

STATE ECONOMY — LOCAL JOBS AND BUSINESSES

Motion

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [1.41 pm]: I move —

That this house —

- (a) notes with concern the ongoing issues with skilled worker shortages and the lack of equitable small business support;
- (b) discusses the need for better planning, leadership and strategies to provide long-term solutions and address the immediate issues facing Western Australian businesses and industry sectors; and
- (c) calls on the Ministers for Commerce; Regional Development; Small Business; Finance; and State Development, Jobs and Trade to work together to proactively resolve these issues.

All of us would acknowledge that COVID-19 has thrown up some very unexpected challenges, which are well and truly outside anyone's control. We knew early on, when we were briefed by government agencies and local government authorities, that emergency management plans were extending for only a 28-day disruption, not a global pandemic, as we have seen. There is no doubt that the circumstances of COVID-19 are unusual. It has required nimble, proactive policymaking, and for all parties across the political divide to try to work together in good faith to ensure that Western Australians and Australians were kept safe and to try to minimise the impact that the pandemic has had on our health and the economic wellbeing of the state. I think we would all agree that, in doing that, certainly in the last Parliament, a lot of urgent legislation regarding the COVID pandemic had to be passed very quickly. Although that was never ideal, because we did not get the opportunity to properly scrutinise the legislation when it was brought through that quickly, we were also acutely aware of the great need to do it as fast as we could and to make sure that the necessary measures were put in place to keep everyone safe. I think we all did that to the best of our abilities and have continued to try to work collaboratively when we can.

A great example of the unpredictability of this beast that we are dealing with in COVID is what we have seen play out in the early part of this year in many other nations, and, even now, unfortunately and, sadly, in New South Wales with the incredibly infectious Delta variant, which is now rampant. It has not presented itself here in Western Australia, yet—touch wood. Only time will tell whether we can keep it out; I hope we can. A lot of strategies that have been applied to contain and control the virus have failed. Governments have had to be nimble. We, as an opposition, have had to work very well to support as many of those strategies as we could to make sure that we are keeping everybody safe, while at the same time not letting people fall through the cracks.

Our small business sector is one sector of the economy that has had to endure lockdowns and repeated disruptions to its businesses. Largely through JobKeeper, it has been able to hold together, but the questions are about the long-term plan: What is our plan as the state of emergency continues in this state? What about future statewide or other local emergencies? We are 18 months into the pandemic and the race is on to try to meet an 80 per cent vaccination rate, which our Chief Health Officer has said will be required for a return to some sort of normality. Despite all the figures that have been thrown around, feedback from small and medium businesses is that they are really struggling to stay in business, especially after we come out of a lockdown and during the recovery from a lockdown. It is not only the effect whilst they are in a lockdown, but also the recovery period afterwards. Those businesses often rely on community support, repeat customers, and a consumer experience over profit. That can be exemplified by some of the businesses that I have had dealings with during and after lockdowns. They have pivoted or changed from their traditional models of serving food in a cafe to making home-cooked meals that people can buy to quickly and easily take home. There are great examples of how those businesses have been able to pivot and provide a really good service to people, even to the extent of delivering things like fresh food. That was an outstanding idea. No doubt, it was not very profitable for those businesses, but it kept them going.

However, entire sectors of our business community are not eligible for support after a lockdown has occurred. In particular, I would like to talk about allied health professionals. They are not eligible, yet we know that when a physio or chiropractor—those sort of services—is taken away from the community, their clients invariably end up in hospital, an emergency department or somewhere else in the system. That is only going to put extra pressure on the system.

I am going to refer to an email trail that was sent by an allied health professional to a member of Parliament. I quote —

Please find the attached letter regarding Physiotherapists being ineligible for the lockdown grant. We are stuck between a rock and hard place where we can't see patients face to face during lockdown (90% of our case load) and are currently not eligible for the grant, but gyms and hospitality are?

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They are asking why gyms and hospitality are eligible, yet physiotherapists are not. The response received by this business was simply —

Thank you for your correspondence regarding the Small Business Lockdown Assistance Grants program ...

There is a big spiel about what the government has done and a link to the grant website, even though it is made very clear in the email that the government already knew the allied health professional was not eligible. This kind of generic response and the failure to try to understand the issues facing that business was not very well done.

In response to the generic email sent, this business owner replied —

... it is quite clear that my email was not read and instead a generic reply was given. This is disappointing.

...

The purpose of my email was to inform you that even with the loss of 80% of revenue, Physio and Allied health are not eligible for the grant.

And so the problem goes on. Allied health professionals are ineligible for those grants and cannot get a clear answer about why that is the case, despite the fact that people who need to see a physio or a chiropractor cannot get that treatment by telehealth, even though telehealth appointments are allowed. There might be a few cases in which that would be effective, but, in the majority, those people need to be physically seen and treated, yet they were forced to close during a lockdown to keep people safe but are ineligible to claim any sort of assistance. The Minister for Tourism has also refused to support small businesses, with 33 per cent of small businesses in the tourism sector anticipating that they will not survive the next six months—at best, they will make it to Christmas. When this issue was raised in the other place, the Minister for Tourism's response was nothing but disgraceful, to be honest. He went on a rant about Clive Palmer, which I am not sure had anything to do with tourism. I am not sure what Clive Palmer has to do with tourism. I would say that he does not have anything to do with it. The Minister for Tourism went on to say —

I tell you what we will not do: ... we will not stand with Clive Palmer and start attacking the state ...

That was his response when asked a question about relief to small businesses in the tourism sector, which, obviously, Clive Palmer would have nothing to do with. The Minister for Tourism went on to cast aspersions about political links to Clive Palmer, which do not exist and are nothing but scurrilous deflection from answering a simple question. Again, the minister has complete disdain for an entire sector that needs assistance. That is why this motion is calling on ministers to work together to try to get their heads around how we might assist all those various sectors.

Many of us in this place are familiar with the issue of skilled workers. I have had conversations with Hon Alannah MacTiernan, Minister for Agriculture and Food, about this issue, and I know that she has met with industry—the agricultural industry in particular—on this issue many, many times to try to find a solution, yet we are not there. There have been proposals in the space and I will talk about them a little later. But it has been 18 months since the pandemic began and I would have thought that we could have found some solution to allow us to find those workers. The agricultural industry relies on workers from Europe and North America, and that is a challenge in the context of COVID; however, it is possible to find a way to get those people in and through quarantine in the short term.

The industry certainly needs to lift its game in training and planning for the future and in ensuring that reliance on overseas workers is perhaps not as heavy as it is at the moment. Having said that, working with the federal government to come up with a solution is something that we have promoted in opposition. I would say that it is proving to be a challenge. I am sure the minister would probably agree with me on that front. We have tried to explain various ways that this could be accomplished and the required skill set needed. Very skilled workers are required on farms these days. They operate machinery worth millions and millions of dollars in very challenging environments. There is no doubt that we need those skilled workers. The estimates are that around 1 000 workers need to come into the state. The challenge here is not that difficult. If we look at the type of work we need, the horticulture industry has an agreement titled the horticulture industry labour agreement. Labour agreements allow workers to come in on specific visa subclasses to work when there is no demonstrable availability of those workers in the country.

We know that the market testing has been done in this case because we have had Work and Wander Out Yonder and other programs and incentives, but we could not find the workers. We know that the workers do not exist. We know that a labour agreement is not that hard to do at a federal level. I have encouraged my federal colleague the Minister for Agriculture, David Littleproud, to address this. I have to say that he was less than receptive when I spoke to him three weeks ago. Then, a couple of weeks later, he actually suggested that it might be a good idea! It is a little bit annoying that our federal colleagues seem to be stuck on the east coast and fail to recognise the significance of Western Australia's agriculture industry to the nation. In fact, we all know that the nation would be imperilled without Western Australia's economic performance. I would encourage every single federal MP from

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Western Australia to kick down David Littleproud's door and tell him that he needs to do something to allow those workers to come in. If that means that we have to use Christmas Island or some federal quarantine facility, so be it. The fact is we need those workers.

It is beyond politics at this point in time. It is beyond a fight between state and federal governments. The simple fact is that if the requirement is that workers need to be quarantined and Christmas Island is the place to do that, let us make it happen. Let us get those visa subclasses opened up and labour agreements done so those skilled workers can come in—at least 1 000 are needed. We get them here so that our farmers can get on with the job of harvesting a record grain crop. In the context of a big year, there is a tremendous amount of pressure that will be put on those farmers to do that job if they cannot get this help. This will result in only mental and physical health issues for them through fatigue, which will open up the potential for accidents and incidents to occur on farms, which we do not want to see. We want to see Western Australian agriculture farmers enjoy the fruits of their labour and have the opportunity to maximise their return from what will be a bumper crop.

