for health reasons, has become an issue. There are limited taxi services, and the list goes on. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses and communities in regional Western Australia advocated for boundaries to be shut to stop people and tourists travelling around, as did I. We managed to make that happen, and I want to congratulate the Premier for making the decision to close our regional communities to people travelling from one area to another. I think that has worked and has prevented COVID-19 from becoming rampant in our regional communities, which could have happened if those borders had not been closed. Most regional businesses accepted a mandatory lockdown or closed as a result of social distancing and no patronage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some are not able to take advantage of the four-to-six-month tourism season as a result of effectively being in a drought with no income and no ability to keep their doors open or provide a limited service to their community. For businesses in remote regional areas with small populations, particularly in the north of the state, this will be the situation for the next

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12 to 18 months, with most not being able to meet their fixed operational costs, such as water, electricity, shire rates, fees or insurance, with little or no income over that extended period. Small businesses in locations such as Exmouth, Coral Bay, Carnarvon, Shark Bay, Monkey Mia, Broome and Kalbarri need support, as potentially freezing fixed costs versus waiving costs over the next 12 to 18 months will be the difference between businesses closing down, never to reopen, or staying afloat over the summer season into the next high season and into the future. There is a difference between waiving costs, deferring costs and freezing costs. The government has frozen future increases; this is a future increase. Water and power prices are the highest they have ever been, particularly in regional Western Australia, where a future charge does not mean much to a small business when it is paying high costs. As I said, the water charge is three and a half times more than it is in Perth. Businesses need their costs waived, not frozen or deferred.

With many regional businesses considering their immediate future, consideration needs to be given to a business assistance package for those meeting the criteria to preserve the future of our regions and tourism, allowing businesses to survive over this very difficult period. Deferring water bills or power bills just adds a debt to those small businesses. Those deferred power and water costs need to be waived. The only way to help our small businesses recover is to remove those overheads, remove that debt, for something that the government can control—namely, water and power. Water is probably one of the biggest charges in the tourism industry, particularly for a hotel, motel or pub. In question time in Parliament today, we asked the Minister for Water about the toilet tax. Thirty toilets can cost \$3 501 without a toilet being flushed. It is a toilet tax on a business—a hotel, motel, or pub—that is closed with the inability to have any cash flow, but it must still pay thousands of dollars to have the pleasure of having a toilet, albeit one that is not being flushed. I asked a question of the minister in question time today and he spoke about it paying for a sewage treatment plant. However, places such as Carnarvon or Exmouth have had basically no sewage go through because they have had no patronage. They are paying for a toilet but have an occupancy rate of five or less per cent with no-one flushing that toilet. Therefore, I do not think the sewage ponds are working overtime. Perhaps the minister can explain in more detail how the toilet tax has come about and why the toilet tax exists, and explain to businesses why they are paying not only for a toilet but for water going in, and when the toilet is flushed, they pay three and a half times more than is paid in Perth. It is a massive impost for our businesses. For businesses to try to survive over this period, we must flush away the toilet tax. I would like to see it removed totally because how can we justify having a toilet tax and charge for water in and water out? Is that not what the sewage treatment plant is for? The water sewage treatment plant is paid for by charging for water going in and out. Perhaps the minister can look at a consumption charge based on a toilet and how many times it is flushed. What is the difference between having 20 toilets and 20 patrons using those toilets or having one toilet and those 20 patrons using that one toilet? Can the minister please explain what is the difference and how that impacts on a sewage plant?

When it comes to electricity charges, a lot of businesses in the north west were happy to receive that \$2 500; however, the power bill for many businesses in the north west is about \$3 000 a month. For those who are on the Synergy line and below the twenty-sixth parallel, such as Northampton and Kalbarri, where air conditioning is still essential, \$2 500 is not being applied to those businesses that are suffering. This is just like the case with businesses in Shark Bay, Carnarvon, Coral Bay, Exmouth, Broome and other parts of the Kimberley—areas in which the Minister for Local Government said, “Spend, spend, spend. Spend your reserves. Don’t pass on any increase in rates.” However, local governments are in financial distress. Their income cannot be reliant just on those who pay rates. They have other areas they need to consider, such as airports. The Shire of Carnarvon generates its income through the airport, as does Exmouth. They rely on income from the airport to be able for cater, not only for their ratepayers, but also the influx of tourists. Places such as Exmouth do not have a population of just 2 500 to look after. Often they have to look after 10 000 people. The cost of their services is higher, yet their rate base caters for only 2 500 people living in the town. They know they have an influx of 10 000 tourists at any one time during the peak season. Shires waiving rates and fees is often not possible, but if businesses cannot pay for water and power, and cannot pay their rates, ultimately how will the shires recoup those costs? The shires also need to have some financial support to ensure they can survive into the future when people are not able to pay their rates.

As I mentioned, some places in the north west are lucky to have two air services a week. Trying to operate a business in some of those regional towns is basically impossible because of not being able to get their workers on the plane if they live in Paraburdoo or Tom Price. There are charter planes for the resource sector, but it is often very difficult to get their workers on the plane or they must pay exorbitant amounts of money. Likewise, people who need chemotherapy treatment or who must come to Perth for a health check face these difficulties. These are some of the issues that face regional Western Australia. Airfares and air services are a major problem now, they were a major problem before, and will be a greater problem into the future, affecting small businesses and people who live in Western Australia.

I have mentioned insurance premiums. Many businesses pay \$5 000 a month to insure their property, even though no-one is going in, or very few people are going in. The costs for insurance, water, power and rates are overheads that businesses just cannot afford.

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Let me look at the toilet tax. I am going to read a response from the Water Corporation to a client who wrote to it because they were finding it difficult to pay the service charges—the toilet tax. This is the response from the Water Corporation —

Firstly, I am very sorry to hear your Business has been affected ... I do hope the situation in Carnarvon improves quickly for you.

In regards to being able to waive the service charges, this is not something which we can do. Currently the State Government has announced a freeze on any price increases for the 20/21 Financial Year, this unfortunately does not provide any room to not make payment.

We appreciate that a sudden change in circumstances can add financial stress. We have a financial assistance program called Time Assist, which I believe will be helpful to you.

Time Assist allows you put your account on hold for up to 3 months. You will still receive bills from us during this time, however you won't be charged any interest and no recovery action will take place.

However, when a water bill is deferred for three months, 11 per cent interest is charged after those three months. Once people start paying their bill again in three months' time, there is an 11 per cent interest charge.

Mr D.J. Kelly interjected.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is what is written here. When a business's turnover has reduced to five or 10 per cent, the owner starts to realise how much these water and other service charges cost their business. This is something that businesses in the north understand because of the seasonality that exists there—the money they make in six months has to last 12 months. The cost of water is a problem for a lot of businesses.

Interestingly, the Water Corporation has also said to businesses that they should not get a plumber to disconnect and reconnect toilets for the next three months. This has been issued by the Water Corporation —

A recurring issue for businesses relates to the Water Corporation charging toilet fees for accommodation providers when their toilets are not actually being used and they have no income to pay the fees. Water Corp advises:

- Water Corp have submitted a proposal about this issue.
- In the meantime, they recommend operators DO NOT pay a plumber to disconnect and reconnect their toilets/outlets as this is quite costly.
- Instead, operators should contact Water Corp ...

Businesses can pause their accounts for three months and they will not be charged any interest during those three months. It continues —

Water Corp is going to contact Tourism WA next week to share the results of their 'proposal' which will hopefully be good news for accommodation providers.

I look forward, minister, to hearing some of that good news that the Water Corporation is sharing with some of the businesses.

Tabling of Paper

Mr D.J. KELLY: On a point of order, I ask the member to table that document.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms M.M. Quirk): He is a member of the opposition; it is only ministers who have that obligation, minister.

Debate Resumed

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I have someone's bill with a service charge of \$3 196.99 for 30 fixtures—a service charge! Perhaps the minister can explain that service charge.

Mr D.J. Kelly interjected.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I think it is important to explain what that service charge is all about. As I said, people are paying for water going in and water going out. I look forward to the minister explaining that service charge for a lot of businesses in regional Western Australia.

A \$14.4 million tourism recovery package was announced by the government to support 1 600 eligible tourism businesses. We asked this question in the other place —

- (1) Please provide a breakdown of how many eligible businesses are located in each region.

That is regional tourism operators —

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- (2) How did the government decide which industry accreditations or memberships will be eligible for the tourism recovery program?
- (3) Will the government expand the program to also include tourism businesses that are members of peak industry bodies such as the Australian Hotels Association, Tourism Accommodation Australia and the Caravan Industry Association of WA?
- (4) Will the program extend to include tourism businesses registered with visitor centres or local tourism associations such as the Margaret River Busselton Tourism Association?

Or it could be the Carnarvon tourism association, the Exmouth tourism association or the Broome Visitor Centre. The response was interesting. Twenty of the 1 600 businesses are eligible to receive some of that \$14.4 million. I note that the Minister for Tourism is not here for various reasons, so perhaps someone can provide an explanation on his behalf. The answer states —

- (1) Tourism Western Australia calculated the likely percentage of eligible businesses within each region as follows: Destination Perth, 25 per cent; Australia's South West, 28 per cent; Australia's Coral Coast, —

I have just explained the coral coast, which extends from Cervantes up to Exmouth —

12 per cent; Australia's North West, —

That is from Exmouth all the way to the Kimberley region —

18 per cent; and Australia's Golden Outback, —

That is from Mt Augustus all the way through the wheatbelt and goldfields and down to Esperance —

16 per cent.

Here we have it. A \$14.4 million package was announced to assist small businesses in the tourism industry, but they have to be a member of the Tourism Council Western Australia. As the Minister for Tourism said, they have to be a genuine tourism operator. So, to be a genuine tourism operator, they need to be a member of the Tourism Council WA. If someone owns a hotel and is a member of the Australian Hotels Association or if someone operates a caravan park and is a member of the caravan industry association, and they are accredited, they pay thousands of dollars to be a member of those organisations, yet that is not good enough. In the minister's eyes, they are not genuine. They need to have paid a \$90 membership fee to the Tourism Council Western Australia and they need to have been a member of that organisation prior to 31 January. That is pretty strict and limiting criteria. Those criteria have left many tourism operators high and dry. I quote from an article in the *Midwest Times* titled "High and Dry: Tourism firms don't qualify for cash help" —

A Kalbarri tourism operator has blasted the State Government's tourism funding package, claiming most operators in the town are excluded.

That is the feedback I have got from businesses on the coral coast, where 12 per cent of businesses can apply for that tourism package. Another article titled "Tourism relief misses mark" states —

"Kalbarri is a ghost town right now, we were able to remain open under the Jobkeeper program but 95 per cent of our business is gone," ...

...

Mr Jessop said he was buoyed by the announcement of the package but was shocked to learn it applied only to members of one of the State's eligible tourism organisations.

...

"Most of us in Kalbarri are members of the local visitor centre, they directly represent us. Why wouldn't this membership qualify us?"

That is the question that the government needs to answer. Visitor centres in Western Australia accredit a lot of businesses and industries, such as the Australian Hotels Association, the caravan industry or whatever industry people are a part of. Businesses are given the tick, but they have to pay a \$90 membership to a tourism council, which captures only 12 per cent of their business. This equates to only 20 per cent of businesses in the north west and 16 per cent of businesses in the outback; most of it goes to Perth and south west businesses.

As I said earlier, there is a difference between the south west and the north west. The south west has had its high season whereas the north west's high season is now. The Premier has opened up some regions, allowing Perth residents to visit the south west, so those businesses are more fortunate in recouping a lot of those costs that they have missed out on during the pandemic. They have gained a lot more because suddenly they will have two Christmases

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in one year whereas the north is still waiting for that. Later, I will go into a little more detail around opening those regional borders.

A lot of the chambers of commerce have commented on this situation. People have written to their regional chambers and the Minister for Tourism. The Carnarvon Chamber of Commerce writes —

We just wanted to gain an understanding of the reasoning behind the eligibility criteria of having to be a member of their RTO, which as far as I know is a Govt funded organisation. We know of thousands of regional tourism businesses who won't be a member of their local RTO—but will be a member of their (non-Government funded) industry member-driven organisation, or their local chamber, or their local visitors centre or just not a member of anything at all. We just wanted to know why this particular criterion was put in place as we think it will automatically rule out thousands of regional small businesses which genuinely need help. We have had over 50 calls and/or emails about eligibility restrictions since the Fund was announced.

