

AGRICULTURAL AND HOSPITALITY SKILLED WORKERS

Motion

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural) [1.05 pm]: I move —

That this house —

- (a) notes the current impact and future issues with recruiting agricultural and hospitality skilled workers in regional Western Australia;
- (b) calls on the state government to provide transparency on its plans to ensure skilled workers in these sectors are available as soon as possible; and
- (c) discusses strategies to improve the availability and reliability of such workers to strengthen the resilience and populations of regional Western Australia.

We all know that this year has presented an incredible challenge to not just our state but also the nation and the globe. We are acutely aware of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had right across our economy in all sectors. It was clear very early on that it was going to impact the jobs market, for a start, as businesses were forced to close. Many of those businesses have reopened, particularly in our state where we took measures that have led to better outcomes than we have seen in other states. Those things have been good and some industries, such as the mining industry, worked very hard to make sure that they could find the workers they needed to keep that industry going.

There was obviously going to be an impact on our agriculture and hospitality workforce as well, and early on we could see that that was going to be a big challenge, particularly in the agriculture space. In a similar vein, it has been a challenge in the hospitality space as well. These industries are dependent on a seasonal workforce, and that workforce largely comes from outside the state and, in fact, the country. That was obviously going to create a particularly difficult issue to manage, but it was known early on that it would require a great deal of work to try to manage it. We could see the immediate impact, for example, on the broadacre sector from a seeding perspective. In March, we were talking about border closures. Obviously, the seeding season was coming soon at that time, but harvest is here and we are still seeing issues.

We recognised those issues and continuously raised them with government. We sent different correspondence to various ministers and to the COVID email hotline that we all had access to. It was a very good idea. In most cases, certainly in my experience, we were able to get good results and a fast and timely response to most issues raised through that mechanism, notwithstanding that the correspondence sent regarding the issue of an ag workforce was one of the very few emails that we did not receive a response to. We just got crickets on that one. That is very interesting, given the significance of that particular issue to Western Australia.

As I said, back in March my colleagues and I started raising these issues, and we continued to raise them through various means such as asking questions about what was being planned, what steps were being taken to ensure that northern cattle producers would have access to people and the hospitality industry could find staff, and how those various industries were going to manage their way through a hugely difficult issue. In fact, I wrote to Minister MacTiernan in June about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on skilled workers in agriculture. At that stage, I had met with a group of farmers who were proposing all sorts of options for how they could bring skilled workers into Western Australia ahead of the harvest season. All these people were well and truly prepared to contribute financially and use whatever means they could to ensure that they could find a workable system to allow these workers to come into Western Australia and assist with the harvest, seeding, hay production and other aspects of the agricultural industry. I got a reply from the minister on that issue, quite promptly, I must say, which was great. She noted in her reply —

It will likely prove challenging for workers to be sourced from Europe ...

We know that. It is a particular problem and the industry has had a particular reliance on workers from the Northern Hemisphere because our seasonal work happens in the opposite time of the year; when it is harvest time here, it is a good time to get harvest workers from the north. The minister noted in her letter that she was optimistic about the prospects of sourcing labour from New Zealand, which was strongly encouraged at that time. She also wrote —

It is unlikely the WA Government would support contributing funds to the costs associated with quarantining individuals from the grains industry as it would not be equitable to those entering WA to complete other services deemed essential ...

The industry representatives did not argue that they wanted a free ride. They were certainly prepared to contribute and pay for whatever needed to be done to find a way to quarantine those workers remotely, if possible. They were prepared to engage whatever mechanisms were needed in order to do that.

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 21 October 2020]

p7056c-7074a

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

I will move on to discuss the impact of the COVID pandemic on future employment issues in these industries. I saw an interesting article in today's digital edition of *The West Australian* on employment data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' data release. It states —

Australian Bureau of Statistics data released yesterday showed the number of WA payroll jobs fell one per cent between September 19 and October 3 ...