I am very disappointed with the federal government in particular on this issue. It is also disappointing that it has taken this long for the state government to come up with a plan that is acceptable, to make that position known and to understand the quantum of people and the skill set required for that industry. However, we are beyond that. We are now at the point at which we just need to make this happen, so I would encourage my federal counterparts, as members of Western Australia —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Can you give us your ideas?

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: I just did, minister. Was the minister listening or was she on her phone?

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Christmas Island?

Hon Sue Ellery: Christmas Island, which was put to the feds.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: I know. That is exactly what I said. The federal government needs to step up. If they are listening, my message to the federal MPs who represent Western Australia is to kick David Littleproud's door down, and I am not afraid that that is what needs to happen. He is the Minister for Agriculture and Northern Australia for Australia, not Queensland. It is incumbent on him to do that. In terms of those labour agreements, really, they are not hard to do. Again, the federal government needs to step up and make it happen. If that means that we can get an agreement from the state to facilitate those people coming into Western Australia, that is a great outcome, but we need to make it happen very, very soon. Again, federal colleagues, do something!

In terms of other issues, the Minister for Health has refused to support bringing in health staff from South Australia. There was a midwife from South Australia who could not get into the state. My colleague Hon Martin Aldridge asked this question about this issue just last week —

Will the state government consider providing incentives, including supporting the cost of quarantine requirements, for interstate healthcare workers ...

...

What is the minister and his department doing to assist those healthcare workers ...

Has the minister raised concerns about G2G applications from key healthcare workers ...

The response was —

... the Department of Health is not able to provide the requested information ...

That is a pretty common response for those of us on this side of the chamber. I guess the old adage that the answer is the answer applies, or perhaps the non-answer is the non-answer. Those issues and questions are absolutely legitimate. We have people who want to come into the state with the skills required, yet they are being overlooked to offer incentives to people outside the nation. If we are going to offer incentives, we need to bring people in from wherever we can.

In the brief time remaining, I want to talk a little bit more about some of the other worker issues that we deal with. There is a story today from the ABC about the need for ag pilots. Obviously, it is a skilled occupation, yet that is one of a number of issues that our electorate officers have been dealing with. My office has been dealing for a long time with qualified agricultural pilots who were trying to get into the state to provide the necessary service for our grain farmers at a time when the season has meant that a bumper crop is out there and the paddocks are too wet to use traditional equipment on. In parts of the midwest region, a mouse plague is brewing.

Agricultural pilots are needed to assist in applying bait and so on, and the pilots we have cannot cope. Traditionally, those pilots are not always needed every year in every state, so they tend to work around the country and we will often bring guys in from New South Wales to do the job. We cannot do that. I have tried everything in my power to

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get pilots in by talking with the Western Australia Police Force about its G2G PASS applications and the quarantine mechanisms that pilots used last year to come here but now cannot. The rules are seemingly changing. We have no certainty about how those people can get in. Despite the fact they could do it last year, they cannot do it this year. It again highlights the level of coordination needed to try to keep on top of this.

In some circumstances when we are dealing with the pandemic, an immediate response is required. We know that we have had to work very hard on making legislative changes or enacting various powers very quickly, but we cannot accept that people are unable to return home to family and unable to get in when they are desperately needed in this state. We must find a way to allow that. Our hotel quarantine system seems to be at capacity. It looks like we have started on the quarantine facility at Jandakot. It will take a while but at least we have made a start. We need to keep pushing to get those people in as quickly as we can. A number of different organisations have a coordinating role, if you like. The Committee for Economic Development of Australia is one of those; it is holding a number of different events to look at a way out of the COVID pandemic through the different testing options that are available and all sorts of things.

I encourage the government to ensure that the relevant ministers communicate and try to work together to formulate a better strategy for business and others as we come out of this.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [2.02 pm]: Acting President, thank you for the opportunity to make a few comments on the motion moved by Hon Colin de Grussa. I know that Hon Colin de Grussa is immensely concerned about the labour shortages in Western Australia, as the opposition has been for some time. Notably, I suspect it has been for just over a year, because it was just over a year ago when we first started to raise these issues in both the house and the media. There was a very good debate, for example, on 21 October last year. I think the government received its comeuppance at the time. We discussed the labour shortages that were afflicting not only regional areas in Western Australia but also certain industries such as agriculture. It was not only agriculture. Obviously, if people travelled at that time down to Albany, they would have struggled to find a cafe open; because of the lack of backpackers, there were no workers who would have traditionally brought out the coffee. The backpacker worker system largely collapsed under COVID. To understand the Labor Party's mismanagement of this process, I think we need a history of how we got to where we are today.

Members should be reminded that I started this debate back in August 2020, so it is now —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Six months after we started doing the work.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Hang on; we will get to the minister's contribution in a minute—don't you worry. The joy of having things on record is that despite whatever noise comes from the other side of the chamber, there are some words written down that we can use in formal debate. On 11 August, I made some comments in the media to say that it was a critically important issue. The government needed to not only have a position on it but also act on it as a matter of urgency. What was the McGowan government's response at the time way back in August 2020, now over a year ago? The reply from the Premier was reported in an online article that states —

But Premier Mark McGowan rejected the suggestions, —

That was my call to action —

instead calling on farmers to look within the state for workers.

“Our priority is to employ WA workers,” he said.

“In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's time for industry to rethink the way it employs workers and look to locals to fill these roles.”

I wonder whether he regrets making those comments a year ago. I wonder whether he thinks that was an outstanding policy success. Do not worry about finding workers from elsewhere; locals will fill the roles. We will be overrun with people —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: No; we were full of optimism, minister. How many jobs were we required to fill? How successful was this? We will think about that. The government's first response was: do not worry; locals will fill that job. What happened? The first thing we found was that locals did not fill those jobs.

Let us come to policy position 2. It was an advertising campaign. We already had an advertising campaign called Wander Out Yonder. Whether the government should be given credit for the success of it —

Hon Stephen Dawson: It was a very good one.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: There has been lots of wandering out yonder, but whether it is because of the advertising campaign is another thing. I accept the optimism of the Minister for Mental Health, but possibly it is just the

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fact that so many Western Australians have no capacity to have their annual or biannual or triannual holidays in Bali anymore and really cannot go to many other places that people have embraced the idea of visiting or revisiting Western Australia. That has been great. I am not convinced that the advertising campaign really drove that; I suspect it would have happened anyway. That dealt with the issue of the impact of the number of tourists in the region. It should be noted, of course, that for Perth hotels there are not many “wander centrally” success stories going on, or have not been for the last year or so. Along with the Acting President (Hon Dr Sally Talbot), who also represents the South West Region, we are very appreciative of everyone coming down to the south west and spending their good dollars in the tourism sector down there. That has been fantastic. That was Wander Out Yonder not “wander in central”, so Perth has struggled.

Policy position 2 was this thing called Work and Wander Out Yonder. Can members remember the advertising — Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot): Members! Leader of the Opposition, will you resume your seat, please? There are some rules pertaining to this debate, as every member of this house knows. One of those rules, Leader of the Opposition, is that you address your remarks to me, so do not look at them.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: We are in policy position 2, which is Work and Wander Out Yonder. I am sure everybody in the chamber remembers the advertising campaign—the skipping down the aisle of the orchard and picking the occasional piece of fruit because that is what fruit pickers do. They wander there and pick that one and they wander there and select that one, and they are chatting away as they go. It is a lovely representation of what the workforce in regional Western Australia looks like. But how successful was that campaign? Have we had labour shortages and issues in the periods since that campaign, or did that campaign solve the problem? Was that the end of the process? It was a pathetic contribution to the workforce needs of regional Western Australia and it represented, in my view, a classic misunderstanding of what regional work is like. It is absolutely the case that it is a tough job.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food will tell us in a bit that lots of people rolled up and put in their names for that. In fact, some people actually went out to the regions and wandered along the aisles and picked some fruit every now and again. What happened? After the first day, there were fewer people wandering and working out yonder, and the next day there were even fewer people. At the end of the first week, only a fraction of the workforce was left. The minister will say that 1 400 people went to the regions and partook in that program. How many have stayed in the industry long term to do the hard work and pick fruit? It is easy to get people there on the first day. The second day is tough. The third day is even harder.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: You don’t know what you’re talking about!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The minister should talk to some of the orchardists that she theoretically represents. The minister should talk to some of the growers.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: I do.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The minister should talk to some of the growers and find out how this program actually proceeded.