Operators of caravan parks, for instance, whether they are in Kalbarri, Coral Bay or Exmouth, are all saying the same thing—they are not eligible for the tourism package. I have an email from one business, which states —

Like many businesses ... in the state ... we closed the operation of our business on March 16th 2020 and have lost 100% of our income due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

All future bookings have been cancelled and refunded and we have lost majority of our future income by means of group coach bookings with retirees from the East Coast and Perth, as well as travelling nomads and caravaners. At the moment our future is unclear.

...

The recent announcement by Mark McGowan and the “Tourism recovery package” bought real hope—yet when we read the terms and smaller print, found that we did not qualify, which feels quite unfair.

We proudly operate ... and have run this for 8 years, the business itself has been established for over 40 years ...

That is from a Kalbarri operator.

How do we move forward? How do we assist these businesses? It is interesting to note—I will read the article in a moment—what has just come out from the ABC Kimberley about the Kimberley region. As I said, we fought hard to close the borders to stop COVID-19 reaching regional Western Australia. That has worked. I congratulate the Premier and the state government for doing that. I also called for the borders between the Gascoyne, the midwest, the Pilbara and the south west to be opened up. I thought the other regions would be opened up to the south west. The Premier made a decision to open up Perth to the south west, putting an unfair advantage on a lot of other areas, such as the north west, that rely on tourism during this period to get them through the next six months. That was a shock to a lot of people, but that has happened. Our tourism areas in the north west—from Geraldton and further north to Broome and the Kimberley, and inland—want a certain date for the borders to be opened to allow for those tourists to plan, book and come north. That will allow those businesses to plan for the influx of tourists, which will occur. Those businesses need help. A lot of those businesses will not be able to gear up because they do not have the cash flow and they will miss out on a lot of these packages that were announced by the state.

What do we need? We need our borders opened to allow Perth people to go north. That needs to be done now. We need a certain date from the Premier to give hope to our businesses so they can plan. We need to be able to allow those people to decide where they are going to holiday. Obviously, we want people to holiday in their backyard. We want them to go to the south west and the north west. The Premier has to allow for that certainty on a date so that people can make a booking, put down a deposit and know that they will not lose their deposit, and for a business to take that deposit, knowing it will not have to refund that deposit because they are uncertain about when the regional borders will open. That is the cry from businesses from Exmouth and Coral Bay all the way down to Geraldton.

Today we heard an announcement from the Kimberley. Kimberley community leaders have issued a 12-point plan to reopen the region, with a goal of lifting travel restrictions on 18 June. The ABC Kimberley Facebook page states —

“There is far greater awareness across the region of the need for hygiene and clear protocols, including those relating to isolation, to manage any infection that may occur,” a statement from the Kimberley Regional Group reads ...

The success is evidenced by the fact that it has been 41 days since the last confirmed case of COVID-19 in the Kimberley, and no cases have been recorded amongst our residents and Aboriginal population. Lifting the border restrictions to reunite the Kimberley with the rest of Western Australia will enable families, businesses and communities to move firmly into the recovery phase of this COVID-19 pandemic, improving the mental health of people and the

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outcomes for our economy. This plan has been backed by all four local shires, Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services and the COVID-19 Aboriginal task force. They have all endorsed the Kimberley opening up on 18 June.

Local leaders and local Aboriginal community groups are all saying that it is time to open the regions because we all know about the economic impact on those communities. When small businesses close, it has an effect on the local economy. Generally, people leave town. When regional towns lose their population, it affects the school and the hospital. It affects the teachers, doctors and nurses and those services. We cannot afford to lose any more of our services in regional WA. It is absolutely critical that we have an economy in our regional towns and that we have services in our regional towns for locals and those tourists who want to travel to parts of regional WA.

The ACTING SPEAKER: I need to remind the minister and the Treasurer that their conversation is being interrupted by the member speaking. You might want to speak up a bit, thanks.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker.

I will end on this, as many other colleagues will talk about their patches right around regional Western Australia. How do we move forward? How do we work together to ensure that our regional communities can survive? The Premier has made a call to allow Perth to go to the south west, to allow those businesses to survive and for people in Perth to travel out. We now need those businesses in the north to survive. We need people from Perth and the south west to go to a warmer climate to experience what the north has to offer, to ensure our businesses and our regional communities can survive. We need a firm date for when the borders will open; it is absolutely critical. As I read out, the Kimberley wants its borders open.

If the decision to keep them closed is based on medical advice, the government should table the medical advice to allow us to fully understand the difference between Albany Health Campus, Geraldton Health Campus, Karratha Health Campus and Hedland Health Campus. What is the difference between those health services in the north and the health services in the south west? If that is the sticking point, the government needs to improve services in regional WA. However, there is no difference. The member for Collie–Preston is looking at me blankly, but there is no difference between the health services in the south west compared with the north west when we compare the distance of Albany to Perth with the distance of Geraldton to Perth and the health services that it provides. Open our borders and allow for people to head north to the warmer climate. Allow people to survive the next few months. It is going to be difficult, but tourism operators need everyone’s support to get through this difficult period. This is why the government needs to look at its small business package and reflect on what is happening. It is missing the mark. The \$14.4 million will not help the majority of those small businesses that are in the tourism game. The Minister for Tourism has called those operators non-genuine, but they are genuine tourism operators.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Nationals WA) [4.42 pm]: Before I begin my contribution today, I would like to pay credit to members of the State Emergency Services throughout the state of Western Australia, including the very energetic SES members who are up in the Kalbarri area and look after all the tourists who go missing in Kalbarri National Park in my electorate of Moore. As of the next election, Kalbarri will sadly be in another electorate and I will have no excuse, other than as a tourist, to visit that beautiful town. I wish all the members of Kalbarri SES and every other SES organisation in the state of Western Australia all the very best, and I thank them for their services.

We know that the people of Western Australia generally are suffering under the current COVID situation. That is why the Nationals WA have brought this motion today, which states —

That this house calls upon the Labor government to immediately address the shortfall and support for Western Australian small business and industries suffering because they are unable to access relief and recovery measures.

A number of weeks ago, just before the Easter holidays, National Party members and members of a number of parties urged for an end to travel into some remote and regional areas. At that stage, there were very good reasons. People had concerns about the paucity of health services in some of those areas, the distance to tertiary health services, the fact that many of the communities have vulnerable and elderly people, and some of the remote Aboriginal communities are great distances from health services and tertiary hospitals, with extra challenges for some residents of those areas. A number of my colleagues made a call that borders be imposed to stop people from travelling throughout the state. Since before the Easter break, borders were put in place and last Monday they were revised. In fact, just prior to the Easter holidays, I put out a video in which I loudly called for people to chuck a U-ey, head back and not come to the tourism towns, such as Dongara where my office is, and other communities in my electorate including Kalbarri, Cervantes, Lancelin and a host of others. In fact, I received calls from shire councils that were concerned about how they could guarantee community safety in their caravan parks and camping grounds, expecting to see an influx of tourists. I remember going to a meeting at the Jurien Bay office of the Shire of Dandaragan, where local business owners, who would normally be talking about how they could attract tourists into the town, were talking about how they could guarantee community safety in the face of the expected onslaught of visitors.

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There was a challenge and a need to put out a system of hard borders within the state to ensure that people from Perth did not go visit regional areas when there were good reasons at that stage for the borders to be in place.

In the case of my electorate, which spans both the wheatbelt and midwest components, the borders between Perth and the wheatbelt were heavily policed. On Toodyay Road, the Great Northern Highway, the Brand Highway and Indian Ocean Drive, there was pretty well a constant police presence, and they turned away a number of people, although I saw some people go through who I thought perhaps looked like they might be obvious tourists, with South Australian plates and camper tops on their LandCruiser. That puzzled me a little, but I was not the one doing the interrogation, so I will have to accept that they had good reasons to go through.

Since Monday, we have seen a change to the border situation that is hard to justify. The member for Geraldton is in the house, and I was in the house when he called for an explanation of why these borders have been put in place for his electorate of Geraldton, a substantial community with substantial health services, located about the same distance from Perth as Albany, and with about the same size community with similar services. People can go to Albany from Perth, but they cannot go to Geraldton from Perth. This was puzzling him. My electorate surrounds Geraldton, so it is an issue that I also find puzzling. When we look at the difference in the electorate of Moore between the wheatbelt component and the midwest component, it is quite puzzling. There is very little difference between, say, Coorow and Watheroo or between Buntine and Latham. It is hard to understand why one community is shut off from Perth and the other is not.

As a local member I am now taking a lot of calls from people who are facing a hard border between the wheatbelt and the midwest. There are border controls on Brand Highway, Indian Ocean Drive and at Wubin. In fact, the stop at Wubin is stopping people from quite legitimately going back to their farms as far north as Maya, which is at the end of the wheatbelt and a considerable distance from Wubin. That is an issue. I responded to an email from a person who has family coming up on the weekend from Perth to visit them at Buntine, and the constabulary at Wubin told them that they may not get through. They should be able to get through because they are only going into the wheatbelt, but why it is any different between Buntine and Latham, which are just up the road in the midwest?

That devastating impact has been felt quite starkly in the town of Green Head. I have here a letter that I received from Rachel Griffiths. The Griffiths family own the Green Head local store. They are quite happy to be quoted. I will read a little from this letter and also paraphrase from a conversation I had with her dad, who is the owner of the shop. The letter states —

Hi, we are in Green Head, 30kms north of Jurien Bay. It has now been confirmed on Sunday night that road blocks are being setup on Indian Ocean (between Jurien and Green Head) and another one on the Brand Hwy (past Badgingarra). It's been confirmed in Jurien there will be an increase of police by 145%. Personally and the majority of people we know will have to go through the Indian Ocean block twice a day for school drop offs/pick ups, work, banking, regular shopping, doctors appts, hair appts etc.

She says that, firstly, if the Perth region, including now the wheatbelt region, has an outbreak of COVID-19, there is absolutely no way that it will be stopped from coming into Green Head because of the legitimate traffic that is going between the two towns. The letter continues —

Secondly, Green Head is 259 kms to Perth. For example, Margaret River is 271kms to Perth. Geographically we are that much closer to the city, yet for our small town of 250 people ...

She says that nobody bothers about them or knows that they exist. Finally, the writer states that only a few businesses in town, are offering the only crucial employment opportunities. She continues —

Due to the COVID pandemic these businesses have already suffered greatly as rely on caravanners and Perth holiday houses, it is now just totally soul destroying to know any pick ups to business are going to be missed because we are 15kms on the wrong side of the blocks.

She says that her family store has been offering vital services to the community since it opened in the early 1970s, and her family has owned it for the last five or six years. There is a very great chance that it now may be lost. The letter continues —

If there is anything at all that can be done, we would appreciate your assistance.

I am doing all I can, and that is advocating in Parliament on her behalf and pointing out that this is causing great distress in the town of Green Head. The community has already lost a number of jobs locally, including in not only the retail sector, the boutique hotel and the caravan park in the town, but also the couple of people who are involved in the octopus market there. They are professional octopus fishers. With the shutdown of that trade in Perth restaurants, which is now starting to slowly pick up, of course they have had no market for their occy, so they have had to shut down. Those fishing families are another statistic in that town. During this lockdown period, the shop itself has lost the 30 per cent or so that is the trigger point for some of these measures. We know that the G2G PASS that has been issued apparently allows some of the holiday home owners to come up to town, but they feel guilty

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about being in the town, so instead of coming up and spending a week in Green Head, they are coming up, checking the house has not blown away and going straight back down to Perth, because they feel that they should not be hanging around in the community. That is definitely affecting businesses.

At this time of year, people in Green Head would expect to see 50 to 100 caravans coming through each day. Those people might stop off and look at the scenery. Some might stay at the local caravan park, which, of course, is suffering. Others would stop and buy a drink or a snack as they go and look at the beautiful Dynamite Bay and other places around Green Head. That is just not happening. Zero caravans are going through Green Head at the moment. That has been a real issue for the residents of Green Head.

As I said, my electorate also takes in the town of Kalbarri at the moment. I have here some figures that have been given to me by a person from a local business in Kalbarri, and she is happy for these figures to be quoted in Parliament. She writes that she is a business owner, not a tour operator. She asks —

... what help is there for me?

She has not been given a handout and is sick of the Western Australian government claiming there is help available when she cannot access it. She contacted the Small Business Development Corporation, but it could not suggest anything. She has had to access her super to cover wages, but, thankfully, the JobKeeper payments have now come through. Her business income in April 2019 was \$125 000. In April 2020, it was \$17 000. Her fixed costs include, for instance, insurance, which is \$2 000 a month. She cannot drop any of that. There is no change to her fixed costs. Her last power bill was \$10 000. She is not eligible for the \$2 500 Synergy offset. She might be able to defer the account, but eventually she will have to pay it. Her water bill is about \$1 200 at the moment. Those types of figures are crippling for a small, family-owned business in the town of Kalbarri. But even when borders are now open, we know there have been gaps in some of the payments of this tourist boost that the member for North West Central spoke about a little time ago, which is available only to so-called tourism businesses that are members of the regional tourism organisations.