That figure was higher than the national average. It is interesting to note in the article the comments made by Conrad Liveris, who said that the drop was concerning because this government had been focused on attracting workers into industry. While these programs have been in place to attract people to work in these various industries, we have seen a drop in payroll jobs. The ABS data shows that the biggest effect on employment has been felt in businesses with fewer than 20 staff. The bigger end of town is coping better with the issues around staffing. It is the small and medium businesses, those businesses with fewer than 20 staff, which includes a great many agricultural and hospitality businesses across Western Australia, that are really struggling to find people to do the work that needs to be done. It has been a great effort on the part of large businesses such as those in the mining industry that have done a very good job of finding the staff they need, albeit with all sorts of incredible and difficult challenges around rostering and so on. That industry has done a very good job of finding the people that it needs. We know that a significant number of people are needed. It is estimated that 7 000 seasonal workers are needed in the agricultural industry across the state. We will need people in the mining sector down the track as well. There is going to be a very strong demand for people, and, obviously, the demands from one industry against another will present a challenge as well.

As I said before, in terms of agriculture in the broadacre context, we rely on Northern Hemisphere workers. Those jobs in particular require skilled workers—people who know how to operate the machinery, what a harvest is and how to do it. Essentially, during the Northern Hemisphere off-season, those people can come here, jump on the equipment that they are familiar with and do the job very well. That has been very good for Western Australian agriculture. It has also been good for those workers. They get to see our wonderful country. They get to do some work, earn some money and then spend some time travelling around—something that they cannot do at the moment.

An organisation in Western Australia called 2 Workin Oz trains some of these workers. When I was farming, I used its services to find workers for our operation. That business did a survey this year and produced a report on some of the impacts of COVID on operations in Western Australia. It states —

Western Australia has a long history, 50+ years, of welcoming professional educated farmers from around the world to work in our grains industry. In recent years when Visas were restructured, these workers were only able to enter Australia on a 417 or 462 Working Holiday Visa and have wrongly been identified as 'backpackers'.

They are not really unskilled backpackers or backpackers in the traditional sense. They are skilled workers who come here to work and have a holiday at the end of their work, not the other way around. It is very important to note that difference. The report goes on to state —

... while the agricultural sector has many unskilled roles available, not all roles within the sector are suitable for unskilled workers, and there will always be a requirement for skilled, experienced workers to operate heavy machinery and oversee farm operations. Expecting unskilled, inexperienced workers to fill these positions is not feasible and introduces and increases on-farm safety issues.

We all know how important those issues are. We have been debating the Work Health and Safety Bill 2019 for many weeks in this place. If the only option we give farmers is to employ unskilled workers, it is incredibly important that we do not introduce a safety risk to their business. That is not something that anyone would intend to do.

One of the questions asked in the survey was about the anticipation of when the hay and harvest season would start in Western Australia and what staff would be required. It was noted by 75 per cent of respondents that the anticipated start for the season was October. We are in October, members, and we still have a critical shortage of these workers. We are debating this important motion today to find out what we can do to not only address the issue in the short term, but also put in place a better plan in the long term.

In the time that I have available, I will run through a couple of other issues around the hospitality industry. In the ABC news of 20 October, an article titled "WA seeks backpackers to fill staff shortages as Kimberley prepares for bumper wet season" makes this observation —

In the six months from March to the end of August, the number of working holiday makers left in Australia almost halved from 140,000 to about 76,000 backpackers on various visas.

Obviously, that presents a massive challenge, given we are talking about a 50 per cent reduction in those available right across the country. It continues —

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‘Every day is a challenge’

All around town signs are appearing at businesses notifying customers that kitchens will be closed during certain hours, some major venues are only taking in-house guests at their bars and restaurants, and others are posting apologies to customers on their Facebook pages—all citing “serious shortages of available skilled staff” for the changes.