The government’s solution was Work and Wander Out Yonder; Western Australians will fix this problem. That was the government’s policy.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: We’re saying it is hard. We have always said it is hard.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: There is a track record here. There is a track record of ideology over practicality when it comes to the Labor Party and the McGowan government in relation to the workplace. How do we know that history is being repeated here? It started as soon as the McGowan government was elected. It was trumpeted in media releases. What was the first action of the McGowan Labor government in its first week in office? The Premier was very proud of this. One of the first things he did was ask the Prime Minister to remove Perth from the regional sponsored migration scheme. He also cut back the list of occupations from which employers in this state could access imported labour from 178 different jobs to 18 different jobs. Remember that? That was fantastic. What a great record. From memory, all of the 18 jobs from which people could import labour were in the medical profession. People could import doctors and nurses, but basically no-one else. People could bring in all the doctors and nurses they wanted. How successful has that been? Gee; that has worked well! We have plenty of doctors and nurses on the wards at the moment. We are fighting them off. We have to get through them, there are so many waiting to move into wards and do the job. The one thing that the McGowan government allowed to be introduced in the medical profession is the thing that we are now massively short of, along with the other 166 different occupations, which included a lot of the people who are now required for farm work, agricultural production and all those things.

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The first thing the McGowan government did was take away the capacity for those businesses that need that labour to import that labour.

There is a history here. The Labor Party said, “We don’t need to import any labour; we’ll train them all here and they’ll go running out.” When the COVID-19 pandemic hit a couple of years later, in 2019, the government had the same response, “We don’t need to import labour; people will flock from the metropolitan area.” That will probably be all the people who are not working in metropolitan hotels because nobody can visit this state; they will all be out there picking avocados, grapes and apples and all the rest of it, and driving header bins. A farmer is not going to put a barista in charge of a million-dollar header—or not very often, I would think—but there are plenty of other jobs that they could do. The government has a history of a lack of practicality—in one hit, it cut back the number of occupations on the migration list and took the metropolitan region out of the list. How successful was that policy? While we are looking at Labor Party successes, I am trying to remind myself of what the outcome of that was.

Hon Stephen Dawson: Sit down quickly and I’ll tell you!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Hang on a minute! The Premier reversed his decision. It was a backflip. I have a bit more to go yet. I am having fun today. It is not even Thursday. Holy mackerel! The Premier backflipped. He should have been in the Olympic diving team. It was once again a backflip. The backflip occurred around the need to import labour. Not only was the Premier doing half pikes and triple twists, but so too was the Minister for Agriculture and Food, who might have wanted to correct the Premier back in August last year and say —

Hon Stephen Dawson: What was the degree of difficulty? It was at least 4.6!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: It was not that hard, minister, for him to acknowledge the truth. It was not that hard for him to recognise the reality the government was facing. The Premier did a backflip. The Minister for Agriculture and Food did a backflip. Is there a tandem? I forget.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: On what?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: On importing labour for agricultural purposes. The minister might have had no choice. She might have understood the problem but was forced to back the Premier’s position. We know what that is like. It is very hard to correct the Premier when he gets it wrong. So we may need to give the Minister for Agriculture and Food some leeway, because she may have been forced into this position. The tuck-and-roll position may have been a requirement of ministerial service. It is absolutely the fact that the Labor Party has proved itself adept at backflips. It is like the mixed diving team at the Olympics; it really is.

There is another part about filling these jobs, of course; I wish we had a couple of hours to go into a lot of these things in more detail. I want to raise the other response that the government often talks about. I am not sure which ministers will respond to this debate, but I suspect the Leader of the House might like to talk about training.

Hon Stephen Dawson: We might all respond! You have incensed us with your outrageous contribution!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Take a number! Come on! At 3–1, it might almost be even! The Leader of the House will probably talk about education and training as a solution to the problem. To some degree, that is a reasonable prospect. I suspect the minister will stand up and talk about the increased numbers in traineeships and apprenticeships. Let us have a little look at this in the limited time I have available. It is absolutely the case that in the last financial year there has been a significant increase in traineeships and apprenticeships in Western Australia. When was the McGowan government elected? From memory, it was 2017.

Hon Stephen Dawson: What do you mean “from memory”? You know exactly when it was!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: From memory, it was 2017. It is very convenient for government members to miss the years when they do not do so well and tell the story about where it has improved.

Last week, I asked a question without notice about how many apprenticeships were commenced and completed in WA, how many traineeships were commenced and completed in WA and how many people were in apprenticeships and traineeships in WA over the last five financial years. The answer is quite telling. I am glad to see that the McGowan government has recognised that there is a problem. The response was that there has been an increase in apprenticeships and traineeships. This is 2021. The COVID-19 crisis started in 2019, as did the current mining boom.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: In 2019?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The end of 2019. That is why we call it COVID-19, minister. It has a “19” at the end of it. Can somebody explain to the minister what that means? I am running out of time.

What was happening during the period of the McGowan government in education and training? This is literally educational, members. These are not my numbers; these are the numbers obtained from the answer to the question without notice last week. The number of apprenticeships commenced between 2016–17 and 2019–20 was between

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6 000 and 7 000. There is a jump in 2021 to 11 500, which is good. In completions, in 2016–17, the number was 4 129; in 2017–18, it was 3 972; in 2018–19, it was 3 679; and in 2019–20, it was 3 397. In 2019–20, we hit the bottom, at 3 397, a good couple of years after —

Hon Sue Ellery: There is no range.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: They range, after three or four years, and it is still sitting at 3 544. Commencements for this amazing work had not lifted until 2021; they had been at a constant level. There were 14 962 traineeship commencements in 2016–17. There are some issues with the numbers, and members will remember the bill that we debated in relation to payroll tax and trainees, so there was a drop that probably related to that bill. The number of completions went from 9 223 in 2016–17 to 5 990 in 2019–20, and there have been 5 282 in 2021.

The number of traineeships, which are for a shorter period, has gone from 9 200 to 5 200 over the same period. Again, there has been a boost in the number of traineeships currently, but the reality is that if this government was focused on fixing the labour shortage, it would not be in the process of delusionally suggesting that people can simply take the jobs that exist. The government actually has to work to generate this workforce. If the jobs do not exist, the government is going to have to find them from somewhere. The Minister for Regional Development belatedly jumped on board and did some work.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: We started in March 2020.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: It took her months. She denied it for months. She said that they would be filled locally, and when it finally became obvious that they were not going to be filled locally, there was this begrudging acceptance that there would have to be a process. In fact, the federal government was calling on the state government to get involved. The federal government said, “We already have people. We have Pacific Islanders in the Northern Territory, so it can be done. We’re here to help.” The federal government said that it would try to assist with the process and the state government said no, but then it finally said that it would try to get them after they had finished in the Northern Territory.

Several members interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: I always talk to my federal colleagues.

The government backflipped in late 2019 because it was faced with the inevitable.

There are parts of this motion that I have not had a chance to get to. I think there would be a very interesting debate about the need for better planning, leadership and strategies, but from my perspective, that will have to be a debate for another day. In terms of better leadership, perhaps we might suggest a change in leadership.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Minister for Education and Training) [2.23 pm]: I have to say that I thought that the contribution of the mover of the motion was reasonably helpful and constructive and done in a reasonable fashion, but then we heard this blast of nonsensical rubbish from the Leader of the Opposition that completely destroyed any credibility that Hon Colin de Grussa had tried to establish when he made his contribution on the motion. It was absolute nonsensical rubbish from the Leader of the Opposition. I invite the opposition to provide sensible and practical solutions to what is, as the mover of the motion indicated, an extraordinary situation. Our state has faced skills shortages previously. We have been through a boom and bust, but we have never faced a skills shortage in an international pandemic when the international borders are closed. We have never been in that position, so we do find ourselves in an extraordinary set of circumstances, and I want to walk members through it.

In one sense, it is a good problem to have. We have the privilege of having the strongest economy in the nation. In February and March last year, economists and Treasury officials from the commonwealth told all the Premiers that we would be facing tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of unemployed people. That did not happen in Western Australia. It did not happen because we sat around and panicked and it did not happen because we yelled and carried on a bit like the Leader of the Opposition; it came about because of strong, solid leadership and considered application day after day. We also know that there is not one single solution to how we deal with issues like the current situation with the management of our labour market needs and skills shortages.

There is not one single solution. It requires us to work together and it requires us to work cooperatively. That is the approach that the state government took when it held the skills summit just a few weeks ago. We did not say—I have said this publicly—that the skills summit would, of itself, somehow be a solution. We did not say that sitting with 130 to 150 industry leaders from across the Western Australian economy would be a solution. We did not say that one single solution was going to provide us with a way to manage this, but we recognised that we have to look for new solutions. We find ourselves in the extraordinary position in which our borders are closed, and will remain closed for some period yet to come, and we are reliant on the federal government, which has so far mismanaged the two things we need to make sure that international borders can open properly and safely—that is, a decent quarantine

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system and a decent, fast rollout of vaccinations. It has failed on both those things so far, but they are the things that we need to work well for us if we are to lift our international borders.