I received a letter from a business in west Toodyay, which states —

I am writing this to attempt to understand and get answers to why some tourism businesses are deemed worthwhile to receive assistance in these unprecedented times, while others are not.

It is fully appreciated that the funds being distributed by all of the schemes, whether they be State or Federally based schemes are ultimately ... funded by rate payers money and have to pass scrutiny ...

What I have trouble understanding is: why the criteria is, a business needs to belong to a Regional Tourism body or have an accreditation to be eligible for consideration under this scheme.

Many businesses can and have been running for many years, very successfully without ... associations with these two criteria. Surely a business operating prior to the upheaval of covid19, that had the same massive impact that a business that fits the current criteria due to the measures that were put in place by government ... should be eligible for funding that it has contributed towards as a tax paying business.

I am disappointed that the benefit from our successful operation has not been seen as a value, financially and otherwise to our local, Western Australian and indeed the national economy as a whole. It appears also that our business and livelihoods also are of less value because we are able to operate outside your criteria.

It goes on to say that this is a legitimate tourist-related business that has an ABN. It states that it —

... has accepted the many costs and conditions that are placed on them to be compliant to enable it to operate. These costs and conditions, many of which are Western Australian Government benefit by, apply to all businesses whether they meet current eligibility criteria or not.

The writer states that businesses have to register their business name, meet all their tax obligations, pay staff and contractors, pay a premium on their water bills, deliver free power to the state government when their solar power generates excess electricity, and have all the additional insurances associated with running a business—building and contents, public liability, workers comp et cetera—and a lot of extra costs associated with building codes specific to the business. It continues —

Factor in lost trade due to covid19 cancellations of events [mandated by Gov.] This includes lost potential trade plus refunding payments for bookings accepted and then cancelled.

The writer feels that many other businesses are equally entitled to assistance as those presently entitled, and all he is asking is for the government to deliver a level playing field.

Those operators in the tourism industry are definitely hurting and need the assistance of both the Western Australian and federal governments. As I said, some of them have been falling through the cracks.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 20 May 2020]

p2970b-2995a

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

I must put on record that the midwest communities and some of the wheatbelt communities that I represent have been devastated by the COVID-19 impact in a way that a lot of other electorates might not appreciate. First of all, our tourism was badly hit, because in recent years we had become a centre that received a lot of visitation from Chinese tourists. Chinese tourists love to come to Western Australia to hire a little car and drive up Indian Ocean Drive, through the towns that are on that drive, through Lancelin and Jurien Bay, up through the member for Geraldton's electorate, ultimately to view the pink lake that is in my electorate, and then back down to Perth. There are a lot of attractions. That has become very much an accepted route for Chinese tourists, or at least it was until the devastating impact of COVID-19 early in the new year. We have been suffering these impacts since way back then.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr R.S. LOVE: We have been suffering these impacts going back many months now, pretty much since the start of the year. In addition, the shutdown of the Chinese market to the western rock lobster industry has been as devastating to my electorate as it has been to the member for Geraldton's electorate. Perhaps more so because that is a major industry in some of my communities, and its impact has been felt up and down the coast from Guilderton to Kalbarri.

In February, the member for Geraldton put forward a great initiative to bring together tourism operators who had been affected badly by the disaster in the Chinese tourism market and some of the fishermen in the midwest region to meet with the Deputy Prime Minister when he visited in February. The member's February media release states that the Deputy Prime Minister came and learnt just how devastating COVID-19 had been on the local fishing and tourism operators in Geraldton. The Deputy Prime Minister left with a great deal of sympathy for and understanding of the problems in Geraldton and the midwest, as outlined by the member for Geraldton. The federal government announced that it would put forward a \$170 million package to support fisheries, seafood and agricultural markets in Western Australia through a freight trade initiative that it would put in place. Those measures were in no small part due to the Deputy Prime Minister's personal interest and his role in guiding some of the federal government's investment to rescue, if you like, some of the key industries and regions in our country. I believe that the member for Geraldton's initiative led to that investment. I congratulate the member for Geraldton and thank him for the effect his initiative has had on not only his community, but also all communities in the midwest. It is a great initiative. Well done, member for Geraldton.

The inland parts of the Moore electorate have not escaped the devastating aftermath of what we might call the coronavirus outbreak. After recent federal government calls for an inquiry into the coronavirus, trade tensions have built up, and seemingly come to a head with a devastating tariff being placed on the barley market. Today's front page of *The West Australian* features Mr Tony White, a member of the industry from the Miling community, who is one of my constituents, outlining the devastating impact this tariff will have on farmers.

It is now not only the coastal areas of my electorate that are suffering economic hardship that is not really of their own making, but also the inland areas. It just goes to show how exposed our free-trading Australian farmers are when a disaster like this happens. I was in Canada last year when China slapped a tariff on Canadian canola. That disrupted trade in canola from the prairie states, such as Saskatchewan, into China, which was Canada's main market. Unlike the situation in Western Australia, in which the imposition of a tariff led to an immediate response by farmers to, in some cases, switch their varieties back to wheat, rather than continuing to plant barley because of concerns about what the market might look like at Christmas, Canadian farmers are protected by what we would call multi-peril crop insurance that insures against not only adverse weather conditions and outcomes, but also adverse market conditions. In order for Canadian farmers to get that insurance scheme, the local provincial government subsidises it to the tune of several hundred million dollars a year, which is more than matched by the Canadian federal government. It means that those farmers get a direct subsidy into their insurance scheme of towards \$A500 million every year. That is an enormous amount of assistance those farmers get in what we might consider to be a fairly free-trading country such as Canada.

If we compare that with what happens in Western Australia, it is quite clear that our farmers operate with minimal subsidies, and we can see that this tariff on the basis that our farmers are either dumping grain or are beneficiaries of lucrative subsidies is unfair and devastating. I think they are both nonsense claims. Over the course of 18 months or so, members of the Nationals WA have had consultations with groups, such as Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd, farmers and farming groups. It has become quite clear to us that this tariff has been a worry and a real possibility for quite some time, and now that it has come to fruition, it will affect farmers throughout the state. It is completely unfair. Farmers will do what they have always done—that is, make decisions and get on with life. New markets will have to be found and those who have not finished planting might consider new varieties. Nonetheless, that is another industry that is suffering—perhaps not directly from the COVID-19 situation. Certainly, as the local member, I think it is important that I put to the house just how devastating this will be for Western Australian farmers.

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

The people of Moore, the midwest and indeed regional WA are crying out for help, and that is why the member for North West Central brought this very sensible motion to the house. This motion is not condemning anybody. It is not a negative motion; it is a positive motion asking the Labor government to get behind Western Australian businesses and to immediately address the shortfall in support for small businesses and industry suffering because they are unable to access relief and recovery measures. Bear in mind that in many cases they are unable to access that relief and recovery support because of the restrictions and rules the government has put in place around the relief measures.

I will finish up with a bit of a discussion about the plight of commercial landlords and tenants in their arrangements. A relief package for land tax has been put forward, but, as local members, many of us have been contacted by landlords who will not be able to access that package because of the criteria wrapped around it. The amount that they would have to forgo or the amount of recompense on offer is a bit unsustainable as well. I know it is difficult and that many landlords are working with their tenants to come to reasonable outcomes. I think they are trying to address the devastating effect on tenants. There are no winners and nobody is trying to be greedy in many of these negotiations, but there has to be an understanding that both tenants and landlords often face fixed costs that they cannot avoid. I think it is important for the government to look again at that land tax situation and readdress the criteria to ensure that money does not stay unspent in Treasury but gets distributed to landlords. If we can help landlords, we can help the tenants. The government can help landlords to assist their tenants to get through this very devastating period when we are all suffering.

I call upon the government to look at this motion in the spirit in which it has been written. It is a motion that aims to be constructive and asks the government to carefully examine what it can do to assist businesses that are obviously still falling through the cracks after the range of measures the state and federal governments have put in place.

MR I.C. BLAYNEY (Geraldton) [5.09 pm]: I would also like to acknowledge the work of the State Emergency Service in Western Australia. I went to a recent SES function in Geraldton. The youngest person there in an SES uniform was 16 years old, and the oldest one was over 80 years old, which I would say tends to indicate broad community support. The member for Moore touched on this briefly, but I will talk for a while about our rock lobster industry initiative.

The rock lobster industry basically ceased fishing on 25 January. Not long after that, direct services to China and most Asian ports stopped. That, of course, left us with a huge problem because 98 per cent of our lobsters go to China, and there was a problem getting them between Western Australia and China. As the member for Moore said, the Deputy Prime Minister, Michael McCormack, came to Geraldton and we explained the problem to him. A commitment from the Morrison government flowed from that to underwrite pure commercial freight flights to China. Over the next eight weeks, 18 freight flights occurred, which went toward saving 2 400 Western Australia jobs and the \$500-million-a-year local crayfish industry. The economics of it are interesting. If crayfish travel under the floor of a commercial aircraft, it costs about \$4 a kilogram, but if they go on a pure freight operation, it costs about \$10 a kilogram. It is reasonably marginal at the current prices, but the important thing is that it gets crayfish back into the pipeline, and it will be worth about \$30 million to the local industry. Obviously, that was quite an important job creator in my electorate. Interestingly, I raised the issue with someone at the Chinese Consulate last week, asking when they thought direct flights to China would resume, and they said that they were not sure if they ever would. I was a bit taken aback by them saying that in such a blunt way. It would be very disappointing if that were the case.

Geraldton has an interesting hybrid university centre. Once again, we welcome the higher education relief package, which came from the federal government. That was quite positive, and included funding for new short courses and \$100 million in regulatory relief for education providers. Geraldton Universities Centre is looking at offering short courses to retrain and upskill people in the Geraldton community who are affected by the future of their jobs being in doubt due to the COVID-19 crisis.

I will touch briefly on the tourism industry. A number of operators in my city have been affected. However, we get quite a lot of commercial travel as well. It is not just people there for holiday purposes. Some of the figures from an operator in Kalbarri were particularly instructive and interesting. That operator qualifies for JobKeeper, but 95 per cent of its business has gone. Some members will know it; it is the Kalbarri Palm Resort. Funds for small businesses will be allocated through the tourism recovery package of \$10.4 million. I am disappointed that operators have to be members of the state's eligible tourism organisation. The owner made the point that most people in Kalbarri are members of the local visitor centre, which they fund and operate. They consider that membership of that organisation should qualify them for access to the tourism package. Thinking like a farmer, as far as I am concerned, it sounds like making drought aid available only to members of the Western Australian Farmers Federation or the Pastoralists and Graziers Association. The government should not discriminate against people just because they do not belong to a particular organisation.

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 20 May 2020]

p2970b-2995a

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

An issue that I have been dealing with for one operator in Geraldton is the so-called toilet tax. In this case, it is a resort that was very busy during the resources boom. I think 2013 was his record year. He has, I think, 60 toilets. It is a combined accommodation and caravan park. All the caravan park ensuites are on septic systems and are not connected to the sewerage, but he has to pay for each facility. I think the department is charging him for 60 toilets and every billing cycle he gets charged \$110 per facility. That is a huge impost on him for a property that has, most of the time, only five or six units that are occupied and no caravans. I call on the government, as we have a number of times, to abolish that tax, even if it is just for the period in which our tourism sector is so badly hit. I think it is quite wrong and quite unfair. Another operator who has been in touch with me is the owner of the backpackers' hostel in Kalbarri, who has to pay the tax for about 12 or 13 toilets. It is a substantial cost out of a bottom line that has been really heavily hit by the virus.

I want to acknowledge a substantial investment by Josh and Tanya Johnson, who have brought a \$3 million 31-metre fast ferry to Geraldton called *Abrolhos Adventures*, which will carry up to 270 people out to the Abrolhos Islands. They have just got it to Geraldton and are ready to get it working. They are going to have a pontoon out at the Abrolhos Islands. Of course, no-one from Perth can travel up there to go on it. Until the border restrictions came in, they were taking plenty of bookings, but since then all they have had is people ringing up and cancelling. There seems to be no urgency from the government to develop tourism and aquaculture at the Abrolhos Islands. Here is a private-sector operator who has invested \$3 million, which is a substantial investment. Its main business is earthmoving. They bought the ferry in Queensland and had to bring it over to Western Australia. That is a substantial investment and I think it would be a good thing if they could get operating as soon as possible. Unfortunately, winter is not very far away now so the seas will probably be too rough between Geraldton and the Abrolhos Islands to use the ferry for a few months.