Many operators out there, the small mum-and-dad businesses in the hospitality sector right across Western Australia, particularly in the north, are very heavily reliant on the seasonal and transient workforce. They are actually exhausted because they are working harder than ever. It is great that Western Australians are out visiting their own neighbourhood. That is fantastic to see because this state offers so much in the way of tourism, but the fact is that the tourism and hospitality workers are not to be found, so tourism operators are working themselves into the ground trying to keep up with the demand. We have seen many examples of people coming through a town being extremely disappointed that the accommodation is full. The signs are up saying, “We’re at capacity”, but the reality is that many of those businesses are at only 50 per cent capacity; they simply cannot take on more holiday-makers because they do not have the staff to clean the rooms and cook the meals. The challenge for those people is huge. They are doing themselves out of business because they simply cannot find the people to do the work.

Tourists in the north have complained about the condition of some places. They have said that it is a bit untidy, the bins are full or the toilets are not as clean as they could be, yet only two people are working in the business because they simply cannot find people to assist them in doing their work. There are significant examples of stress and mental health issues arising for some of these operators because they are so under the pump that they are not getting a minute’s rest. We have talked about safety issues, and this obviously introduces potential safety issues and issues around the health of those people in the regional communities who just cannot cope with the number of visitors because they do not have the staff to do so. Our tourism industry’s reputation is damaged when these businesses are unable to cope with the influx of visitors, which they would normally otherwise be extremely grateful for, especially in the north at this time of the year when it is normally starting to quieten down, but it is not doing that because there are many more people up there than usual.

As I said, businesses simply cannot find workers to do the work. Accommodation is not available for those workers either, so trying to find a solution for that, particularly when some of those places are busy and there is not much accommodation available, is another issue. There are a great many issues around the hospitality program up north. It is great that we have encouraged people to visit Western Australia and I wholeheartedly support that idea, but there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of how we find the people to meet the demand of those holiday-makers. That is a complex issue because we have a reliance on workers from interstate and overseas.

It is a collective responsibility as well. If we look at the ag sector in particular, it cannot be up to either the industry or the government on its own to come up with a plan; it requires everyone to collaborate on potential solutions. The minister said in her media release of 15 October 2020 —

The Australia-wide international border closure has cut off the supply of Working Holiday Makers that WA’s primary industries are reliant on for harvest work.

We know that. That has been the case since very early on in the COVID pandemic, and that is why we needed a plan earlier to try to deal with these issues. The minister goes on to say —

The Work and Wander out Yonder campaign will continue to roll out and will ramp up activities in November ...

I mentioned earlier that peak demand for much of the ag industry was anticipated to be in October. As we learnt in the estimates hearings yesterday, I think 86 people have received payments for their Work and Wander Out Yonder accommodation claims. That is not going to help us find the thousands of workers that we need. That is a little bit disappointing. A glitzy ad campaign is part of the Work and Wander Out Yonder campaign that has been running. An interesting article from Caroline Di Russo paints a good picture of what that means to people. I want to read some of that into *Hansard* because I think she, much more eloquently than I, captures the feeling of it out there in the regions. She writes —

One of the greatest challenges now faced by the regions is the dissipation of its seasonal workforce due to closed interstate and international borders. The federal agricultural minister has been trying to negotiate arrangements with state governments, but alas, playing politics on borders is more important than helping farmers get crops harvested and getting Aussies fed. I’m sure if food shortages or price rises hit supermarkets, inconveniencing city people, the narrative and the policy would change. Until then, regional areas have been given little reason to expect change.

Which brings me to the winner of the 2020 NFI Shinybum award: the WA Government and its ‘Work and Wonder Out Yonder’ advertisement ...

Granted, it was a good idea to have an advertising campaign to encourage Perth people to take up seasonal work in regional WA for fruit picking, grain harvesting and the like. Credit where it's due. The problem is how that idea played out into one of the most cringeworthy and fallacious adverts known to modern marketing.

