

COUNTRY BUS SERVICES

Grievance

MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston) [9.16 am]: Today I grieve to the Minister for Transport concerning the withdrawal of bus services in country electorates. I note that not one National Party member is in the house—the so-called saviours of the bush seem not to be interested in this. **Dr K.D. Hames**: Can we have Hansard note that there is a National Party member in the house?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Mr Speaker, due to those interruptions, can I have an extension of time?

The services that have been withdrawn are from Boxwood Hill to Bremer Bay, Hopetoun to Ravensthorpe, which carried 369 passengers last year, and Quairading to Narembeen, with 163 passengers. The regular services, which are more in my area, include Albany to Ravensthorpe, 1 203 passengers; Northam to Mukinbudin, 645 passengers; and Bunbury to Collie to Boyup Brook, 3 768 passengers. As members can see, this is quite a considerable number of people. I understand that it comes down to a dollar percentage and the subsidies that have to be in place—some of the subsidies are quite high—but the Bunbury to Boyup Brook to Collie line is only \$52 per person per year. I would like the minister to tell us what the central area transit service around Perth, which is just a matter of convenience for shoppers, costs the state government a year in comparison to a service for people who want or need to go from one area to another, such as from Bunbury to Collie, or Collie to Brunswick to catch the *Australind* train service. That is another story that will play out in the future as the *Australind* will drop customers and the minister will then look at reducing the train service—something that is very dear to the people of the south west.

Some of the major issues that have come from the dropping of bus services 115 and 166 are not only that local residents use these services to catch the train, but that there are people in our community who do not have transport at all. We have been touted as a SuperTown yet services are being taken away. We have people who may have to go to Homeswest interviews, or Centrelink interviews, which are compulsory. If people do not turn up for their Centrelink interviews their benefits are cut and they are put on a suspension list. They then have to find some way to get there. I have picked up people hitch hiking to Bunbury to try and get to their Centrelink interviews because they did not have the money to travel on the more expensive private coach line.

The other thing is that the private coach line will not allow unaccompanied children between the ages of 10 and 12 to travel between Collie and Bunbury. However under the TransWA system they can be ushered onto the bus and off at the other end. There is more to it than just saying we will save a miserable \$500 000 a year when we have seen what this government has wasted in many other areas.

The other matter is that South West Coach Lines does not allow pensioners to use their free passes or offer a concession for health card holders. Again, the cost is in the pensioner's area. Health card holders who for various reasons are on a pension, not necessarily an aged pension, need the service even to go to Bunbury to see their specialists. When there are no concessions, again the impost on a pensioner is huge. It is 10 times more than the impost on a non-pensioner—maybe in some cases even a thousand times more than what people are earning, especially people in this house!

TransWA did not charge children under five years of age. Families on the pension who have three or four children are able to get on the bus, and those children will travel for free—again, the impact is great. But a very important point was brought to me by the local shire president for Collie, Mr Wayne Sanford, about his concerns for his 17-year-old daughter travelling back and forth to Perth in the traffic. She had just received her licence but unfortunately came down with an illness that meant she was not able to drive. The service that will enable her to get on the train, come down to Brunswick, get on the bus at Brunswick and come through to Collie, will be gone. We are putting young people back on the road instead of putting them on the train. We are putting pressure on the families to go and pick up their family members from Brunswick. If the train does not stop there, it will go straight through to Bunbury. I am very concerned that this is just another cheap shot at people who live in country areas. Why, in the city, are we talking about the extension of train services that will be subsidised in the billions of dollars when people in the country are being short-changed for a few hundred thousand dollars on an essential service?

I say to the minister that the figures speak loudly. When we are talking about 3 768 people using the Bunbury to Collie and Boyup Brook bus service, that is very substantial. It impacts also on people who walk the Bibbulmun track and then catch the bus back to Perth. There are side issues that I am sure people have not thought about, which is the tourism side of things. Many people jump on that bus to return to Perth after walking on the track and staying a night or two in Collie. It is not just about a free service. It is about a service that is essential to a country town—essential! It is not about being able to have a bus—we heard the petition earlier about congested roads; this is not about congested roads. This is about people being able to get from one place to another if there is no transport. Many, many elderly people use this line.

In the very short time I have left, I beg the minister to keep at least this part of the Bunbury–Collie–Boyup Brook transport line in operation due to the number of people who use that service.

MR T.R. BUSWELL (Vasse — Minister for Transport) [9.22 am]: For the record I think it is appropriate that I point out there is a National Party MP in the house—just to clarify that for the public record. Again, for the record I should also point out to the house that I have been approached by a range of regional MPs, including members of the National Party, about this particular decision.