I want to talk a little bit about what we have done and where we are going forward. I think it is important to note that every minister—the full cabinet—was in attendance at that skills summit. They continue to work within their portfolios and across portfolios to make sure that we address the shortages in the different industries, because they are different in the different industries; they are different geographically. That is why there will also be a follow-up series of regional skills summits starting at the end of this month—to pick up that there are significant differences between the different regions and we need to be able to act on those as well.

I had hoped that the debate would continue to be constructive and helpful. That has not been the case. To pick up the point made by the mover of the motion that we need to work together, I will suggest some amendments to the motion that I think will make it a less politically loaded set of statements and more about how we can have a sensible debate. If those on the other side have sensible solutions, I want to hear them, because we want to fix the situation that we find ourselves in.

I want to touch on some of the things that we have been doing. One of the things that we put in place early on, and we worked with the commonwealth on, was the Job Ready training, because we knew that people were transitioning from work in different industries. We were also trying to attract back into the workforce people who might have been out of it for a while, such as retirees and others, and people who had been displaced—pilots are a classic example of people who have been displaced. I will leave matters agricultural for the Minister for Agriculture and Food to tackle in her contribution. For example, the Ageing and Disability Job Ready short course is creating a pipeline of workers in one of the most in-demand areas of industry. The Infrastructure Ready course in civil construction was designed with WA's leading civil construction employers to get jobseekers job ready to work on major infrastructure projects. The heavy vehicle driving operations skill set was developed in consultation with the transport industry. It is an Australian-first six-week course to address driver shortages by training 500 new workers to get heavy rigid licences and upskilling an additional 500 existing workers from heavy rigid to heavy combination and/or multi-combination licences. We have the Brick Laying Job Ready program. There is a serious issue with the capacity to get bricklayers. It is not the most attractive job for kids these days and parents do not necessarily want their kids to aspire to be bricklayers, but we desperately need bricklayers, so we have a Job Ready course. It was developed in consultation with the Construction Training Fund and key industry partners, including the Housing Industry Association, the Master Builders Association and ABN Group, to meet that high demand. The construction accelerated apprenticeship program will recognise the experience, contribution and work of those workers who are already in the industry but hold non-licensed positions and will move them through an apprenticeship and give them a formal qualification.

In February and May 2020, as a result of COVID-19, 101 500 Western Australian jobs were lost. Since May 2020, we have had a recovery, with some 109 800 people finding jobs, more than offsetting what we lost. We found ourselves in a situation in which there was mass displacement. We were told hundreds of thousands of people would be displaced and tens of thousands of people would die. The Western Australian government, led by Premier Mark McGowan, made deliberate, considered policy decisions, including how we could continue to operate the resources industry in a safe way, when, honourable members, the rest of the nation wanted us to shut down the resources industry. They wanted us to shut it down and Premier McGowan insisted that we needed to keep it open to keep jobs. Thank goodness we did, for not just our own economy, but also the national economy, which is riding high on the benefits of the resources industry in WA. Employment levels have risen to almost the highest we have ever had and the unemployment rate has dropped to almost record low levels, yet we continue to have a quarantine system and a vaccination system that have not worked as quickly or effectively as they should.

I really hope that the commonwealth government can meet commitments that the federal Minister for Finance, Simon Birmingham, made this morning. I really hope that it can open a purpose-built quarantine centre in Jandakot by March. I really hope it can, and we will work with the federal government on that. But I heard the minister say on radio this morning that the federal government has not locked down the contractual arrangements over the land—it has not locked down that it will be in Jandakot. Therefore, the federal government has not gone to tender and does not know how much it will cost. We are now at the end of August. The federal government wants to start construction in October and have it finished by March—good luck! To the extent that the state government is able to assist, it will, but that is a very ambitious target in the current labour market conditions in Western Australia.

We find ourselves in an extraordinary position and yet we are continuing to deliver essential services by doing things differently and better. We announced a series of things immediately prior to the Western Australia 2021 Skills Summit and certainly listened to the contributions. The contributions were around the things members might expect them to be around—the international border, and migration, quarantine and vaccination. There were contributions on how to tap into the unutilised workforce and how we can make apprenticeships and traineeships less complex and easier for employers to deal with. There were contributions on the attraction and retention of workers, the

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upskilling of existing workers, and how to manage our infrastructure pipeline of work so that we do not have public infrastructure investment competing with private infrastructure investment for the same workforce. There were contributions on how to make sure our vocational education and training sector is more responsive, and how ongoing workforce development for the future can continue to diversify our economy.

We have already announced a range of measures, including the adult apprentice employer initiative to bridge that age gap for employers to take on apprentices aged over 21. On skilled migration, we have written to the federal government asking it to increase the number of skilled workers. The Leader of the Opposition made an extraordinary proposition. When we came into government in 2017, from every door that we knocked on and phone call that we made, we heard people say that they were worried about jobs for themselves and their kids, and we responded to that. Then we faced COVID and the economy changed. Our economy is the strongest it has ever been, so we changed our policy settings. According to the Leader of the Opposition, somehow that was the wrong thing to do. Somehow it is not appropriate to change policy settings when the economy changes. That is just preposterous and nonsensical. It is a really good example of why the Leader of the Opposition should never be in government! He would take a position, and according to him he would stick with it forever whether it was right, wrong or indifferent. He would just stick with it because he cannot change his position to match a change in policy position. It is preposterous, and thank goodness for Western Australia that he will never be a minister!

In addition, the government is making sensible decisions about how to help underutilised sections of the workforce, particularly young Indigenous kids who cannot get into the labour market because they do not have drivers' licences. How can we do some smart stuff about that? We need to make sure that we tap into that underutilised workforce. We need to do an advertising campaign on the east coast to those who are already in Australia on economic visas. How do we get them to come to Western Australia to pick up the jobs that are here? We have already initiated all of those things. Equally, we need to put pressure on the federal government to lift its game when it comes to vaccination and quarantine.

The motion refers to small business as well. In addition to the \$1.3 billion of assistance that the McGowan government has provided to small business since the pandemic began—whether that is the electricity bill relief, payroll tax and business licence fee waivers, grants and other industry-specific measures—the most recent small business lockdown assistance grants added another \$41.5 million to grants available to small businesses. It is tough. There is no question that it is tough when lockdowns happen, but we have seen the economic benefit of that. That we are sitting in this chamber today without wearing masks and can go to functions and events, whatever they might be, including a football game on the weekend that could have ended better, is testament to the fact that hard, fast lockdowns work. If members ever needed to be convinced that we need to go hard and fast, and that if we do not, it will end in dire consequences, they should look to New South Wales. My former sister-in-law and niece are in Sydney. I know the difficulty they are experiencing. My niece is 20; the biggest thing for her is that she cannot go out on a Friday night! But it is having a serious impact on people. If members need to be convinced about how smart, methodical, deliberate and really hard decisions have to be made, they should look at where we are now in Western Australia and where New South Wales is. Yes, we have a real issue to tackle to make sure we can get the skills we need so that our economy can continue to flourish in the extraordinary circumstances of international border closures and, from time to time, interstate border closures to protect ourselves from the pandemic and keep ourselves safe. This is a serious issue. I do not question that there are challenges. There is no silver bullet; it is a combination of things. This government is working across agencies and portfolios to tackle all those issues. I do not think the motion before us reflects that as well as it should. Therefore, I will move to amend the motion.

Amendment to Motion

Hon SUE ELLERY: I move —

To delete paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) and insert instead —

- (a) notes skilled worker shortages and the need for small business support;
- (b) discusses the need for ongoing planning, leadership and strategies to provide long-term solutions and address the immediate issues facing Western Australian businesses and industry sectors; and
- (c) notes the government is working across portfolios and with stakeholders to proactively resolve these issues.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon SUE ELLERY: The member can listen, and he can read it because it has been handed out.

I ask members for their support on that amendment to the motion. I think it is a good thing that we are having a conversation in this chamber about how to tackle skills shortages in a pandemic. Frankly, if members opposite have suggestions that they want to make, we will listen to them. But if the extent of their contribution is a bit of,

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“You changed your position when the economy changed; therefore, you are wrong”, that will not help us manage the skills shortages. I ask members for their support for the amendment that I have moved.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot): Members, the Leader of the House has moved an amendment to the motion. I will quickly remind members, particularly noting we have some new members, that we are debating an amendment to a motion. I will remind everybody of the rules. If I give you the call, you have five minutes to speak on the amendment. I see a look of alarm on people’s faces—that is why I am explaining it. We will then vote on the amendment and return to the substantive motion, at which stage, you can speak for your full 20 minutes’ speaking time.