In short, it depicts peak hour in the Margaret River as going for a surf, watercooler chat in Exmouth as drinking at the pub and the company car in the wheatbelt as a \$750K harvester—something a little more complicated than the average Volvo SUV. No wonder city people think country Australia is a burden rather than a driver of our national economy—they think we are all surfing, drinking or chilling in an air-con cab all day. When you stop to think about it, it's actually quite offensive.

...

But the most hideously unrealistic part of the advert was when it cut to ... fruit pickers styled head-to-toe in agrarian chic. Let's be clear, when you pick fruit you don't wear an off-white cheesecloth shirt cinched at the waist and an oversized boater while you frolic through the orchard giggling semi-stoned in the soft late afternoon sun. That said, seasonable labour would probably be less palatable to the soft-palmed, knot-bun barista set if they knew they'd be dressed in work clothes and a baseball cap, while they sweated their —

Unmentionables —

... off up the top of ladders in the summer heat.

I think that paints a pretty good picture. What we should be trying to do is not paint some shiny advertising campaign to attract people. That, to me, is like throwing darts in the dark. We need real solutions. What is needed is very strong collaboration with industry and government to try to find the solutions to this issue in the long term.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West) [1.26 pm]: It looks like this will be a popular motion today. I am very pleased that Hon Colin de Grussa has moved this motion. I have a few things to say about this government's incredibly and woefully inadequate response to what is, effectively, an emergency in the agricultural sector in Western Australia. I was made shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food at the end of July this year, and this issue was already the most significant issue facing the agriculture sector. It is an issue that I am well aware of, coming from Donnybrook and being involved in the communities from Donnybrook to Manjimup where the reliance on the international workforce for fruit picking in particular for vineyards and orchards is absolutely paramount. There are orchards that rely almost exclusively on transient labour sources, particularly backpackers, but also Australian transient workers and transient workers from other countries who turn up. To not have that workforce in place is an absolutely dire emergency.

I raised this issue in the public arena in a number of places as early as 11 August 2020. I make reference to one of those times, which ran in an article on the ABC on the morning of 11 August, stating that south west MP Steve Thomas was calling on the state government to bring in foreign workers to help farmers through harvest. That is when I began this process—11 August—which is now two and a half months ago. At that point I recognised there was a significant problem. It took some courage to take that approach because at that point the government was still spruiking its hard border and not letting anyone in. The public had a lot of support for that position, so it was a courageous position to say that we had to bring in some labour from COVID-safe environments and that those workers had to go through proper quarantining and do the appropriate testing, because otherwise this problem would be highly exacerbated. In my view, that position has been borne out in an issue that I will come to later—namely, this government's incredible backflip a week ago when it approached the federal government looking to import foreign labour, something the government had refused to do for the two and a half critical months that would have made a significant difference to agriculture in this state. The government's comments are quite telling. In an ABC online article also on 11 August, I made a couple of comments. This is a quote of my comments in this article, which states —

He warned time was running out to make a move and urged the State Government to follow the lead of the Northern Territory Government.

...

Mr Thomas said such an agreement for WA was vital, and with arrivals to WA needing to quarantine for two weeks any preparations needed to begin soon.

“We're going to need to see these additional workers put in place by October,” he said.

Bear in mind that was in August 2020, so there were a couple of months' leeway for this government to get off its backside and achieve something.

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The only farmer in the Parliament who cannot be the Minister for Agriculture and Food can keep his counsel to himself at the moment.

The reply from the Premier was this —

But Premier Mark McGowan rejected the suggestions, 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.”