I note with interest and some excitement the \$4.42 million pilot study to look at the feasibility of setting up a renewable hydrogen and ammonia production facility in Geraldton, which is funded by BP Australia and the Australian Renewable Energy Agency. It is quite an exciting project. That is real money, so we are all waiting with interest for the results of that study, which will take less than a year. We are a very favourable place for renewable energy. All that is needed to make it really happen is to do the final stage of the 330-kilovolt powerline from Three Springs to Moonyoonooka or Oakajee. The Barnett government built the first stage for \$419 million, which was Western Power's biggest investment for 20 years. I see that the Minister for Energy is sitting in front of me. I appreciate that a case for such things has to be made to the Economic Regulation Authority, and I suspect that would be a pretty hard job to do.

I refer to apprentices and a couple of local building companies. The first one is run by a bloke called Peter Fleay. He has been doing work in the Pilbara for Rio Tinto, and he has moved most of his apprentices to the Pilbara during the period of that work. A lot of Geraldton companies do that when they have substantial work in the Pilbara. He employs 16 apprentices full time. I would like to acknowledge the package of help that the state government brought to keep apprentices. In addition, he employs a significant number of Aboriginal apprentices. He is one of the biggest local regional apprenticeship trainers. He directly indentures; he does not use a labour hire company to employ them. The current president of the Master Builders Association of Western Australia is a bloke called David Crothers, who has a substantial building company in Geraldton. He also has a company here in Perth. He was talking, once again, about the difficulty of retaining apprentices due to the downturn in construction. He said that the industry peaked in Perth about six years ago, and the number of houses built each year has fallen since then from 32 000 a year to about 14 000. Locally, in Geraldton, the market has obviously peaked. We came off a high of around 360 houses a year, and I think we are down to about 40 this year. That gives an indication of the extent of the slump in the building industry in Geraldton.

I have an interesting note here about a fisherman building a new fishing boat, which I think is a pretty substantial investment. This one is worth \$3 million. It is being built between a couple of companies, one in Dongara and one in Geraldton. If someone has a long-term commitment to their industry, they have to keep investing, so I would like to acknowledge Dave Perham for signing on the dotted line for a new \$3 million fishing boat. It is being built between Xtreme Marine in Geraldton and Southerly Designs in Dongara.

I do not have designs on the town of Dongara, but I would like to acknowledge another company there called the Illegal Tender Rum Co. It has been praised for winning an award for the world's best under-five-year-old rum, which I think is quite an achievement. I would like to acknowledge Codie Palmer and his partner for their company. They are doing an exceptional job. During the COVID-19 crisis, they switched from making rum to making hand sanitiser with the highest possible alcohol content, using 96 per cent alcohol. The first batch is 4 500 litres. I want to say that in the small business community in Geraldton it is not all bad news, but it is certainly not easy. Small business people will say that it is never easy, but it certainly has not been easy for the last six to 12 months.

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

The City of Greater Geraldton has financial problems, as do probably all our local governments. It revealed recently a forecast deficit of \$3 million for the rest of the financial year, basically due to the COVID-19 crisis. The budget had been forecast to have a \$100 000 surplus; however, there has been a fall in revenue this year of \$6 million. The council has clearly indicated that it will not be raising rates, fees and charges on residents. The majority of the loss came from the airport, which had its revenue absolutely slashed by the decline in flights. We have gone from 14 Qantas flights a week to two. Because of that, the council said it would have to cut its expenditure. It suspended more than 200 staff and operations and maintenance of city infrastructure. Its worst-case scenario for next year is a \$10 million decrease in revenue, which will mean it will have to look very carefully at every operation it has.

I sympathise with councils, because they are not able to access the JobKeeper payments, and they have not really received any support from the state government either. I think it was a little unfair of the Minister for Local Government to say that they needed to lift their game and look at cost-saving measures, which Geraldton council has done, but it also came under severe criticism from the minister for standing down 200 people. The council is considering offering ratepayers a 10 per cent discount if they pay their rates up-front in full when they are due, and that is a pretty hefty discount to be offering. As I said, our airport now has only two flights a week. I was dealing a bit with the issue for security people at the airport, who were actually employed by a company, and all the other work they do is on mine sites. Once again, the company could not access JobKeeper because its revenue had not dropped by 30 per cent. That meant that the hours worked by people doing security checks for people getting onto flights in Geraldton had gone from the normal number of hours a week to probably about eight hours a week. They were not able to access any support. I checked it out, and, unfortunately, there was no flexibility in those rules.

A big issue locally for the last month or two, since the crash in the price of oil, has been the price of petrol in Geraldton. It really has been a marked difference this time. The price of fuel has obviously dropped considerably in Perth, and I would like to know to what degree that has been affected by the emergence of Costco as a competitor, because I am told it is the cheapest operator. We had a price difference of 50¢ a litre for a while between Costco near Perth Airport and most of the service stations in Geraldton. This is an issue that the Nationals WA will bring to the next Parliament. We will request a parliamentary inquiry into the difference between the price of fuel in the regions, particularly the regional cities—because they have the turnover at the service stations—and Perth. I do not really think there is much faith anymore in FuelWatch. Anyone we have spoken to seems to be trying to find excuses for what is happening rather than giving us reasons and telling us there is something they can do. On the same day that the price of petrol at a Perth station was 107.7¢, in Geraldton it was 137.5¢. The point has often been made to me that bringing fuel from Perth to Geraldton by road, at whatever the cost, is perfectly legal—if someone is qualified, they can do that—but no-one is doing it. If everything we do around this place these days is ruled by the invisible hand of the market, that is a case in which the invisible hand of the market is somehow being stopped from working.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: We are a port city, of course, and port cities have a tradition of providing hospitality to seafarers. I had a couple of cases of people being concerned about seafarers being allowed off their ships. They are usually allowed off for a couple of hours to go to a local supermarket and do some shopping, but that has been ceased. It was obvious that the community was concerned about it, and the masters of the ships were worried about the security of their crews, so for the period of the coronavirus it was decided they would not be leaving their ships. As it was, they were not allowed to leave their ships until they had been quarantined on them for 14 days and proven to be free of COVID-19. Of course, that has meant that our mission to seafarers has been closed as well.

A group of backpackers found themselves stranded at Drummond Cove, which is a free camping area in the northern part of Geraldton. It looked like they were going to be told to move on, as no-one was interested in helping them, so the local community gathered around and gave them a hand and found them accommodation, which was good. It showed good heart in the community.

Of course, accommodation continues to be an issue. Along with the MBA, I have been in contact with the Department of Housing. There are about 40 boarded-up government houses in Geraldton, and the MBA is interested in whether those houses are available to renovate. The Salvation Army has a reasonable amount of land available in the middle of town with, I think, five small units that people with a need for emergency housing can use. They could always do with more, because our Cameliers Guesthouse shelter closed down, so we have lost out. Sun City Christian Centre also has a facility in Geraldton to look after people who are homeless for a short time. It would be good if some of the money that the government has just put aside was available to be spent on renovating those houses in Geraldton.

I want to talk also about the boundary issue that other members have mentioned. Like everyone else, I fully supported the government's decision to put in place the boundaries; however, in the case of Geraldton, as people have said, we are now linked with the Gascoyne and the Pilbara and, let us face it, most people want to go to Perth; they do not want to go to the Gascoyne or the Pilbara.

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

A government member interjected.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: That is the way it is. That is where all our connections are. Most of our people have connections with Perth rather than that area. I agree that it could perhaps have been said a bit more carefully, but this is really causing a bit of grief.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Have you asked for a briefing from the health officer about that?

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: We asked a question about it.

Mr W.J. Johnston: But have you asked for a briefing?

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: I have seen what was said in the upper house. I think we got the answer we wanted in an answer in the Legislative Council today.

Mr W.J. Johnston: You should seek a briefing from the professional.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: Should I ask the Premier?

The time has come, certainly within Western Australia. I understand what the Premier is on about with the interstate border. The briefing note from the upper house today, which I have had only a brief look at, said that the government would not think about taking down the state's border until there had been two full 14-day cycles. I get the logic of that; there are no arguments there. However, I think the time has come to move on within the borders in Western Australia. Surprisingly, a lot of people in the regions want them to stay. The point was made by a number of people that these measures are easier to bring in than to take away because people like the security they offer. A person from Broome left a comment today on the ABC website that they would like the government to leave the borders in place until Christmas. There was no rational reason for that; they just thought that Christmas would be a good day to bring them down.

As I see it, there is an absence of community spread of COVID-19 in Western Australia. I note a Hollywood Private Hospital specialist, Clay Golledge, today called for the intrastate borders to be scrapped immediately and labelled the idea of clean states —

Mr W.J. Johnston interjected.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: May I seek your protection, Madam Deputy Speaker?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Protection granted, member for Geraldton. Minister, that is enough.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: I am being bullied by the Minister for Energy!

I echo what the specialist said. It was endorsed by a phone call I received today from a fairly senior doctor in Geraldton, who said that one of the top infectious diseases doctors in Western Australia was struggling to understand why the midwest and the north were isolated from the rest of the state. The doctor said there was no infectious diseases person on the working group that was deciding these things. It is time to take a good hard look at this. I note with interest the group in the Kimberley that is asking for the borders to be removed. I echo what it says.

I have only one other thing to talk about, which does not have a hell of a lot to do with coronavirus, but I want to acknowledge it here today. Anzac Day events were held differently this year across the midwest with the social gathering restrictions. I am sure most members stood at their front gate at 5.50 am, like I did, listening to ABC Radio in Canberra before they laid their wreath. The *Midwest Times* states—

At the Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation's Yamatji War Memorial, unveiled last year, four men gathered on Saturday for a simple ceremony to honour the 280 Yamatji men who fought for Australia ...

The two veterans behind the idea and construction of the memorial, Graham Taylor and Ron Cross, spent several years campaigning to create it.

According to a spokeswoman for the Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation, the two men were a bit disappointed they could not have proper ceremony, but they understood the restrictions were necessary to keep people safe.

This is only a black-and-white picture, but it is a picture of the war memorial that I am happy to say I made a reasonably substantial donation to.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Give it to me and I'll frame it for you.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: The minister will lose me!

I wanted to acknowledge that. I do not know of any other Aboriginal group in Australia that has built its own war memorial and I think it is quite an amazing achievement.

Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Terry Redman;
Mr Bill Johnston

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury) [5.35 pm]: I, too, would like to begin by acknowledging the State Emergency Service workers and volunteers throughout the state. We have a remarkable amount of orange in Parliament today, and that is great to see. That group of people has been doing a fantastic job for many years and it is good that we acknowledge them collectively today.

I acknowledge also the 260 000-odd small businesses in Western Australia and the traumatic time they have been through. I think every member in this house would share that view. On the day that we had to start closing down the economy in this state, it was traumatic to see the uncertainty people faced with their businesses—some businesses quite small, some businesses reasonably large. It was like nothing we had ever seen before. It was not like a recession or a natural disaster impact; this was about closing down businesses and the uncertainty about when they might reopen. At the same time, there was an aura of what COVID-19 might mean and that people might die from it. If people did not die from it, they would be seriously ill and nobody quite knew what the boundaries of that would be. That is something we forget in this debate. This is a fundamental issue impacting not only Western Australia and Australia, but also the whole world. We can see that the virus has had an impact in different locations across the world. Some had to move to quite severe lockdowns, much stricter than here in Western Australia, after the virus had got loose through community transmission. We were facing some pretty devastating scenarios at that time with the closure of businesses, the uncertainty surrounding that, and the uncertainty of what that meant for us as family and community members. That uncertainty may be easy to forget when we get to a point at which we have zero reported new cases and only three active cases in the state and nobody in hospital, but there is still uncertainty about where this virus is at, from a transmission point of view, and into the future.

One of the remarkable things is that businesses, particularly small businesses, adapt quickly; they can be incredibly nimble. Some businesses in my electorate picked up pretty quickly and reported to me that they had significant changes in spend within their businesses, particularly in the retail sector. Bike shops have done pretty well in my electorate.

Mr P.J. Rundle: Like Woolworths and Coles?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Woolworths and Coles have also done well, yes. Interestingly, sales of fitness equipment, such as weights, has increased. Gardening centres are also doing well. Retravision told me it had done an enormous trade with people who are doing home renovations and replacing kitchens, for example. Some businesses found that they could continue and improve their retail prospects. That could well be a bubble of retail spend and it might dissipate over the next few months as people adapt back into their working lives, but it was certainly an interesting thing that we did not foresee at the time.