I give the call to Hon Colin de Grussa, with apologies for consistently mispronouncing his surname up to this point! As somebody who has suffered from that for a number of decades, I apologise sincerely.

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [2.39 pm]: Thank you, Acting President. I would like to seek your ruling on whether this amendment, which substantially changes the original motion —

Hon Sue Ellery: If it is of any help, by interjection, honourable member, what has changed in (a) is “concern” and “lack of equitable”, what has changed in (b) is “better” and what has changed in (c) is “calls on prospective ministers to work together”.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: I will seek a ruling and then I will be in a better position to make a contribution.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot): Member, perhaps I could be of a little assistance here. I assume that you are drawing my attention to standing order 87.

Hon Colin de Grussa: Yes.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: In which case, it may assist you to know that my view is that the amendment does not contravene either of those requirements in paragraphs (a) or (b). In other words, the amending motion is still relevant to the question before the Council and it is not a direct negative. I hope that assists. I am seeking speakers on the amendment.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: Thank you, Acting President. It is very difficult to make a decision on this amendment when it has literally just been presented to us and I have not had an opportunity to consult with my colleagues on it. In the first instance, the amendment detracts from the original intent of the motion in paragraph (a) that —

notes with concern the ongoing issues with skilled worker shortages and the lack of equitable small business support;

Skilled worker shortages concern all of us. I do not think there is anything wrong with that wording. I am not sure why that needs to be amended. The small business support has been inequitable. A number of small businesses do not have access to the small business assistance packages provided, and for no good reason. Those types of businesses have access to grants in other states, but they do not have access in Western Australia. I talked about how allied health businesses, such as physiotherapists and chiropractors, are an example of that inequity. I certainly will not be accepting that part of the amendment.

Paragraph (b) of the amendment deletes “better” and inserts “ongoing”. The original motion simply highlights some of the challenges that we have had with understanding what the plan is. There is a need for better planning. Again, I have not had a chance to consult with my colleagues, but I would be reticent to accept these amendments. The amendment to paragraph (a) is not acceptable.

In paragraph (c), we are calling on specific ministers to work together to resolve the specific issues we have talked about. The amendment to paragraph (c) changes the meaning or the intent of that aspect of the motion. I certainly will not be supporting that. I am sure that my colleagues will rise to make some contributions on this. It is not common practice to amend motions on notice. I do not think it is something that —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: It has been in practice for over 20 years.

Hon COLIN de GRUSSA: These motions are brought into this house by members. If the government wants to use its numbers to change the meaning of the motion, that is simply a reflection on the government and not the original motion. It is a reflection on the government not wanting to face up to the fact that it is failing on these matters, which is why we raise them in this house in an effort to be constructive, as I was in my contribution, and to suggest solutions and ways to help address these issues we raise in this place. Instead, the government wants to change the motion so that it gets the particular words and the outcome that it wants, rather than actually listening to and dealing with the issues that face it. I am pretty confident that the Leader of the Opposition will not be supporting the amendment.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Regional Development) [2.44 pm]: I urge members to support this amendment. The amendment recognises that the motion that was brought here today has

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real content and that there are very real issues that this state is trying to deal with. There are issues of labour shortage and skills shortage. This amendment simply seeks to put this motion into a more reasonable frame so that members will be able to bring forward their concerns and ideas in an environment and context that recognises that this is an issue that the state, the government and members of Parliament, across industry, are all grappling with. These amendments before us will facilitate a better and more rational discussion of these very real issues. The government is not seeking in any way to diminish the importance of the underlying issues of skills shortages, labour shortages and the problems that small businesses are facing. We are trying to create a better, more rational environment for this house, as a house of review, to make a proper contribution. I urge all members to support the amendment on that basis.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [2.46 pm]: I note the words in the amendment put forward by the Leader of the House. The Minister for Regional Development just referred to ongoing labour shortages and skilled worker shortages, and she is right; that is something that we both probably agree on. If we are going to have a closer look at this motion, perhaps it should refer to not just skilled workers. I have spent a lot of time talking about agricultural issues et cetera. Perhaps we should include skilled and unskilled workers in the motion, because we also have a significant shortage of what we would traditionally describe as unskilled workers.

Point of Order

Hon STEVE MARTIN: I rise on a point of order. I appreciate that you, Acting President, have ruled on the entire amendment. I am not sure if I can do this, but can I get you to reconsider paragraph (c)? The assumption made by paragraph (c) of the motion is that those ministers and departments are not working proactively. The amendment does a 180-degree turnaround and changes that paragraph to note that the department and government are working. Can I ask you, Acting President, to reconsider that ruling on at least paragraph (c) of the amendment, please?

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot): Member, I will respond in the tone in which you asked the question. There is, of course, a mechanism for you to question my judgement, which is to dissent from the ruling. I will assume that that is not what you are trying to do.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: That is absolutely correct, Acting President.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Good! I am glad that my instinct was correct. In that case, I have made my ruling and I do not intend to change it. Member, do you wish to continue your remarks on the question before the house?

Hon STEVE MARTIN: Not on the amendment, no; thank you.

Debate Resumed

The ACTING PRESIDENT: In that case, there being no further speakers, I will put the question to the house on the amendment moved by the Leader of the House.

Amendment put and passed.

Motion, as Amended

HON WILSON TUCKER (Mining and Pastoral) [2.50 pm]: I rise to support the motion brought forward by Hon Colin de Grussa on skilled workers. For the record, I do not take umbrage with either version. For me, the operative words here are “skilled worker shortages” in paragraph (a), so both versions are applicable.

Some members here today may recall the remarks I made yesterday during a member’s statement about a midwife, Hannah John, who had difficulty obtaining a G2G PASS to get across the border from South Australia to Western Australia to take up a position at Kalgoorlie Health Campus. I ran out of time yesterday and I thought I would use the opportunity now to finish off my remarks and highlight the skilled worker shortage in the health sector, especially in regional Western Australia.

To refresh members’ memories, and for *Hansard*, Hannah is a midwife who was having difficulty in obtaining a G2G PASS. Her application for a G2G PASS was rejected three times and she was unable to enter Western Australia despite having the required documentation. Hannah was upset by her inability to take up the position at Kalgoorlie Health Campus, a regional town that desperately needs her expertise. She was also concerned with the lack of incentives and reimbursement offered to domestic health workers. This incentive had been extended to international health workers. It is my understanding that it is an \$8 000 reimbursement, which has been extended to 200 junior doctors and nurses. The situation has been resolved for Hannah and her G2G PASS was approved after the Minister for Health got involved. However, this raises some wider issues regarding incentives for domestic health workers considering that we are in the middle of a pandemic.

Yesterday, I posed a few questions, and I will raise them again today. Firstly, how many other health workers and other people travelling to Western Australia have experienced the same problem as Hannah? Secondly, why is the G2G PASS system so rigid for workers in the process of moving to Western Australia from other states in Australia?

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Thirdly, why are international doctors and health workers being given priority over domestic health workers? Fourthly, what was this glitch and has it been fixed to avoid future occurrences of this nature? Although I ran out of time yesterday, I had a few action items that I wanted to propose based on these questions. They are, firstly, that we need to carry out a review of the G2G system to ensure that incidents of this nature do not occur in the future. Secondly, we need to provide incentives to healthcare workers who are seeking to relocate to Western Australia. Thirdly, we need to create a simplified process for healthcare workers to obtain a G2G PASS.

I am glad that the situation has been fixed for Hannah but there are still a lot of unanswered questions. I hope the government will take this situation seriously and update Parliament and the people of Western Australia on the actions that it has taken to give us confidence that future workers will not be affected.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Regional Development) [2.54 pm]: I truly do thank Hon Colin de Grussa for bringing forward this motion because we know there are these shortages of skills and labour. Although I note that the member put it in terms of skills shortages, there are also broader shortages of labour right across the state. I also recognise that there are complexities with the G2G PASS and that decisions have to be made on each individual case. We will certainly make sure that the member's comments are taken forward and are considered. There is a continuous process of assessment and whether we are doing these things in the best way possible.

Perhaps I could confine my comments to the agricultural workforce. I found the contribution made by Hon Dr Steve Thomas pretty extraordinary. Apparently, he was the first person to notice there was going to be a skills shortage. The pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020; it was retrospectively named COVID-19, but the pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020. It was on 27 March 2020 that I put out the first statement we made about the work we had been doing with the Food Alliance WA to launch a dedicated program to support jobs and fill labour shortages in the agriculture and food industries across Western Australia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognised, right from the very outset, that we needed to respond to the cessation of backpacker labour—no new backpackers would be coming into the state or the country for the foreseeable future. I reckon having set up a group and an alliance within the space of two weeks since the declaration of the pandemic is pretty good evidence that we have been on the case.