If the Premier had the slightest understanding of agriculture in this state, he would know that that does not happen; it has not happened for 50 years. When unemployment rates have been at five per cent or higher, close to 10 per cent historically, we have never been able to rely on a local workforce to pick fruit from fruit trees and from vines and to get in the hop crops. That has never been the case, so why would it suddenly be the case now when the Premier has decided it is? It is not. This is an example of the Premier and the government having zero understanding of agriculture. That was the Premier, of course, and he probably has no understanding of agriculture, but the comments spread. Only two days later the issue was bubbling hot. This is an article from *The Albany Advertiser* of 13 August in which I again am quoted —

... called on the State Government to negotiate a Pacific Island-type solution similar to one announced in the Northern Territory.

...

“The grains, fruit and avocado, and wine industries all need workers for their upcoming harvest, and they all need certainty that there will be a workforce available ...

“Naturally, we would all like to see these jobs filled by local West Australians. But history has taught us that producers have never been able to achieve this in the past, and it is unlikely that they will be able to do it now.”

That was the simple truth two and a half months ago. It is still the truth today. The response came this time from the Minister for Agriculture and Food who said —

“Since March we have recognised a potential looming shortfall of agricultural workers, and have been working with industry to develop local solutions,” she said. “We’ve had to be very clear with industry: they cannot rely on a hope that international labour will be available this year.

Last week’s backflip might change that outcome unless the government messes around again with a couple of months of negotiation. Even with the best intent, we will not get anybody in this year. Perhaps this is a surreptitious attempt to fill that. The government did a couple of things: it put in some extra training courses that no doubt the minister will describe shortly. I hope she describes how many graduates from those additional training courses are in the agricultural sector picking fruit or driving tractors today. That is not to say some good work is not being done, because additional training is a useful tool. To some degree, it will be useful next year, but it is not much use this year. Those graduates do not have much experience and they are already needed.

It was not until 24 August that I put out a media release on this because I thought the media coverage was pretty solid at that point. The media release of 24 August states —

The Shadow Minister for Agriculture Dr Steve Thomas has called on the State to take up the offer of the Federal Governments to deliver a Pacific Island type solution similar to the one announced in the Northern territory to address the impending agricultural shortfall of agricultural workers in Western Australia.

That was 24 August. What was the government’s response at that point? A lovely article ran in many outlets, but I picked up that bastion, *The West Australian*, which has covered this in reasonable course, to get the minister’s response. An article in *The West Australian* of 25 August, the day after, starts with this —

A row has broken out between grain growers and Agriculture Minister Alannah MacTiernan after she said farmers should consider paying harvest workers more to attract people to the industry.

Having then realised that telling local people to go out there did not work, the minister suggested that the problem was they were not being paid sufficiently. I can tell members that avocado producers have generally been paying in the region of \$35 an hour. But let me say this: a lot of properties are marginal.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: That was about harvest stock operators.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The minister may have been specifically referencing that.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: That is not what it says necessarily in the article, but the minister can get up and speak on that.

My response was —

... the Minister's comments were an inadequate response to the impending crisis of a shortfall of farm labour, and represented "government flip-flopping on policy".

I will come back to flip-flopping on policy later, which is what happened last week. The opposition has consistently called for a solution involving the importation of labour. Why is that critical? There are simply not enough available, and locals will not fill it.

Hon Charles Smith: Why not?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Because they are not interested in doing the work. That has always been the case. I wait for the member to stand up and tell us that he will pick fruit. I can guarantee that he will not be in the orchards and the paddocks, in what I can absolutely guarantee is a fairly tough environment. These workers are absolutely required. At the moment, the towns of Donnybrook and Manjimup are working very hard to retain their backpackers and transient workers because they are desperate to have them in for the pruning season. Growers are in the middle of thinning; it is peak thinning season. They want workers to go from thinning to harvest and picking. They are therefore offering cheap or free accommodation. Members might have seen some media not too long ago when a rally in Manjimup was promoting free accommodation and free food. Do we know why they are doing that? They are desperately worried that they will lose those workers to other sectors.