Other businesses have done some really interesting things. I want to comment on a few of those. The Side Door Restaurant in Bunbury switched to doing deliveries straightaway. It switched its whole profile and moved to a delivery framework. It started doing fresh produce boxes for delivery, even baking its own cakes to go in the boxes. When gatherings were increased to 10 people, it started to provide home dinner parties with eight guests, one chef and one waitress. A very modest price was charged for a three-course meal. Cost-effective pricing for families really targeted the notion of supporting families and trying to do something special for them. It made money as well and the business survived. What I am talking about, member for North West Central, is the fact that businesses adapted, and we should celebrate the fact that some businesses could adapt. I am not taking away from the fact that some businesses could not, but I want to acknowledge those businesses that could.

Mr V.A. Catania: It's different when you've got a large population like Bunbury.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It may well be, but I am talking about my electorate. I might add that, in anticipation of the border restrictions being eased at some future point, I have booked a holiday in Exmouth for a few days. When I went on Booking.com, I found that I could get one of the last rooms available. So there is a sense of optimism about forward bookings for holidays in that area.

Mr V.A. Catania: Do you know something that we don't know?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: No, I do not. I do know that I have a fully refundable option, so if it stays closed, I will not go, but I will go later. What I will do, member for North West Central, is support local businesses in Western Australia. I will support them in my electorate and I will support them in the member's electorate, and I will do whatever I can in Western Australia to help us recover.

I want to come back to Mojo's Bunbury, a little family business. The family has worked hard for many, many years to build that business into a quality restaurant. It switched a lot of the beer that is sold in the bottle shop to WA-manufactured beers, rather than imported beers, and it made up Mother's Day packs after collaborating with other local businesses. This business networked and maximised the potential to support other businesses and build a resilient business network in the south west. That is what we admire about small businesses. They have gumption. It is a good old-fashioned word that means rolling up the sleeves and getting in and making the best of a very

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difficult set of circumstances. They sell growlers that can be refilled with local WA beers. I am not a beer drinker of any note, but I am assured that that is a very popular item in Bunbury. The business looked at local deliveries and had cost-effective pricing for families, with family packs.

The Rose Hotel and Motel is a great historic pub in the centre of Bunbury. It has very entrepreneurial operators who moved straight to a full menu for pick-up and delivery, with a very modest delivery cost. They made up favourite cocktails in batches to sell to the public. Again, that business adapted very quickly. The Green Depot, which is in the main street of Bunbury, provides gardening accessories. It very quickly switched to an online store and provided gifts and flowers for delivery locally. The Sabotage clothing store in Bunbury had been a traditional retailer and immediately developed an app and went online for purchasing and local delivery. Corner's on King switched to home deliveries and takeaways. Nicola's Ristorante collaborated with other local businesses for Mother's Day gifts. Florist Gump, which is one of the major florists, beat the competition over east on the internet after a referral to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. It moved online and has had a really good run through online sales. This what I am talking about with the adaptability and nimbleness of business, and we should acknowledge that. Some businesses in my electorate are equally doing it tough.

I want to read into *Hansard* something from Mojo's, because it goes to the essence of what the people who are running these small businesses have been doing to try to make sure that they build their resilience and that they do that in collaboration with other people. This is from Juliana, one of the owners of Mojo's Bunbury —

Would like to send out some good cheer to our BUNBURY & Surrounds family!!!

At the start of the week we were wondering how we were going to keep trading without customers!!!

Starting yesterday it's been like a veritable Tsunami of good wishes & people coming in to see if we're okay!!

Today is the day Noel & I stay home to babysit our Grandson & even in these hard times we needed to do this to lighten our mood!!

Our normal day usually works with Jake our son, running Mojo's & then we phone each other every so often throughout the day to check in ...

But today Jake keeps calling me & telling me of all the phone calls & bookings he's had where people are clearly going out of their way to help us.

The last call was to let us know that one of our local work crews around BUNBURY were wanting to support each of the hospitality venues every Friday for lunch from now on & they were booking us for catering next week.

Tears haven't stopped today because at least they've been because we are so overwhelmed by how much everyone is trying to help each other.

Working together will save us & many other venues in town & we in turn will do our very best to make sure you are safe from catching this dreaded virus when you come to visit us!!

THANK YOU, THANK YOU BUNBURY & Surrounds we really can't do it without you ...

That is what regional WA is about. It is about local people helping other local people, doing their best and not necessarily relying on government. These are people with gumption who have been doing it themselves.

I want to come back and talk about the government itself. In the debate so far, one of the biggest things that has not been spoken about but is one of the biggest things that Mark McGowan, our Premier, has done, along with our Minister for Health, Roger Cook, the cabinet, health professionals, frontline workers and the Chief Medical Officer, all with the support of the people of WA, is to flatten the curve. The curve has flattened, and that means that we have the potential to restart the economy, which I do not think ever stopped. It certainly slowed and it certainly had an impact on individual businesses, but we have been lucky because the economy has been operating, and the businesses in my electorate that I have just spoken about are testament to that. This government, with the support of Western Australians and health professionals, has taken a determined, disciplined approach, but it has had to defend that approach. It has worked in lock step with the national cabinet, the national Chief Medical Officer and the Prime Minister to make sure that our state is safe and that those small businesses that had to stay closed have the potential to reopen. That is the critical point. That is fundamental. A fear existed when we first closed the borders and started to talk about social distancing and hygiene and the implications of that in running a small business. We are now in a position in which we can start to say that we think we may have some control over this virus. There is still some uncertainty about that, and that is why there is a cautious approach to unlocking each risk. This is something that no government has faced, as far as I am aware—certainly not for a long time, but maybe during the time of the Spanish flu. The ease of transmission in the modern day is so rapid that I think it is even different from that during the time of the Spanish flu. This is a situation in which we have to make decisions, be adaptable,

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receive medical advice and then advance another step so that vulnerable people are not suddenly placed clearly and seriously at risk. All the feedback that I am getting from my electorate is that people fundamentally appreciate that. As the member for Geraldton said, a lot of people out there do not want the borders opened in a rush. They want assurance that they are going to be safe. I am very confident that that is what this government is about—it is about trying to make us as safe as possible as things are unlocked and restrictions are eased.

That does not mean that government ignores the plight of small business. Both the federal and state governments have worked to try to put in place the fiscal and regulatory levers to help support small businesses through this period of quite severely restricted trading and help businesses start up again and re-establish when they can reopen, because it will not be a simple reopening. There will be a whole new start-up phase in terms of cash flow, and I think members in this place understand that. Although members opposite may have raised issues about eligibility and quantum, the fact is that this government came to office with the state in a pretty damaged fiscal position and pretty significant debt. It worked hard to bring that debt and operating expenses under control. In my view, the government certainly put this state, Western Australia, in a much better position to deal with the COVID-19 crisis than it would have had we continued with the fiscal management patterns that were established by the previous government. That is a very important thing to note. Having said that, it is not a bottomless pit. We have to manage state debt and we have to manage expenditure. The government is very committed to looking at a targeted approach to try to ensure that support goes to where it is most needed and where there is the best chance of recovery in supporting our small businesses. I have nine pages of notes relating to the sort of support that is available. If small businesses have any concern at all, I urge them to ensure they talk to the Small Business Development Corporation, get advice, talk to their accountant and look at the pathway forward.

I want to talk about the member for Geraldton's comment about fuel prices because that is pretty dear to my heart as well. I acknowledge that the member for Warren-Blackwood is in the chamber. He joined me and other colleagues from the south west in writing a public letter to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to express our dissatisfaction with the way fuel price monitoring is occurring at a commonwealth level. There is a clear reason for that. I understand that the difference in fuel prices between the metropolitan area and Geraldton is pretty significant, as noted by the member for Geraldton. We reached record levels. I think there was a 42¢ difference in the price of petrol in my electorate and the metropolitan area. That is a record price. I accept that there can be some differences between the metropolitan and regional locations but as all of us members in the south west saw, there is no rational explanation for a price difference of that magnitude. There is no rational explanation for why someone can go down to Busselton and get fuel 10¢ cheaper or go to Manjimup and get it 12¢ or 13¢ cheaper.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I received a letter from the ACCC that basically mirrored the explanations I get from the fuel companies, which is a real concern. One of the letters that we received from one of the fuel companies acknowledged that there may be a 7¢ to 12¢ difference in the cost of supply and delivery between the metropolitan area and Bunbury. The ACCC provided no explanation why there was a 24¢ difference between its price and the metropolitan price at that time. There is 12¢ or 13¢ going begging. It makes no sense to all of us, collectively, in the south west that when the world oil price goes up, fuel prices in the south west almost go up instantaneously. When fuel prices on a world scale go down, there is a very long lag before seeing that at the petrol pump. The people of the south west are seeing that, and they are pretty cranky about it. In my view, the onus is firmly on the ACCC to take a fresh look at this issue. It needs to take a fresh look at the speed with which price movements occur and how consistent those price movements are across various outlets. It needs to take a good look at that and not hide behind the fact that it may be more expensive to sell in the regions, and it may be that the volumes are not moving over as quickly as they should or there is not enough competition. There is plenty of competition in the Bunbury market. One of the fuel companies clearly acknowledged to me in phone calls that there was a lack of competitive pressure in the bush. Although that is there, they can move in a very aggressive way on metropolitan pricing. To me, that says that people in the regions are subsidising the metropolitan fuel price. I will certainly keep the pressure on. In this argument, when small businesses and households are really feeling the pain from dealing with this crisis, the last thing we need is fuel companies at a national level making an excessive profit out of that. We should not deny them a reasonable profit, but the profits appear to be excessive.

The other thing I wanted to comment on—I know there was a discussion on this earlier in this place—is the issue of reform and regulatory reform. I look forward to the debate on planning reform over the next few days. I thought it was interesting to read today's media release from the CEO of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, Chris Rodwell, which is headed "Small businesses freed of regulatory deadweight". It states —

WA small businesses will be better able to adapt in the wake of COVID-19 following a significant overhaul of planning regulations announced by the State Government today.

That is a pretty good third party endorsement. It continues —

Extract from Hansard

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Large projects with the potential to bolster jobs and support our economic recovery will also have a faster, simpler and more coordinated planning approach to help them get started sooner.

Everybody is looking towards capital projects as part of the stimulus to aid recovery. It is amazing how we all run back to Keynesian economics when the going gets tough and as soon as things look a little better, everybody views the whole of the market as a free market and a free run for all. It is really interesting that the CCIWA has come out so strongly in support of this government's agenda, not just looking at grants, which is important in helping to cushion the impact on cash flows, but positioning the state for private sector investment because, at the end of the day, the government fiscal budget is a small part in comparative terms to the whole of the Western Australian economy. There is a whole pool of private sector investment out there waiting to be tapped, and those private sector investors have a role to play. In my view, they have a responsibility to play. Now is the time to step up. Now is the time to come forward and support this state, support regional Western Australia, support the metropolitan area and help Western Australia recover. In my view, all those frontline workers, Mark McGowan as our Premier, Roger Cook as our health minister, the Chief Medical Officer and the cabinet members have all played their role in flattening the curve to the point at which we can now start to risk-manage the unlocking of those restrictions and open up opportunities for business to restart. That is what the government can do but it is up to the private sector as well. I look to those large institutional investors to take advantage, to look at the opportunities, and to look at what we are doing in procurement reform. The Procurement Bill 2020 was debated in this house yesterday. In fact, I do not think we have had a single day in the past few weeks in this Parliament when a reform bill has not been debated. That is what we call adaptability, being nimble and responding and taking action. Action is what we need. We need movement to help give people confidence, help drive the state forward, and help take us to a point at which people feel confident about the future. From the feedback that I am getting, I certainly think that people are feeling very confident about how this government has managed the response so far. From my point of view as a local member, I am proud to be part of my government. I am proud to talk to my community about what we are doing, proud to hear the feedback and proud to be able to relay that feedback to the ministers because I think we are doing a good job. I think there is a long way to go. We are doing a good job, but it is a job that is based on teamwork with the people of Western Australia. It is the people of Western Australia who will make this state thrive again.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren–Blackwood) [5.58 pm]: I would also like to respond and make a contribution to the motion that was moved by the member for North West Central, which states —

That this house calls upon the Labor government to immediately address the shortfall in support for Western Australian small businesses and industries suffering because they are unable to access relief and recovery measures.

I want to take that motion in the full breadth and context that I think it deserves around what is happening in Western Australia now. I agree with one point made by the member for Bunbury. I think the government has done a good job during this pandemic. Its response so far is certainly acknowledged by the people of Western Australia, including the people in my electorate. Therefore, the government has strong community support. There are certainly a few people in my electorate who would like to see a bit more than a hard border in Western Australia; they would like to dig a ditch and see a bit of the Southern Ocean flow up through the middle of Western Australia and take a more permanent approach to those borders. Unfortunately, that will not be the case. At some point, those borders will have to be lifted.