At the very outset, the situation with the backpackers was not so bad because a very significant cohort of probably somewhere around 14 000 backpackers was still in Western Australia, as well as something in the order of 1 000 seasonal workers, mainly from Timor-Leste. However, we knew that those numbers were going to be depleted and that many of those people would be going home. We did all that we could to reach out to them and set up a whole variety of programs to encourage people to stay. We also strongly encouraged the federal government to extend the visas of seasonal workers. The extraordinary thing is that Hon Dr Steve Thomas has not made one positive suggestion. He seems to believe that we should have been able to create new people! It was very clear that we could not, at the height of the pandemic, bring in people from overseas.

Another issue that has emerged is that this virus changes. It became evident, over time, that certain areas of the Pacific Islands had remained without any serious infection, but even that was changing. At one point, we were considering people from Fiji. We were in the process of putting together a program using people from Fiji as well as Tonga and Vanuatu. Once the commonwealth said that it was prepared to allow seasonal workers to come into the state, we leapt on board. I can provide documentary evidence that in early October 2020 we said that we were setting up a unit. I think Hon Jackie Jarvis may have been involved in the original unit that we stood up within the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage to drive that work, and that work is continuing today. We have brought in approximately 1 500 workers from the Pacific Islands. We had stood up a special hotel for those workers. As the Delta variant has emerged, it has reduced the number of hotels that we can use. It is quite evident that the Delta variant is a lot more infectious; hence, many of the hotels that we were using before were assessed as having insufficient quality of ventilation to deal with the Delta variant and a couple of the other variants—the British variant for one—that have emerged in 2021. Therefore, the number of hotels available to us to use has diminished because of the ventilation issue. Then, of course, the Delta variant is so highly contagious that even within those hotels, we are now only able to have something less than 50 per cent occupancy because we can only occupy every second room, which contracts what we have available. But we have been able to secure one of the hotels that is no longer appropriate for people coming from jurisdictions with COVID. We have been able to preserve that hotel for the Pacific Islanders whom we are bringing in, on average, on two planes a month to use that facility, which is funded by the state government. We do all the coordination work, bringing industry together and getting the planes together. We were funding VegetablesWA to help with that work, but it is no longer able to do that, so the work is now entirely done within this unit with the department.

In terms of the Work and Wander Out Yonder program, we have always said in every statement that we have made that we realise that much of the horticultural work is challenging and not for everybody. We have always

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acknowledged that there are huge issues in attracting people to it, which is one of the reasons we came up with our program of media encouragement, backed in by very significant subsidies in early September. People could get \$40 a night and a travel allowance of up to \$500 and all they had to do—we did not care if they slept in a swag; they were still entitled to their 40 bucks a night—was show that they had worked. Hon Dr Steve Thomas completely mischaracterised the scheme. Although I agree that, alas, many people go out, and are sent out by the various commonwealth employment agencies, and do exactly as the member says: they turn up and are gone by the end of the day. I am not denying that that is happening. But I am talking about the 1 400 people who we have paid under the scheme. People are only eligible if they complete a minimum of two weeks' work. They actually have to be out there, working for two weeks before they can put in their claim form. Therefore, the numbers that we are using are not numbers of the people who have turned up and by lunchtime they are gone, or they are gone by the end of the day; they are people who have stayed there for two weeks.

This scheme was not about getting people to move permanently; this was a scheme about seasonal work. This was a scheme about going to those places where they need workers for two, three, four or five weeks. Unlike the commonwealth scheme, which was extremely clunky and bureaucratic and people had to show that they were actually going to move permanently and had to show all the receipts, our scheme was very streamlined and tailored to getting people in. But we have always recognised that this was just one of the things that we do.

It is quite extraordinary that Hon Dr Steve Thomas fails to appreciate that we need a number of different strategies and just because we layer and add on different strategies does not mean that it is a backflip. No! We have to try everything. When the federal government quite rightly said that no workers were coming in at all during that phase, who could we focus on? No-one was able to come in from overseas, so of course we had to focus on those people who were in the state. Then, when the Pacific Island scheme was opened up, we jumped on board. We said, "Yes, we will bring them in." We have 1 500 workers and we have more planeloads booked right until the end of this year. We are now trying to work with the commonwealth. We have read the Constitution, and I am sure Hon Dr Steve Thomas has too. He knows very clearly that section 51 of the Constitution enumerates those powers that the commonwealth is responsible for, and quarantine is one of them! We have been telling the federal government: "We don't have any more hotels that we can put agricultural workers in." We could judge the risk—this is a decision for the commonwealth—of bringing in people from, say, northern Europe or Canada who had been vaccinated and returned COVID-negative tests. We cannot do it. We do not have any hotels to do that, but we asked the commonwealth to use Christmas Island. Finally, after two or three weeks of argy-bargy, the commonwealth is now saying that we cannot use Christmas Island. In the meantime, we still believe that the commonwealth should be in there trying to find a solution for the harvest workers.

We have been doing the work, calculating how many workers we would probably need. The estimates from industry vary—somewhere between 300 and 900. We have worked out how much it would cost to charter a flight from northern Europe and the cost per person. Therefore, we have been doing this work. We have also been funding the Grains Council of Australia, which is trying to work across different industries, to get them to release their workers for a four to six-week period. We have chucked some money into the kitty there to help the Grains Council fund that particular work. For the last couple of weeks, we have been talking to the Northern Territory government about whether we could jointly stand up the Bladin Point facility near the Darwin airport. That discussion is ongoing.

The first media release went out on 29 March, setting out the work that we had been doing in the intervening period to address the issues of the agriculture workforce. We have continually worked hard and have been prepared to put the personnel and funds in to support our agricultural sector in this time of unprecedented demand. It is extraordinary that just at the peak time when it is so hard to get labourers, we are looking down the barrel of the most extraordinary 20 million tonne harvest. But we are doing all that we can. We are working with local government. We are working with the private sector. We are working with the federal government and the Northern Territory government to find a way through, to get people in, so we can get this harvest off.

HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan) [3.09 pm]: I had not originally intended to speak on this very worthwhile motion, but a number of thoughts have occurred to me; I know, it is strange! I assume that all sides are concerned about what is best for Western Australia and Australia. The debate brought to mind an interview I heard yesterday regarding a terrible incident of racism on the footy oval, and the question was put: what more could we do? The answer was that we cannot legislate for morality. We can make as many laws as we like, but really it is about the mindset of the people for whom we are legislating. The same could probably be said about the mindset of the population when it comes to how we manage our internal affairs. Basically, we are saying that we are not a self-sufficient nation. That is a terrible thing to say. In this day and age, when our borders are at risk and we are constrained, if we are unable to provide for ourselves, we are at the mercy of other nations. That is unacceptable.

I recall the stories of my parents from the Second World War when life was very difficult. My father was based abroad, of course, but my mother was still in the United Kingdom and food was at a premium. People had to look after themselves. They rationed. They worked on the land and saved money, but they suffered. They fought their

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way through that because it was necessary. Here we have a bumper harvest coming up and the population says, “Huh, I wonder who is going to get it in for us? I wonder who is going to do the work? I can’t be bothered. I have other things to do, other priorities”—as if feeding ourselves is not a major priority. What are we thinking? Seriously, who are we? Think back a generation to those who served abroad in the Second World War, those who were doing unimaginable things on the Kokoda Trail. They did them because they had to, and they did them very well. They were a breed of people, and I think we would have difficulty holding a candle to the type of people—men and women—who sacrificed everything for their community and for their mates.

Here we have a national crisis. We are managing fine, we are legislating to get people into the state, but is that really what we should be about? Mention was made of having to focus on the population of Western Australia and how we can look after ourselves, but we cannot; therefore, we are going to have to get backpackers in to do the harvest, spend some time here, look around Australia and do the work that we Australians do not want to do or find excuses not to do. Are we happy with this? Is this sufficient? I suspect not. One of the areas we ought to work on first of all is acknowledging that this is a problem. We need to work on ourselves. What is stopping us from getting up and doing that work? What is keeping us from going out on the farm? We leave six weeks of very hard work on the harvest to our farmers, who are underpaid, overworked and wrestling with the banks. We leave it to them to find their way forward and we, the consumers, sit back and look for someone else to do the work for us. I put it to all of us here that this state of affairs is unacceptable. Who are we as a nation? Who are we as a state? Can we afford to continue down that path of least resistance by looking elsewhere for people to do the work that we should be doing?