When I go to places such as Albany, I see cafes that cannot find staff to serve people. That is partly because all my friends in the farming community are desperate to keep the very limited pool of workers who are available. The problem is progressing from one sector to another. There are worker shortages in agriculture and even among people who service beverages such as coffee, and in tourism. Because of that shortage, people are becoming desperate to withhold that labour. It is absolutely the case that they are making the best offers they can afford to keep backpackers away from the cafes and restaurants in Albany and up north, because they need them. That is the stage we have got to.

Let me go onto the next step the government took. Having realised that the simple call to get people out of the metropolitan area and pay them more had failed utterly, the government then took the next desperate step, the next flip-flop, by doing a bit more advertising. The Wander Out Yonder campaign was already in existence, but a couple of words were added to the front of the slogan, Work and Wander Out Yonder, so it became a five-word slogan instead of a three-word slogan. A smidgeon more money was put in and, as the previous speaker said, it was an utterly unrealistic representation of what harvest looks like. It was completely unrealistic. It may come as a surprise that traipsing between cherry trees and picking the occasional cherry is not what harvest in an orchard looks like. To give the Minister for Agriculture and Food some due, I think she understands this. I am very interested to know, for example, the Minister for Agriculture and Food's personal position on the need to import labour versus the government's position, particularly that of the Premier. The Premier came out first and said, "No; we're not having any of it. My hard border is my political wedge. It is the thing that will get me re-elected in March and no-one is allowed to put any pressure on it." I suspect this minister understood there was an impending disaster or at least understood the work that is required. I think the minister said in the media that she has undertaken some of this picking work, which was good to hear. The Premier took a hard-nosed approach, particularly in the early stages, when he overrode the Minister for Agriculture and Food, who perhaps saw a little more. When we had the backflip a week ago, it was not the Premier coming out and saying, "Oops, I got it wrong." I suspect he rolled out the Minister for Agriculture and Food and said, "I've got it wrong, but you have to pick up the pieces." I have a bit of sympathy for the minister, who has to deal with a Premier who is in that self-styled deity mode, as it were, and was rolled out, unfortunately, to try to pick up the pieces.

The minister's comment back in August was that the government had recognised the issue since March. Let us look at its six to seven months of inaction. We have a little bit of increased training; that is not a bad thing. Then we have gone to, "We're not going to open the borders; locals will fill those roles." Then it said, "We were wrong; they're not going to fill those roles, so what we'll do is put some advertising in place." Whoops, the advertising did not work—almost nobody took it up—so the government decided it needed to have some financial incentives. There were not enough financial incentives, so the next bit of this saga is that the state government said, "As long as these people can claim all of their JobSeeker payments and any other payments"—effectively double dip—"and as long as the commonwealth government pays all of these extra payments as well, we'll bribe them to go out there. But we're not paying for it; the commonwealth will." That was the next step. What happened?

Hon Jim Chown interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: What an incredible double standard. The state government basically said that as long as the commonwealth bribes them to work, that will work. Guess what? The commonwealth said no. I suspect that if the Labor Party were in charge at the commonwealth level, it would have said no as well. That was one of those attempted cost-shifting exercises. Obviously, that did not work either. So we had an advertising campaign. The government said, “No; we’re going to throw some money at it.” Throwing money at it has not particularly worked either. It may be that some people will go, but there is a difficulty in getting people out of the Perth metropolitan region, particularly if they are being paid particularly well on JobKeeper for the time being. The government has to accept that the commonwealth government will not be handing out lots of free money for the benefit of this state government, which rejected overtures, until last week, for the adequate importation of labour.