The Nationals WA also want to see the government successful at this. We do not want to see Western Australia be a massive loser out of this international pandemic, something that is out of our control. We want to see success as a result of the steps that the government takes to ensure the health and safety of people who live in Western Australia as well as an appropriate stepped response to recovery. Members will have seen that in how the National Party has been operating. We have not played tough politics during this time. We have been supportive of bills that have come in on very short notice, with today being a slight exception. It was fair and reasonable to push back on that, but the record we have had in supporting bills in this place, as was highlighted by the Deputy Leader of the Nationals WA not that long ago, has been pretty good on the National Party's part. Through the Leader of the National Party's office we had taken the step that when issues came up, we discussed them ourselves on Zoom. In the collective, we took those through the central point of the leader's office. Those issues were then raised directly with the Premier, and in many cases we got a response. I might say, very unusually for members of Parliament, it was not attached to a media release. We took issues that came out of our electorates into the collective and through to government and got some good outcomes. An example is getting the three-bottle rule on alcohol limits out of bottle shops. Eastern state companies are able to sell online full cartons of wine, yet our own retailers were not able to sell more than three bottles. That was changed very quickly by the relevant minister. Likewise, the firearms and ammunition issue emerged, which was the right decision to start with, but there was some collateral damage. Again, the government was quite quick to respond and made sure that it put in place the right measures. The

National Party is on good ground when it says that it has been responsive and supportive of government initiatives to deal with the issues that it faces.

The bigger challenge comes now, in letting out the reins and making decisions to ease off restrictions. How fast does the government do that, and where? Will there be enough time to see the response to that easing and to see whether there are any outbreaks or community spread and take appropriate action? That is the more difficult challenge. We are now starting to see in our communities a fair bit of comparing and contrasting happening between us and the other states, us and other countries, and my region to another region in what steps may well be taken by government. I make the point that I know making decisions in the lockdown are tough. Governments made those tough decisions and I think the state government rightly made the call that it had to go hard and early, based on experiences we saw overseas. The government took on that strategy and it was the right thing to do. I do not say this lightly, but it is a relatively straightforward decision. We see the challenge coming, see the issues elsewhere, make the call and lock things down. Letting it out is harder. We have health advice, maybe with some differences between state and federal health advice, a federal government and other jurisdictions to deal with, and we have different parts of Western Australia that are very diverse in nature. That is going to be harder. One thing that the community will ensure from now on is that the government will now own its decisions. It has been reflected well so far, but the government will now own its decisions.

What are some of the pressures in my community that have come from this crisis? First and foremost, it is the protection of the elderly, those people who are in that older demographic. Some of them have other underlying health challenges, which puts them at high risk. That is a big concern, particularly across my electorate, which has an older demographic. Some communities, such as Augusta, have a relatively small population and a big transient population that comes in during the holiday period, which now brings with it some risk to that community. I know that that is a big concern for the Department of Health in the south west. Communities like that will express pretty strong views. Some of my parliamentary colleagues from other parties have put out Facebook posts about lifting the boundaries and I have seen the responses. An underlying response, in a lot of cases, says that we need to keep a level of protection over this. Some of that still exists, but fundamental to our thinking needs to be protecting the elderly and making sure that we have processes in place for that. I have elderly parents in Denmark. When I was working from home I bought the daily paper for them and took it to them. I did not want them going near the shops. We have taken some very localised steps in our family to try to enhance their level of protection. There is now a risk emerging that some in our community may be getting a little casual. We have not seen the pandemic wash through our towns and we have not seen close friends die from COVID-19; we only read about it in the papers and see what is going on in the news. We are getting a bit casual about social distancing and all those protections that have been put in place for a reason. That is a risk, and it is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that as we move forward, particularly as we lift some of the restrictions, and we make sure that our community keeps a level of rigour in and around this.

The premise of this motion today is business stress. A big proportion of my electorate relies on the foot traffic of tourists coming through the south west to Margaret River, Bridgetown, Manjimup and Pemberton, right through to Walpole, Denmark and Mt Barker. They are quite heavily dependent on the tourism sector—the one sector that has been absolutely smashed through COVID-19—and the imposition on them because of the boundary restrictions on travel. I must say that they have absolutely welcomed the JobKeeper strategy. That has been really welcomed across the community. Obviously, we will watch that as it moves forward and comes to an end, but that has been the saviour of many small businesses in my community. Of course, the positive effect of that extends to accommodation, businesses, cafes, restaurants, shops and a whole range of broadly tourism-related businesses that have been impacted by the travel lockdowns. With the lifting of restrictions, they are starting to open their doors and work out strategies to manage the health risk and maintain high levels of hygiene and social distancing in the context of maintaining a successful business.

The next impact on my electorate has been emerging mental health challenges. We know that the numbers are going up for those groups that receive phone calls from people with mental health challenges, Beyond Blue and Lifeline in particular. Again, we need to be very cognisant of the mental health challenges through this. I have written letters to the Minister for Health about a couple of specific issues in my electorate, where some consideration needs to be given to extra resources, given there have been a couple of suicides in very recent times, which is terribly, terribly tragic.

An interesting impact has been in the international workers space. I have only one example of this, but there are probably a few in my electorate who fit into it. This young fellow is a saturation diver who goes on the rigs overseas. He stays down in a bubble and does the work he needs to do in the very, very deep sea. Divers have to come up slowly and go through decompression. Because his work is overseas, every time he makes the decision to go to his job, he has to sit in isolation for two weeks before he can get back to his family in Denmark. This issue extends to a lot of people in their workplace, and some with some very unusual circumstances. The member for Geraldton might have already mentioned backpackers. There are two groups: backpackers who are largely responsible for harvesting

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pretty much all the horticulture in my electorate in the Manjimup–Pemberton area, and also work visa holders who have been asked to come because of the particular skills they bring to our nation. They are here for a couple of years, and when their jobs drop out, as they have, they have no way of supporting themselves and they cannot go anywhere. We invited them to be here. There are a couple of those people in Nornalup, in Western Australia. It was quite a publicised issue. That is one of our challenges. Back to the backpacker issue more specifically, the Manjimup community has absolutely embraced them. It has said, “Righto, we recognise that you are fundamental to our workforce as we go into the harvesting season in spring. We need to make sure that we look after you.” I take my hat off to Ed Fallens. Ed owns Tall Timbers. If members ever go through Manjimup, they should stop in at Tall Timbers. If they want a glass of wine, he has a fantastic array of local wines, but it is also a great restaurant. Ed has just bought the Manjimup pub across the road and he has converted it into a backpacker hostel. He has some 60 backpackers in there now who he is effectively feeding. He sought donations from the Manjimup community and got a significant amount of money, more than it costs to feed them, to look after those backpackers. That is a fantastic initiative that is supported by the shire. He is getting a little bit of work out of them, they are getting a bed and a meal and being looked after, and they will be ready to go in the spring when the harvesting starts. Interestingly, he was geared up to convert that pub into a distillery and a brewery. It has all the kit inside; he showed me recently. When he gets the chance, he is raring to go and pull the trigger to start a pretty significant tourism investment into Manjimup. I am sure that will be something that is not only a fantastic tourism initiative, but also supports the local economy.

Our community sport and recreation and culture and arts groups have also been impacted. We do not talk about them very much, but they have been pretty significantly impacted. Margaret River and Denmark in particular have strong creative industries that support those communities. Their businesses have been smashed. Also, sport and rec. We might not think of football clubs, but I talked to a member of one of the football clubs in Manjimup recently who made the point that even if the club were allowed to go back and start playing footy, it is not allowed to have crowds, because there are restrictions on that. The club gets its revenue from charging people coming through the gate and from selling beer and so on across the bar. That runs their football game. The club member made the point that unless the club can do that, it is pointless opening because it would have no money to run the club. The impact goes right into those sporting and cultural groups that sit within our communities and form a significant part of the community fabric. They should not be lost in the discussion about how we respond to this. In many ways, they are businesses in and of themselves.

There are challenges. The government is looking at easing restrictions now. At the same time, it wants to stimulate business. That is the challenge matrix. What things can we do in my electorate that respond to a motion like this to stimulate business and help businesses to come out of the challenge? The first one has already been raised, and that is the eligibility criteria of tourism grants. I have had numerous emails and phone calls on this issue—a significant number. I have had more emails and phone calls on this issue than pretty much any other in the last six months. The government announced \$14.5 million worth of grants. A lot of businesses in my electorate do not meet the eligibility criteria because they are not a member of a regional tourism organisation as at 31 January. In my electorate, they would need to be a member of Australia’s South West or the Tourism Council Western Australia or another accredited group. I think that is sad. That extends to accommodation businesses, for example, that have been hit by the online platforms. This issue was raised in this house and we had a discussion about it; we even had a parliamentary inquiry. The recommendations for that now sit with the Minister for Planning. They include setting up a central register for those short-stay accommodation providers to make sure that they are on a level playing field with those businesses that have invested in the sector. Accommodation businesses were impacted by that. When businesses are impacted by something, they go through their profit and loss statements and try to wash out whatever expenses they can. Membership of organisations such as the Tourism Council WA or Australia’s South West is probably one of the first things to go. Many businesses were members of those organisations before and have chosen not to renew their membership because of reasons of business pressure. Of course, the consequence now is that they are not even eligible to apply. This is not an issue of getting a grant but of being in the pool to have a go at it. I would have thought it reasonable that a business in Margaret River, for example, that has been massively impacted by this, is a member of the Margaret River Busselton Tourism Association. That is a local tourism organisation—the next tier down from an RTO—and is a very, very competent group with over 600 members, who do a lot of very good progressive work in the Margaret River and Busselton region. However, membership of that organisation is not sufficient to be eligible to apply for this grant. I think that is disappointing. I think the government has missed the mark there.

I have even had wineries give me a call. Wineries are in the tourism space. Again, they are members of their own organisations, or, in many cases, members of their local organisations, for reasons of local promotion. In Denmark, for example, there is the Amazing South Coast. The Shires of Denmark and Plantagenet and the City of Albany have got together and coordinated a campaign to promote their region. Why would wineries not be a part of that? They

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join that, drop their membership of other organisations, and now they are not eligible to apply for a government grant. I am not suggesting they might be successful in getting a grant, but they would like to be eligible to apply.

I note the hardship grants that were part of that \$4 million. I think the Premier made the point that there is every likelihood that that money will go north. Some of my colleagues might benefit from that, simply because of the hardship and the longer duration of the travel restrictions.

I refer to wine tasting. I have been contacted by cellar door outlets that can open and sell wine, but cannot allow people to taste their wine. That does not make sense to me. Restaurants are allowed to sell wine and food to up to 20 seated patrons, but a winery cannot have a tasting. They would have to follow the rules, absolutely, including rules on social distancing and all the hygiene issues, having patrons seated outside—whatever it might be.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I would have thought that more than reasonable. Again, we have the long weekend coming up. I would love the minister to consider that before the long weekend, because that would give those businesses that are going to be opening for the first time a chance to be able to put something to the tourism traffic that is going to be coming down.

I want to get on to a couple of other issues. I know the Minister for Energy is here. I am running out of time. I am not going to get on to the timber industry just yet. I wish the Minister for Forestry were here, but that might be left for another day.

I refer to the \$2 500 grant that the Minister for Energy has put out for small business. There is a threshold of 50 megawatt hours in the south west interconnected system. If businesses go above that, they get into the contestable market. The minister has answered every question that has been thrown at him in the last couple of weeks by saying, "That is the contestable market; I don't want to upset that." In the Horizon network, I think it is all contestable. There may be some areas. I will pick one. Esperance certainly does not have a contestable market.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Horizon had authority to go beyond the 50 megawatts for—I don't know whether Esperance would be covered—those businesses that the nature of their location mean they use more than 50 megawatts. But I will talk about this in a second, if the member wants.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Yes. My understanding is that that was a late decision.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Yes, it was.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The call was made that there is a 50-megawatt-hour threshold. We asked questions about it. My office actually wrote an email to the minister on 22 April. I was seeking information on whether the government will provide equal support to regional small businesses who operate in uncontested electricity markets and use more than 50 megawatt hours per annum. I made reference to the Horizon network. Of course, the response was "No". The response was that these are the rules. Then I read in the paper that Horizon's tariff offset had been welcomed by the member for Pilbara. Some two or three weeks after I raised it with the minister's office and I got a no, he must have come more nicely to you. Those businesses have got it because it is hotter up there and they are required to run air conditioners. I do not understand why that is a special requirement that means they are in and no-one else is. What about Esperance? Esperance has businesses, one of which, the Esperance Taylor Street tea rooms, is actually on a footprint of the Esperance Southern Ports. This business is over the 50-megawatt-hour threshold and is in the Horizon network, but it cannot access this grant. Interestingly, it has to run a couple of lights to light up the Taylor Street area, which are actually port lights. They have to have those and they pay for them.