Mr M.P. Murray: Are they in cabinet?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Because this particular decision —

Mr M.P. Murray: Are they in cabinet? Is the National Party in there?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I talk to a range of MPs and this issue has been raised with me. I can spend the balance of my time talking about who I have talked to, or I can talk about the issue. The facts are that the Public Transport Authority is having to trim its expenses. They are the facts. It is unfortunate, but we do not have a bottomless pit of money. Last week, the member for Collie–Preston and his colleagues came into this place and criticised the government for debt levels and for the pressure on the state's AAA credit rating that ultimately resulted in it being lost to the state—temporarily, I can assure the house. We have to respond by cutting our cloth to suit; we simply do not have the money to do all the things that everybody in the communities around the state would have the government do.

That has meant the PTA has had to look at a range of services across the state. The member suggests in his argument that it has not impacted on the metropolitan area, but it has. The City of Fremantle has had its NightRider bus service removed. Two late night bus services that used to run along South Street and Canning Highway are gone. We implemented 4.00 am late night trains on a Friday into Saturday and Saturday into Sunday to service the five lines; they are gone. The *AvonLink*, which runs up to Toodyay, has been replaced with a bus service to save money.

Mr M.P. Murray: They've still got a service, that's the point.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: We have had to make some changes in regional areas as well. The subsidies that the taxpayer pays to the Public Transport Authority are the single largest subsidy that we pay out of consolidated revenue in any area of government. I am not saying that we should not do that, but we simply have to live within our means, and that means that some services that have previously been operated will no longer operate.

It may interest the member, that I was just reading through the budget papers and I found that the country passenger services on both rail and TransWA—not the regional town bus services—cost about \$39 million to subsidise per annum. As the member for Collie–Preston pointed out, that has meant that a number of existing regional services have been withdrawn. There are some on-demand charter services that the member alluded to—that is, Boxwood Hill to Bremer Bay, which carried 33 passengers in the last financial year at a subsidy of \$117.78 a passenger; Hopetoun to Ravensthorpe, 369 passengers at a subsidy of \$97 per service; and Quairading to Narembeen, 163 passengers at a subsidy of \$129 per service. Then there are some of the more regular services operated by charter operator, and the route to Collie was one, and Albany to Ravensthorpe was another, along with Northam to Mukinbudin. I should point out, for example, that the Albany to Ravensthorpe service carries only six passengers per trip on average. The service from Northam to Mukinbudin carries some seven passengers per trip on average and, from memory, the service to Collie carries about 14.5 passengers per service.

Mr M.P. Murray: It is 3 000-plus a year.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Yes, but unfortunately we are not in a position to continue to fund all of those services. I wish that we were. We are having to look at other areas of operation within the PTA, as we are in all of my agencies, to find savings. This is not an easy process. Other decisions will have to be made.

I will comment on one point the member for Collie–Preston raised about the *Australind*; there are no plans to review the operation.

Mr M.P. Murray: Will you concede that if the numbers dropped off, that would affect the *Australind* numbers?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: It may have an impact. We are happy to work with local communities to understand where we can —

Mr M.P. Murray: You didn't on this case.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Well, we made the decision. We are happy to work with local communities to understand where we may be able to offer revised services over time, but we are not in a position to do that at this stage. Certainly, there is no plan to change the service provision of the *Australind*. It has been there for a long time and

I imagine it will be there for a long time to come. The member for Collie–Preston has probably used it. I have used it, and I think it is a good service.

Mr M.P. Murray: The point really, is how to get to the *Australind*.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Again, there is still a service in Collie. I understand the member raised some issues around cost and lack of access to concessions, but as I understand it, there is still a regular road coach service through to Collie, which will be provided by South West Coach Lines.

Mr M.P. Murray: Can I just quickly say, the private service is \$35 and the TransWA is \$18; so you can understand the impact on the pensioner.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: No, no, I am not disputing that it will have an impact on the community. As I said, over time we are happy to work with those communities to understand the extent to which we can revisit this decision, but it simply will not happen at the moment. That is because the PTA—like every area of government—has been asked to do all it can to live within its means. There has been some significant effort to save head office costs —

Mr M.P. Murray: The CAT bus, for example, just goes around the city.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Member for Collie–Preston, the CAT bus service is not just a service for shoppers, it is an incredibly important way to reduce congestion —

Mr M.P. Murray: For lazy people.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: “For lazy people”; that is an interesting comment, member for Collie–Preston. I am sure that that will be featured heavily in the Labor Party transport policy at the next election!

The CAT bus and *Australind* services are going to stay, but unfortunately we have had to make some decisions that will impact on some regional communities.