Let us jump to last week. The Minister for Agriculture and Food was in the invidious position of having to announce a humiliating backflip.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: She had to reverse the position of the entire government and say, “Guess what? We are now going to have a look at this. We will now work with the federal government to look at the importation of labour.” Do members know what the government did? It wasted two and a half months on the process. The government should have listened to the call. I get that it was probably the Premier’s fault and not necessarily the minister’s. It was certainly the Premier’s fault; maybe the minister’s as well. The government said, “We’ll steal the workers that the Northern Territory government brought in.” It said, “This is our idea now.” The federal government has an agreement with the Northern Territory. We are all capable of that. The federal government has called on the state government to organise and negotiate an outcome to find a workforce from a safe COVID environment. That is not that easy. We do not want just anybody, even those people from the COVID-safe Pacific islands. They have to be from a safe community. Ideally, we do not want city people who have no farm experience, but there is a farm labour workforce there that the government could use if it was prepared to work at it. It should find its own workforce, strike a deal with the commonwealth, and bring them in. But that is all too hard! The government said, “What we’ll do is we’ll steal the Northern Territory’s workforce. When they’ve finished picking the mangoes up there, we’ll just take them.”

Hon Rick Mazza interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Guess what? Northern Territory farmers want them as well, so do Queensland farmers. Everybody else wants them as well. The Northern Territory government is saying, “Hang on a minute. We did the work, we invested, we brought them in.”

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Do you have evidence that that is what happened?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: That is what they are saying. Look up the media, minister. That is what producer organisations in the Northern Territory are saying. They are saying, “We don’t want to hand them over.” If the state government can get a third planeload diverted, good luck—fantastic! This government should have been in the marketplace months ago negotiating an outcome. It should have talked to the commonwealth government, got an agreement in place, and had labour available now. Guess what? It may come as a surprise to the government to realise—I am sure Hon Ken Baston knows this—but mangoes are grown up north. It is not just the Northern Territory that grows mangoes. Agriculture is produced in the north of Western Australia! The truth is we could probably produce a bit more, but we produce agriculture up there. Mangoes are being saved in the Northern Territory but nothing is happening in Western Australia because this government, led by its Premier, had no interest in taking the hard and brave decision to support agriculture and had no understanding of how agriculture functions in Western Australia.

I will end on this note because I have a very short amount of time. I wish it was a budget speech and we could spend a bit more time on it. The reality is this: six months have been wasted without a proper position in place. It is two and a half months since I started calling for the position of getting international labour from a COVID-safe environment, who could quarantine for two weeks and be tested on days 3 and 11. All of those things are critical. It was a brave position to take because at that point, particularly back in August, everybody was still very enamoured about this “hard border”. Even though thousands of people were still moving in and out of the state, it was called a hard border and it was politically popular—I understand that. It was not necessarily the easiest thing in the world to say, “We need to look after agriculture and put its needs first. By the way, if you look after agriculture, you might actually be looking after all the accommodation and service and tourism providers as well.” It was a fairly brave decision.

I have had a fair crack at the government in this presentation. Heaven knows that keeps me amused most days! I want to make this comment to the mover of the motion: on 26 August 2020—a couple of weeks after I began my call for the importation of labour—the member for Warren–Blackwood, I presume on behalf of the National Party,

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

put out his response, in which he called for a committee to be formed. I would ask the National Party to join us in a direct call for labour to be imported, because a committee will take months to develop not necessarily anything at all. I hope the National Party will join us at the forefront of this battle.