Another aspect here is bureaucracy, because I call to mind that we are the epicentre of bureaucracy, are we not? We make the laws. I recall very much speaking about healthcare workers coming into the state. Back in 2008, my wife told me that it was time to settle down. I asked her what she meant and she said that it was about time I went back to Australia. I grew up here, of course. I had to get a visa to get back in because my parents did not bother changing their passports to Australian ones. There I was with 80 pages of very bureaucratic questions. One of the questions was whether I spoke English. I got a telephone call from someone in Australia with a very strong Indian accent. He said that before he could proceed with the application, he needed proof that I spoke English. I said, “Well, I am speaking better English than you.” He said, “No, sir. No, sir, we need proof.” I asked what kind of proof he needed. He said that he needed documentation from a school that taught in an English-speaking country. My finishing school was in Scotland. It had been closed and knocked down. I told him I did not have that, but I had a diploma from the Dundee university’s medical school. “No, sir. No, sir.” Really what he was saying was that he would block my entry into Australia because he could not know that I spoke English.

How many other bureaucratic issues do we have? Take, for example, a midwife in South Australia who was blocked from entering because of a G2G PASS issue. How often are we shooting ourselves in the foot by putting up bureaucratic hurdles that prevent us from moving forward as efficiently as we might? I am not asking that we make any changes; I am asking that we consider whether we are responsible for these problems. Do we create the hurdles ourselves? Should we start looking at them and doing something about it, making things less bureaucratic and opening the doors, if you like? I do not know how we would do that, but I ask members to consider whether we are part of the problem.

I have slammed, if you like, the general population—I consider myself in that; I am not out at the harvest and my hands are soft—and ourselves as lawmakers, in that we need to consider how we might improve the situation. That being said, I think both sides agree that the motion is excellent. The skilled worker shortage is, of course, the issue. How we resolve that is the question, and I commend the motion.

HON STEVE MARTIN (Agricultural) [3.16 pm]: I rise to talk to the motion that was amended by the Leader of the House, and I refer to the third limb of the motion, which states —

- (c) notes that the government is working across portfolios and with stakeholders to proactively address these issues.

How is that going for the government? Is that working well? I will briefly mention what that looks like on the ground at the moment. There was a story today on *Country Hour* about a crop-spraying contractor called Helispecs. Brent Nottage from Helispecs said the state government has knocked back his application several times despite there being no COVID infections where the pilots are based in regional Queensland. Obviously, he has planes and helicopters to spray crops but no pilots.

We have had some excellent contributions from members opposite and outstanding contributions from members on this side of the house. While this fine debate has been going on today, we have farmers looking at their diseased canola crops. It is that time of year; it is spring and it is warm and wet, so disease-carrying pests fly into canola crops. Damage can be done in days, let alone weeks. Those canola crops, with excellent yield potential, go backwards quickly if they cannot be sprayed. It is far too wet to spray some of the crops in the wheatbelt and great southern with a traditional sprayer, so planes and helicopters are needed. The shortage of pilots is doing damage today. If the

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yield drops a couple of hundred kilos in the next two weeks because it cannot be sprayed at today's prices, it can cost those growers \$180 a hectare. That is what the skills shortage looks like today, while we enjoy this debate.

Obviously, other sectors have a skilled labour shortage. I will confine my remarks to the lack of labour, especially in regional Western Australia. I refer to the tourism sector. I have been in country towns recently where the restaurants have closed after lunch during the week because they simply cannot get the staff to keep them open. In Broome, Busselton and other tourism places, it is very hard to get labour. People are losing money because they cannot keep their businesses open. It is hard to get staff such as chefs, for example, and people to work behind the counter.

I have talked briefly about the shortage of pilots in the broadacre agricultural sector. We have also heard about header drivers, chaser bin drivers and truck drivers. The Minister for Agriculture and Food mentioned a scheme to get drivers quickly upskilled to heavy combination driving. Trust me: that is not an area in which we need someone to be quickly upskilled. If someone is driving towards us with 90-tonnes of truck behind them, we want them to have some experience; we do not want them to have had their learning fast-tracked. That is an area in which a process needs to be in place. It will take some time to correct that shortage of drivers.

One of the impacts of the labour shortage has been on Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd. We talked about that earlier. CBH had issues during autumn with contracts to get grain to port. It could not get grain out of the Geraldton port zone because it could not get truck drivers. That shortage of truck drivers cost Western Australian growers money. We heard from the Minister for Agriculture and Food about some of the government's responses. I agree with the Leader of the Opposition, Hon Dr Steve Thomas, about the Work and Wander Out Yonder campaign. Members saw the outstanding television commercial. We can imagine the genius who was paid to put that together, sitting in an office in the suburbs or in West Perth, and showing people dancing between the grapevines and picking strawberries, having a lovely time, with candlelit dinners in the tent after work.

Not surprisingly, those who did venture down south, thinking that was real, got a rude shock. It reminded me of the story that Hon Dr Steve Thomas told yesterday about *A Country Practice* and its link to a real-life veterinary surgery. The link between that advertising campaign and what it is like to pick fruit is about on the same scale. Horticulturalists still do not have enough people to pick the fruit when it needs to be picked. That industry is obviously very time-sensitive; the work needs to be done at the right time.

The other response that I have heard at least twice from the minister recently is that if people are short of staff, they should offer them a pay rise. That insinuates, of course, that farmers and other people in the agricultural sector are not paying their staff enough; if they want more staff, simply pay them more. Could we try that with nurses or police or teachers, or perhaps in the public sector? If we are short of public sector staff, simply pay them some more. No problem at all. See whether that works. I was surprised by the minister's response about a pay rise.

We heard also from members on the other side, at every opportunity they could find, that it was the federal government's fault, and we heard from members on this side that it might be somebody else's fault. The guy sitting on his canola crop does not particularly care whose fault it is. The horticulturalist who is trying to find somebody to pick his strawberries does not care whose fault it is. It is now the middle of August 2021. We can quibble over exactly who knew the shortage was on, and when, but it has been 18 months at the very least and we still do not have a solution to the labour shortages in Western Australia. We are hearing that things might be in train, but it has been 18 months and we are still short of staff and skilled workers right across Western Australia.

I am aware that other members wish to contribute, so I will keep my remarks short. The other issue, of course, is that even if people in Broome can get staff today, the rental vacancy rate in Broome has snuck back to 0.0. People might find a staff member to go to Broome to work as a chef or a caravan park operator, or at the fuel depot, but they simply cannot find anywhere for them to live. That is the story right across regional Western Australia.

I commend Hon Colin de Grussa for moving a form of this motion that I agree with more than I do the motion as amended.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I just remind members before I give the call that I am going to interrupt proceedings when five minutes remains to offer the mover of the motion a right of reply. The question is the motion as amended be agreed.

HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [3.24 pm]: I am very glad to rise and respond to some of the utter rubbish that I have heard from the opposition today on this motion. One of the things that members would think would shock me, but has not, is the opposition's total lack of support to try to go local first—to try to hire Western Australians. That was evident in the time of the former government, when we saw it totally drop the ball in that space. This is not the first time I have heard members of the National and Liberal Parties talk about not putting locals first. When this issue first arrived for me in 2017, it was from the federal government. We had an issue in the goldfields region that we needed workers. That has been ongoing. Michaelia Cash came barging into town with a big idea about a designated area migration agreement, in an attempt to bring foreign

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workers to Western Australia to fill the skill shortages in Kalgoorlie. When that conversation started, I said to the working group there, “Why aren’t we looking at skilled Australians to bring across to the goldfields?” We could have gone away and looked at where there was unemployment and people with skills and brought them across. However, the federal government had already destroyed an industry that had workers in it. That was the car industry. It had absolutely wiped out manufacturing in the car industry. That industry had employed many skilled families. I think 45 000 people alone in South Australia were made unemployed by that decision. Instead of the federal government having a think about how to make it easier to bring those skilled Australians to Western Australia, it chose to take the easy option with DAMA. It chose to get businesses to pay \$10 000 in order to bring foreign workers to the goldfields.

What we were also struggling with in the goldfields at the time was getting families to live in the small towns around the goldfields and Kalgoorlie, such as Kambalda and Coolgardie. We would think that at the very least, the federal government would have thought about populating the region. No, no, no. There was nothing in DAMA about those people having to live in the goldfields. Every application that came in from overseas, such as the United Kingdom, was from people who were going to live in Perth. There was no attempt to move them out to the regions. It was simply a trick by the federal government. The federal government must then have been a bit worried, because Rick Wilson showed up in Kalgoorlie—only once in the three years that I have been out there—and said, in the dying days of that government, that it would do a five-year deal on DAMA. A five-year deal—he just threw that in there. It was absolutely outrageous. There has been a severe lack of action from the federal government on training and skill opportunities for Western Australian and Australian workers. The federal government has a fantasy that bringing foreign workers over here is the only option.