A member interjected.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: They do from the port, but they cannot access the grant, either.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Because they are not Horizon customers.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: They have to be a Horizon customer; what about other businesses down in Esperance that might be over the threshold?

Mr W.J. Johnston: I will explain in a second.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Okay. I found it interesting that the minister set the rules up, and then suddenly there has been a change. I am sure there is a whole heap of other reasons businesses could find there has been a change. The toilet tax has been mentioned very, very strongly in my electorate. I would have thought that the minister could simply take that off the Water Corp's balance sheet. That would not be hard.

I have another couple of issues. I refer to Hesketh Quarry. The minister was talking about green and red tape today. That is an issue; they need some issues sorted in order to be able to put blue metal onto the market. Right now, it has to be transported a significant distance away. It would literally supply the south west. Main Roads is chasing it. They have all these barriers to their expansion.

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Mr W.J. Johnston: Is it on private land?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: No, it is on Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions land. I have had letters back and forth. I am trying to get the development commission to take up the issue. Of course, the fantastic Walpole pumped-storage hydro project—one of the minister's projects—is applying for a clearing permit for the bottom dam site. I hope that gets a tick. I have written to the Minister for Environment to say that this is a good outcome for a community that is just longing for a solution to the challenges it has. I have raised a number of issues that the government can respond to. We are putting this motion on the table in good faith because we know there are challenges; nevertheless, businesses out there have been substantially impacted by something out of their control.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Mines and Petroleum) [6.19 pm]: I rise to speak on behalf of the government on this motion—somewhat surprisingly. In advance, I want to pass my regards to the Minister for Tourism and hope that his day does not go too badly.

I say to the Nationals WA members that what they are asking us to do is what we are doing. We are looking at the shortfalls in the federal government support to small business and trying to fill the gaps that have been left to us. The federal government has not assisted everybody in industry in Western Australia. That is not a surprise because no government has unlimited money. We have to fit in around the enormous support that the federal government is giving. Let us not get away from the enormous support provided by the federal government. It is to its credit that it has abandoned ideology to follow some incredibly commonsense policy. We all have to acknowledge the elegance of the design of the JobKeeper program. There are, no doubt, issues around it. Temporary migrants are not covered by it in the way that the member for Warren–Blackwood described. I think he said that people were invited to Australia to work but are being left out of the JobKeeper program. Casuals have been left off. If a person has been a casual employee for less than 12 months, they do not get the JobKeeper payment. On the other hand, there are people who might have been working, say, seven or eight hours a week who are covered. Previously, they were getting \$300 or \$400 a week as a uni student working one shift in a bar, but now they are suddenly on \$1 500 a fortnight. There are definitely some anomalies in the JobKeeper program, but I absolutely give the commonwealth government credit for that program. I do not want to be seen to be criticising it. The commonwealth government had to design a program in a very short period of time for the hibernation of the economy—I think that is the term we are always using. When we thought that we would have to have a very, very long period of hibernation, it was a genius idea. The commonwealth government also supported displaced workers through the JobSeeker program at a proper level, rather than the disappointingly low level that used to apply to people who were out of work. I give credit to the commonwealth government for its ingenuity in designing these programs.

Of course, the commonwealth government also has working capital grants available to business. I think the maximum is \$100 000. It is a grant, not a loan. A whole range of government-backed loans are available for small business to get them through this difficult period. An incredible number of well-designed programs are available from the commonwealth government to assist industry in Western Australia and around the country. We looked at what the commonwealth government had done and tried to work out how we could fit in around that. So far, we have spent \$1.8 billion on behalf of the people of this state on stimulus and relief in response to COVID-19.

I will go through that in a minute, but I want to come back to a couple of things that were discussed by members as well. No matter what happens in the future, some things will probably stay with us for a long time. I put that down as social distancing, changed personal hygiene habits and people staying home when they are sick. I think people have to understand that these things are needed from now on, even if we have no people with COVID-19. We do still have people with COVID-19 in Western Australia. If no people in Western Australia had COVID-19, that would not mean that the disease does not exist. The disease will still exist elsewhere in the world, and all that is needed is for one person with the disease to come into the country for us to be back where we were in February. People need to understand that. If we are able to get zero cases in Western Australia, that will not be the end of the fight; that is just the end of this stage of the fight. We will still have to deal with the fact that COVID-19 exists in the world, and we have to change society to accept that. The future will be different from the past. It does not matter what happens, because the future will always be different, so I think those three things will be with us for a long, long time. I am talking five, six or seven years. Social distancing; personal hygiene—people cleaning their hands and using hand sanitiser three times a day—coughing into elbows, not hands; and people staying at home when they are sick will be with us for a long time. People used to think that the best employee was the guy who came to work no matter what; we do not want that anymore. If people are sick, they need to stay at home, because the insidious nature of this disease is that some people do not even know that they have it until after they have had it. It is absolutely essential that society now changes to come to terms with this until, as we know, there is either a vaccine or a treatment. I am sure we all read the same international media sources and have seen the discussions in them about whether either of those two outcomes will ever occur. Society has to change; we will not, for the foreseeable future, go back to where we were prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in our world.

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It is interesting that they now say that the first person to catch COVID-19 in France caught it before the new year. Nobody was talking about COVID-19 on 31 December. It was not until the middle of January that it started to break out as a story in world media. It had actually already been spreading outside China before anyone in the media was talking about it. That shows the difficulty we all have in dealing with this disease. Nobody knows whether there will be another outbreak tomorrow. Look at the difficulty they are having in Victoria with McDonald's. A truck driver infected a McDonald's employee and, as is often the case with McDonald's, the owner had more than one store, and the same worker worked at more than one store. They ended up with an outbreak across McDonald's stores and 12 stores are now shut. That is a challenge for all of us. Nobody should think that just because we get zero cases in Western Australia, if that ever happens, that that will be the end of the fight against COVID-19, because every day there is the possibility that a person with COVID-19 will come into the state, and that is why we have to have our hard borders with the east coast and overseas.

It is also interesting that just because a person is tested and comes up negative, it does not mean that they do not have the disease. There are also false negatives. Again, there is a lot of debate in the media about that. I think it was the member for Geraldton who was talking about people becoming relaxed about this. We cannot. We have to continue to maintain our strict behaviours because, otherwise, we will risk an outbreak of the disease exactly as we had in February and early March, when it became an issue in Western Australia. Remember, if we have an outbreak again, we will have to go back to that March response. It is not that we will now only ever go in one direction. If we have an outbreak, we will have to go back to where we were, because otherwise we will end up like New York or South Dakota. If members want to see an example of a regional community battling against the virus, they should have a look at what has happened in South Dakota over the last month. Obviously, this disease spreads more rapidly in a tightly populated area; therefore, cities around the globe seem to have been more impacted. However, even regional communities can be impacted. Of course, as we saw with the outbreak of the disease at Broome Health Campus, regional communities can be impacted. That is why we had to rush into the lockdown, but it will take us a long time to get out of it. If members have seen the advice of the government on the intrastate borders, they would know why we are being correctly cautious. Just because we get the count down to zero does not mean that there will be no risk. The more travel occurs, the higher the risk. That is why we need to do social distancing, make sure that we sneeze into our elbows, use a tissue and dispose of it, regularly clean our hands, and stay home if we are sick.

I want to address a couple of little things. We recognise that culture, the arts, sport and recreation is an area that relies a lot on volunteers—the bar funds the football, the ticket price funds the regional touring program and all these things. That is why the Premier tasked Lotterywest with supporting the not-for-profit sector. Organisations that would normally not be able to get a grant from Lotterywest or ordinarily not be able to get a grant for their underlying costs can now apply to Lotterywest to get that type of support. Lotterywest has money that is available for grants, but that does not mean that every community organisation in the state will be able to be supported to the extent they would like to be, but that system is deliberately designed to make sure that we can help community organisations get through this difficult time. Again, that is exactly what the Nationals WA is asking for. We have had a look at the shortfalls in support from the commonwealth government and are trying to address them. That is an example of something that we knew would not be helped by the commonwealth government, so we moved to address it.

I refer to the \$2 500 electricity offset. The government had already decided to give the \$17 500 payroll tax grants to businesses with a payroll between \$1 million and \$4 million. The reality is that, as a government, we do not have that much to do with business. Businesses operate out in the community. They might have to go and see their local government or they might need to buy a licence, but there is not much interaction between the government and business. But one thing we do is send an electricity bill every two months to just over 70 000 small businesses in Western Australia—those that buy regulated electricity from Synergy, and Horizon in the regions. Most of those small businesses do not pay payroll tax; therefore, they would not get the benefit from the payroll tax credit or the reduction in payroll tax that we are also introducing. Many of those businesses do not have employees. Statistics have been quoted that there are 225 000 small businesses, but 150 000 of those small businesses do not employ anybody. We know 70-odd thousand of them because they buy electricity from us. Generally speaking, if a business uses less than 50 megawatt hours of electricity, the assessment of government was that those businesses are not paying payroll tax, because if they were, they would be larger businesses and would be in the deregulated electricity system. In fact, many of them would be small businesses that do not employ people. That was a way of targeting support and getting it into their pockets quickly. I think it was the Leader of the Opposition in the upper house, rather than the National Party representative but, one way or the other, we had a question in the upper house about what the application process is. There is not an application process. On 1 May there is a \$2 500 offset to electricity costs. Interestingly, the average electricity purchase for the business tariff for Synergy is \$2 600 so basically for 70-odd thousand small businesses we are paying their electricity for nearly a year, which is a pretty amazing achievement.

Mr V.A. Catania: They are under the 50 megawatt hours?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes. It is those people using less than 50 megawatt hours.

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Mr V.A. Catania: Can the minister explain how the government made the change about Horizon?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I am coming to that. That was the decision of government, and we made the announcement. Subsequent to us making that announcement, the chief executive of Horizon Power was approached by businesses in the north west and asked for flexibility around the implementation of the grant. That was reconsidered by the government and approval was given for Horizon Power to provide assistance to businesses—effectively, those in the north west, but it is not limited to the north west—that would use less than 50 megawatt hours if they were located in the south west. Therefore, they are using above the 50-megawatt-hours limit, but are not able to access alternative offerings other than Horizon. Horizon has to come back to me to approve the exact details, but it has flexibility, for those businesses that are a bit above the 50-megawatt-hour limit, to provide the offset to those customers. I am sure that the member wrote to me about this issue. I have no doubt about that. We would have told the member what the position was at the time that he wrote to us. It was a decision that was made quite late in the process, and it was because the chief executive, Stephanie Unwin, came and spoke to us about the challenge for customers in the north west particularly. I am not engaging in the question of Esperance, because I do not know the answer to that and I have certainly not discussed it. The concession is to Horizon and its customers. There are Esperance customers that are buying their energy from Horizon, but I think, because of the nature of the environment down in Esperance, that a business that would be using 50 megawatt hours in Perth is probably using 50 megawatt hours in Esperance. Interestingly, the port authority currently does not buy its electricity from Horizon. If a business is on the port land, it is probably getting its electricity either from the port authority or from somebody else—not from Horizon.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The south west interconnected system is a contestable market. The moment we start playing with it, we disturb it. I said this twice, in answer to a question from the member's leader and a question from the member for Bateman. I had retailers come to me and ask me not to give a grant to those people because I would be favouring Synergy over other businesses. In the over-50-megawatt-hour area, because they can get contestable outcomes, they can get different products. Sometimes the unit cost of electricity is lower than the regulated tariff. It has become very difficult to play in that space. That brings me back to the cost. This is a \$220 million program, which is an enormous amount of money. We cannot help everyone. It is sad, because we know that there will be businesses that are badly impacted. The member will have heard the Premier make the point many times that the COVID response has led to good people ending up in bad situations. That is the way it is happening because of the disease. We are trying to help as many people as we can, but we cannot help everybody. We are trying to do exactly what the member has asked. We are trying to see where the shortfalls in support from the commonwealth government are to see where we can fit in.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I just say one more thing?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Sure.