The hypocrisy that has come from the other side today is unbelievable. One of the great projects that Minister Alannah MacTiernan has spearheaded is the migration project. The government has organised with employers in the goldfields, and through Legal Aid, to bring families from Perth who are struggling to get work and are seeking citizenship in Australia to do their year in the goldfields. We have now managed to get over 60 families to live in Coolgardie and Kambalda, and in Kalgoorlie, and fill skilled jobs in the region. It has been an amazing project, run on the smell of an oily rag. It has gone so well. I have to give a massive shout-out to Blessings, who has been an amazing advocate in that space. The minister has driven this project. We are not talking about DAMA and bringing people in from outside; we are talking about people who are currently in the country and looking for work. That project has been taken on by the Shire of Coolgardie. It has been a huge supporter. It has provided work through the council for three different families. It is also connecting people with mining companies and mining jobs. I met a young man who had been sleeping at a train station in Perth. He is now working for Northern Star Resources in the goldfields. That all came through this placement program. What really upset me around the DAMA push and the fact that the federal government had signed a five-year agreement was the total lack of effort to seek Australian workers first.

Hon Steve Martin may laugh about a pay rise, but he needs to understand that it is not a joke when we talk about some of these conditions, particularly for backpackers who are getting paid crumbs by certain industries. They cannot pay pebbles and expect to get workforces. There needs to be an understanding that in some of these areas, there are problems.

Several members interjected.

Hon KYLE MCGINN: It is funny how members deflect so quickly from the industry that they are talking about. They just jump right out of it.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! Hon Kyle McGinn has a very short time in which to conclude his remarks.

Hon KYLE MCGINN: Thank you for your protection, Deputy President; I appreciate it.

I find it quite amusing that the wording changes whenever it suits members opposite and we end up going down the path of: “We’ve done everything right. The McGowan government is bad—boohoo. It wasn’t the federal government or the National–Liberal opposition. It definitely wasn’t us.” They sat on their hands for eight years and did not support local workforces and did not support people moving into the regions. They did not do a thing; they just sat on their hands and waited for it to happen. When they got into opposition, by some miracle they developed this high-and-mighty position that they know best and this government does not. The hypocrisy of the opposition is unbelievable.

Hon Samantha Rowe interjected.

Hon KYLE MCGINN: It is quite amusing, but it is sad, because we are dealing with serious issues that need to be tackled. I can gladly say that I know that Hon Alannah MacTiernan has been working tirelessly in the agricultural area. She has been working, consulting and trying to find solutions, unlike the federal government, which likes

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a hot shot of butter. This is about real outcomes for the future. It is about training. Why should we not go for locals first and get a handful of locals to work and wander out yonder? To me, that would be a success. We want workers to move from here to the regions, so we should absolutely try our hardest to make sure that they get the first opportunity to do that. This is not an issue that has just arisen because of the pandemic; there have been issues within industries, particularly those that utilise foreign workforces, for many years. If we had foreseen what a pandemic could do to our reliance on foreign labour in this country, we may have had more Western Australians skilled and trained in these positions. That needs to be taken into account when we are talking about the situation that we find ourselves in today.

As I have said, I was absolutely flabbergasted at the total lack of effort by the federal government when the car industry fell over in this country. Skilled workers were left out to dry—over 45 000 in South Australia alone. We could have done some proper negotiations with the car industry and found out how to get families across to the goldfields and put them in skilled positions, but, instead, the federal government went for the easy target and put together a designated area migration agreement to try to bring in foreign labour. What happened? We had a pandemic and now the DAMA does not mean anything. Once again, the federal government has been short-sighted. It is unbelievable.

After listening to Hon Alannah MacTiernan, who has shown a lot of commonsense in this space, I understand that we are working on many things to try to find our way through this situation. It is going to be beneficial to regional WA if we all do our absolute best to try to find solutions, not just sling mud and hope for the best. I commend this amended motion to the house.

HON JAMES HAYWARD (South West) [3.33 pm]: On the weekend, after the Eagles lost to the Dockers, the Eagles players sat around in their room and moved a motion that noted that they were working well together to get the job done. The bottom line is that you guys are doing some great things and you should be congratulated for those things, but there is more to do. We just have to look around Western Australia to see some of the challenges out there.

I was talking to representatives from a large transport company that needs 70 drivers to keep its operations in the Pilbara going. About 39 of its drivers are stuck in the eastern states and simply cannot get back here. We have a pandemic and we need to come up with some out-of-the-box solutions. I have a constituent in Donnybrook who is an intensive care-trained nurse from Sweden, but she cannot work in the health system in Western Australia because, apparently, Sweden does not fit within our requirements. There is some work to be done in that space as well. It is ridiculous that somebody who has been highly trained in intensive care in a First World country like Sweden cannot work in our hospitals when we desperately need them.

When I walk down the street in Albany at 4.30 in the afternoon, there is not a coffee shop open anywhere because they simply cannot get staff to make sure that they can open at that time of the day. People cannot get a house in Albany, so even when workers might want to move from Perth or some other location, there is nowhere to house them. These are the serious issues that the government needs to put its mind to.

Recently, I met with representatives from the mining industry who said that they want to create their own hub; they will build their own quarantine camp in the Pilbara and have jets fly in directly and solve the problem by creating a bubble. What is being done in that space? Who is looking at that? It is one thing to say that the government is doing plenty of the skills stuff that the Leader of the House talked about; that is excellent stuff. But there is still more work to be done. The reality is that the government needs to put its mind to how it can solve these problems. It is going to take a real effort. We have amended the motion today to acknowledge the work that the government is doing. I acknowledge the work that it is doing, but there is more work to be done and I encourage it to do it.

Finally, on the comments of Hon Dr Steve Thomas, who may very well one day be a minister in this place, just like many members opposite who had no idea that they were going to be here this time, you never know what the future holds.

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [3.37 pm] — in reply: I thank all members who have contributed to both the original motion and the motion as amended. I want to reflect on the original motion and its intent. As members can see, it was intended to allow us to have a sensible discussion. That is generally what I try to do in this place, because I am one of those people who seek solutions rather than try to find all the problems. There are examples of things that the federal and state governments have got right, but there are also examples of things that need to be improved. Many members have commented on various aspects of the motion and some of the challenges that are faced and some of the good, and not so good, work that has been done in that space.

We must have touched a nerve with members in this place because we even got an interjection from Hon Samantha Rowe—I think that was a first. We obviously touched a nerve. I need to comment on the assertion made by Hon Kyle McGinn in his contribution that the entire agricultural industry does not pay its workers properly. There have been stories, particularly in the east, about some sectors of the agricultural industry that have done the wrong thing, and I acknowledge that. It should never happen. It is not acceptable to pay workers less than the award

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rate and to put them in the conditions that some of them have been in. That is only a minority of the industry. The agricultural industry in Western Australia is first class, top notch and one of the best and most modern in the world. It is a high-tech industry. It is a very efficient industry. It is our state's second-biggest industry, valued at \$11 billion. Although it is great that, as the Leader of the House said, the Premier worked hard to ensure that the mining industry was able to continue to do what it did, it is very disappointing that the same was not done for our second-biggest industry, the agricultural industry, at that time. We know that the agricultural industry, although not of the value of the mining industry, supports a lot of jobs and regional communities, so it is equally as important as the mining industry, particularly in a regional context. It was disappointing that it was not held in the same regard as the mining industry at that time.

Hon Kyle McGinn spent some time talking about the car industry. I am not sure how relevant that is to the current debate. It would be great to see cars manufactured in Australia. Governments of all persuasions failed that industry; they subsidised the guts out of it, and all that happened was foreign manufacturers ended up taking those subsidies overseas. We can blame one side, but I tell you, that industry existed under many different governments, and all of them failed to keep it here. That is a debate for another day, I would say.

I am particularly concerned about health workers. Hon James Hayward made the point that some of those workers may actually be in our community, but because their qualifications are from foreign nations, may not be able to work in Western Australia. I hope that there is some work being done to ascertain how many people there are in that space who could potentially come into the system and whether we can find a way to make sensible rules. Hon Dr Brian Walker talked about that incredible bureaucracy that seems to exist to make things that seem so logical and sensible completely impractical! That is a classic example: we have someone obviously with the skills who is unable to work here because of some bureaucratic paperwork. In times of a pandemic, I would think that is the kind of thing we need to set aside.

Again, I thank all members for contributing to the debate on the motion. At the end of the day, I am disappointed that it was amended. In my view, it takes away from the spirit of the debate, but, nonetheless, it was good to have contributions from all members and a pretty good and robust discussion about some of the issues we face in attracting and finding skilled workers, and the strategies and planning we need to continue to undertake to make sure we get those workers.

Question put and passed.