Mr V.A. Catania: For roadhouses, for example, in the north that are independent of the power supply and are not making a dollar, it is costing them a lot by not having traffic. They spend up to \$20 000 a month on diesel just to run. Is there any chance of them being able to get some acknowledgement that they are an essential service that is being kept open—not that \$2 500 is going to make a lot of difference? It is a vital service and their power costs are through the roof.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I am not going to give the member an answer standing here, but we are very sympathetic to problems that are arising in the community. It is a very difficult time. We are not quite finished considering all the relief efforts, but we are ready now to pivot to the next stage because we are lucky that we have been able to control the disease and we now want to reopen. Leaving aside the Northern Territory, we are the place in Australia with the fewest restrictions. We never had a stay-at-home order in Western Australia. Obviously, nobody was encouraged to travel, but it was not like Victoria or New South Wales where people were told not to leave their homes. That has not been the case in Western Australia. Now, there can be gatherings of 20 people. On the east coast it is 10. It will be more in the future. I am not going to make any undertaking about a particular circumstance for an individual business that we have not been able to help, but I am happy to have a look at it.

Mr V.A. Catania: I have written to the Premier about that.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Sure. I do not know what response was given to the member.

Mr V.A. Catania: I have nothing yet.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes. We get a lot of questions about where the line is. It is the same with the internal borders. Everybody accepts that the internal borders were needed. The question is how we get out of them. I go back to the comment I made at the start of my speech. The disease still exists, so we still have to make sure that we are not doing

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things that will allow it to spread. Everybody looks at the figure and says that there are three people with the disease in Western Australia, so it is not a problem. Actually, that just means that we are back to where we were in February. The risk is exactly the same, although we are managing the borders better now, so we have to make sure that we do it slowly. I am not on the emergency management committee of cabinet, but, again, information is still given to the full cabinet. The point I make is that if we had taken all the borders away in Western Australia and if something had gone wrong, we would not know which bit was the problem, so we will do it slowly and in a measured way.

Mr V.A. Catania: I suppose the argument from the north is that we are allowing two major populations, being Perth and the south west, to congregate in a colder climate. Why allow that to happen down south and leave the north alone? That is the argument.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Sure, but the Premier has explained that. It is because the medical facilities are further apart, there is more reliance on medical transfers and there is a larger Aboriginal population in the north. Do not forget that even if we had done away with all borders, the commonwealth government's biosecurity rules would still be in place. The Kimberley and a significant part of the Pilbara and elsewhere, including the goldfields and, I think, even a bit of the Gascoyne, are covered by the commonwealth government's biosecurity arrangements, and we cannot withdraw those. Only the commonwealth government can withdraw those.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I just make one point. Everyone keeps talking about the Aboriginal populations and communities; yes, there are communities and a large Aboriginal population, but the largest Aboriginal population lives in Perth and the south west.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I know, but whatever the risk in Perth is, it was always the same. When we relax our risks here in Perth, that risk changes, but there is a risk if we remove the internal boundaries. We have removed some internal boundaries. The Premier has made it clear that he will review that in three or four weeks. If the risk has not become a problem, he has made it clear that he will make further decisions about those other internal boundaries. Broome is one of the classic examples. It is a city that relies on tourism, but it is the service centre for the remote communities in the Kimberley. The member can immediately understand the challenge. Yes, we want tourism businesses back up and operating, yet it is one of the points in the state where the risks are so high. These are not easy decisions. As I say, I am not on the emergency management committee and it is not a decision I have to make, although it comes to cabinet for final endorsement, but these are the problems. It is the same as the pubs. There has been a suggestion that there should be 20 people per venue, but one of the problems is that some large venues have a number of subparts. One of the challenges is the use of toilets and ingress and egress, because if there is only one entrance to a building and only one set of toilets, it is only one venue, because the patrons would mix. That is about tracing if there is a need to trace people.

Mr V.A. Catania: They cannot afford to have more than one toilet either!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The difficulty with that, as the Minister for Water highlighted in question time today, is that it is a fixed charge because there is a fixed cost. The Water Corporation bears the cost whether facilities are being used or not.

Mr D.T. Redman: But it is a spot where the government could provide a subsidy or short-term relief, because they simply do not have the revenue to offset what is a fixed cost.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, it might be something we could look at.

Mr V.A. Catania: Prior to 2003, it was a consumption charge rather than a —

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The problem is it is a fixed cost because it is about capacity. It is like so many other things; it is about having the capacity available when it is needed.

Mr D.T. Redman: Network costs.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, network costs; there we go. But we never know what the government might do in that area. It is something that we understand is a challenge and it might be possible to come up with a plan to help.

Getting back to the question of the interaction of customers in a business, I turn to the question of the cellar door. The reason a person cannot just have a beer at a pub is about preventing mixing of clients. If we go okay with the current relaxations, there will be further relaxations, and that will probably address the cellar door question.

Mr D.T. Redman: A big proportion of cellar doors are only little ones—three or four people at one time.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, I understand that.

Mr D.T. Redman: Provided they have good practice—I think good practice is a given—I would have thought it made a bit of sense.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: It is the advice we have at this stage, and I am sure it will change over time.

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The other thing is the \$150 million pull forward of the expenditure on the housing package. This is a really good idea. Yes, some new houses are going to be built, which is good, but the other thing is this large-scale refurbishment program. The great thing here is that the Department of Communities has houses everywhere, so the refurbishment of houses in Broome will be done by contractors in Broome, the refurbishment of houses in Carnarvon will be done by contractors in Carnarvon, the refurbishment of houses in —

Mr D.T. Redman: I thought you had open tender processes that allow those to go to market, which means a Perth business may well get that business.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: No, because the good thing is that it is a panel contract, as the member knows, as a former Minister for Housing. The contractors are already in place. This is the great thing.

Mr D.T. Redman: So you would use those panel contractors?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I am not the Minister for Housing, but my understanding is that the reason we are encouraging the minister to do this is that he knows what work needs to be done. He does not have to plan it, because like all government organisations, there is a list of maintenance tasks. It is right across the state; therefore, we can spread the work around. He already has a panel of providers for the proposed works, so he can get the work out the door on a quick basis, just like we did with the school maintenance blitz last year. That was a great program. I am sure members all have stories of what happened in their schools. The member for Central Wheatbelt got the largest contribution of any electorate in the state.

Ms M.J. Davies: I have got a lot of schools.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, I know. I looked it up. The electorate of Cannington had the largest spend in the metropolitan area, so I wanted to see what the largest spend in the state was, and it was in Central Wheatbelt. The member for Central Wheatbelt and I did very well out of that.

Ms M.J. Davies: I have got a lot of schools.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, although I have a lot of old schools. I have two schools that are over 100 years old, so members can imagine the maintenance required.

Ms M.J. Davies: I think I might give you a run for your money on that one. I reckon I have more than that.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I am sure the member does, but to have two 100-year-old schools in one metropolitan electorate with only 42 000 citizens is pretty amazing.

Ms M.J. Davies: I reckon a lot of mine would be around that age.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, but the member's electorate has a big footprint.

Ms M.J. Davies: Yes, I have a 100-year-old town.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: There are not a lot of 100-year-old schools in the metro area, so to have two of them in one electorate is pretty amazing.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr T.J. Healy): I have one.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: You have one?

The ACTING SPEAKER: Gosnells Primary School.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Anyway, keep going.

Mr D.R. Michael: Tuart Hill Primary School.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: There you go—another one.

We appreciate the problem with the cellar door. That is the advice we have at this stage. As the advice changes, we will deal with it.

The \$2 500 credit on electricity bills for small businesses is a very important part of our relief program, and I have explained why we targeted those businesses—it is because they were the ones that we think were not being touched by the other federal or state government programs. The grant of \$17 500 to businesses with a payroll of between \$1 million and \$4 million, increasing the payroll tax threshold to \$1 million and waiving payroll tax for four months for businesses with annual wages bills of less than \$7.5 million that are affected by COVID-19 are very important contributions. There is \$24.5 million in funding to assist the building and construction industry to maintain apprentices and trainees and the \$150 million housing investment package for the Department of Communities to provide work for tradies across the state. The construction of up to 500 social and affordable houses will be achieved out of that package as it unfolds over time. That is very important, and the minister explained, I think

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yesterday, the pipeline of work and the fact that many of those construction companies rely on that long pipeline. Because that pipeline has been severed, even if only on a temporary basis, that will have a big impact.

We have also waived over \$100 million of licence fees that impact on small and medium-sized businesses. An electrician might need to renew their licence, so there are those sorts of things. They have all been waived for 12 months. Believe it or not, that is \$100 million of cost to government by effectively giving a 12-month extension to people in those situations. Of course, we have invested in the Small Business Development Corporation so that there is a one-stop shop for people needing to find out what assistance is available from government. The great thing about the SBDC is that it does not just explain how to access state government assistance; it also explains what other assistance is available and helps to deal with other more commercial issues.

I want to emphasise what we have done. There was a bit of criticism from one member about the rebate on land tax. People asked how the government expected landlords to be generous to tenants if it was not being generous to landlords, so we have given a rebate. If a landlord forgives their tenant the rent, we will forgive them their land tax for the exact same period. Land tax cannot be a reason for a landlord not to help their tenant. They might have other reasons not to help their tenant, but it will not be about land tax. We will waive their land tax obligation to the extent that they waive the rental for their tenant. Of course, we have given increased protections to leaseholders. There is also the eviction moratorium and a process to deal with disputes, in that there is a compulsory mediation process, but the dispute will go to the State Administrative Tribunal for resolution if it cannot be resolved through mediation. That is a much stronger position for tenants than they had previously. That is why there is a \$100 million land tax assistance package for landlords. If a landlord has given rent relief to a small business, they can seek a land tax rebate for the same duration as the relief given to the tenant. I know that there has been some criticism about eligibility, but, again, grants of \$6 500 have been provided to support eligible tourism operators, including micro-businesses, with annual taxable wages of less than \$1 million. The \$4 million tourism business survival grants package will provide grants of between \$25 000 and \$100 000 to try to assist businesses to survive during this difficult period so that tourism offerings can continue in parts of the state that have had to be locked away from tourists in the short term.

Ms M.J. Davies: I have a couple of travel agents who are obviously still working 12-hour days because they are working through cancellations. A lot of them might get JobKeeper, but only one of them, because a lot of them are mum-and-dad operators. They are not included in that tourism package. I have had a couple, including one that operates in my electorate and also in the Premier's electorate, and they are just devastated because they are a small business and their entire capacity is based on international and interstate travel. They feel like they are very much a part of the tourism industry, but they do not qualify under that package.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: The \$14.4 million recovery package is aimed at the tourism offerings—the attractions. I would not want to be a travel agent, and there are lots of them that have specialised in marketing cruises, because I do not think anybody will be going on a cruise.

Mr V.A. Catania: They're cheap!

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, I know. Apparently, they are really, really cheap, but I am still not going on one.

Ms M.J. Davies: But they are doing all the cancellations, so they are still working but they have no income.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, I understand that. It is unfortunate. I am not quite sure what the assistance would be to get them to a successful business model. Does the member understand what I mean? These grants are designed to help businesses that have a clear opportunity for the future of tourism in Western Australia, which is going to be more domestic oriented, to make sure that when tourists return, the tourism offerings are there to attract tourists from Perth, and perhaps later on the east coast, to those regional parts of Western Australia. As I say, it is unfortunate but true that the government cannot help every single business, in the same way as the commonwealth government cannot help every business. The member is quite right; we need to address the shortfalls and that is what we are trying to do. But that does not mean that we have addressed every single business, because that is not possible for us. As we keep emphasising, the state government is about nine per cent of the economy and the commonwealth is roughly 24 per cent, so that means that the private sector is 67 per cent. We do not have the resources to replace that 67 per cent.

The new Procurement Bill is another way that we are trying to provide simpler and more consistent access to government work. I know that is something that people in the National Party discuss regularly. We have arranged the hygiene training course for hospitality workers so that businesses are ready for the return of customers. There is a \$1.78 million package to make sure that the workers and businesses in the industry are ready to deal with this new world of COVID-19 that we are coming into. That is one of the things that we have to understand—the world has changed and we have to deal with that. There were some grants to individual TABs to make sure that they can cover cash withdrawals during the COVID-19 restrictions.

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Ms M.J. Davies: The next available RPT flight out of Karratha is not until Monday, 8 June. They have been told to ramp up and get going, but they need people.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes. We have worked very closely with the resources sector on the health and safety of workers on mine sites, because clearly keeping the mining industry going was absolutely essential not just to Western Australia, but to the nation. One of the responses to that was for the mining companies to move to a dedicated charter service, and that was a necessary part of their COVID response. Of course, given that they made up about 60 or 70 per cent of travel to the regions, it completely undermined the existing regular public transport business model. As I understand it, the state government is supporting the operations of Rex airlines and the commonwealth government is supporting the RPT operations of Qantas and Virgin Australia, but it is very difficult.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Yes, but that is the problem. It is all about the risk. Maintaining the high level of risk management for the mining industry saved Australia. If the mining industry was not running as successfully as it is, Australia would look like a different country.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

House adjourned at 7.00 pm