HON COLIN TINCKNELL (South West) [1.47 pm]: I would like to start by letting Hon Colin de Grussa know that we agree in principle with the motion. I want to take a slightly different approach. Looking at the whole situation, this was looming before the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID pandemic is one thing that has happened in the past 12 months. Looking at the country and the bush, this sort of problem has been looming for many years. We cannot gut the hell out of the bush and expect a good result. That has been going on for many years through governments. It does not matter which government it is; this government is probably worse at that, but it has been going on for many years. I am happy that the government has some good initiatives. The free agricultural skills training for young people, migrants and unemployed was a great idea; also, some flexibility in the current working holiday-maker arrangements. However, as previous speakers said, it has all come too late. Many people were calling for these sorts of initiatives back in March, and all of a sudden they have popped up very late in the piece. Why is that the case? I say that it is not just because of COVID. We have had an issue with the bush for many, many years. Regional WA does not have the ability to respond when a workforce is needed. We have taken the search capacity, the agility and the services away from country areas. With things such as regional education, roads, hospitals and shires, there is a lack of desire to decentralise. Also, we have not built those innovation hubs. We have not done the work. There has been a non-stop city-centric approach from governments, and we have taken away the ability of regional areas to fend for themselves and create the majority of their workforce. We know that there will always be a need for them to bring in extra workers during harvest, but these days it is worse and worse, and it is not just because of COVID. There are now very few strong, vibrant country communities with permanent residents compared with what we used to have. There were more families and an ability to provide a workforce. There was also innovation by people who had the ability to be creative and come up with answers to problems. We have gutted that. We have made it very, very hard. That is the problem when we look at the overall situation. If we had vibrant regional communities and if previous governments and this government had put workers back into regional areas, the ability of regional areas to respond to this situation would be a lot better.

The one vote, one value philosophy has decimated the voice of country areas. That is part of our philosophy. It is not good when policies are based just on election results, popularity results or numbers in the book, and that is the problem. Governments base policies on what will make it easier for them to get elected. Sometimes governments have to make hard decisions, whether they are Liberal or Labor, after they have done the research, done the consultation and worked with industry. Governments have to make hard decisions. Those decisions may not be popular at the election, but they are hard decisions that have been well researched and they need to be made. I believe that governments over the last 20 or 30 years have had an issue with making those hard decisions, because it is so much easier to make a decision that will be backed up by the numbers in the city.

A return to royalties for regions may be a Nationals WA mantra, and I see that, but it should not take a tax on a tax for this government to see value in reinvesting in the regions. The reason we had to have royalties for regions is that, as I have said, this has been happening for 20 to 30 years. It has been going on for a long, long time, so we had to bring in royalties for regions. I support royalties for regions. Royalties for regions was maybe not so well administered towards the end of the last government and it certainly has been gutted under this government; we know that money has been distributed to other places.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon COLIN TINCKNELL: The principle of this motion has our support —

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon COLIN TINCKNELL: — but this is not a recent situation. It has taken many years to come to this situation. I am a regional member. There are many in this house, especially on this side, who talk week in, week out—non-stop—about the lack of regional thinking from the government. It has been there. As the previous member said, I am sure the Minister for Regional Development understands this, but she is part of the government and she has to toe the line. Until this happens, I cannot see the situation improving a great deal. The member who moved this motion said it was like shooting darts in the dark, and that is the way it has been. I wish this had started only in March, but it did not, and the government only started to act later in May or June. That was very late in the piece. If we had a government that had a true approach to the bush and regional areas, this situation would not have run down over the last 30 or 40 years. It is a symptom of the way our governments have treated regional areas.

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Yes, we do need overseas workers. Yes, we do need to recruit a workforce, but that has happened because of a failure of governments to look after regional areas and provide infrastructure to create vibrant regional towns where families live and work. It is not like that anymore. We know that, and that is why we have to rely on outsiders to come and do the work. There is virtually 100 per cent reliance on outsiders to get the results.

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [1.55 pm]: There have been some extraordinary contributions to the debate on this motion. Quite frankly, I cannot believe my ears on some of the things I have just heard.

This is an issue on which I differ significantly from the major slaver parties we have in Parliament today, which obviously support the continuing importation of cheap foreign workers.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: They are not cheap.

Hon CHARLES SMITH: We will get on to that in a second. I remind the member about the exploitation that occurs on regional farms, particularly on berry farms.

I can solve this problem for the house in three easy words: pay higher wages, and the problem will disappear like magic.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: No idea.

Hon CHARLES SMITH: That is great coming from the slaver party over here on my right-hand side.

One would have thought that the COVID-19 pandemic, the effective closure of our international borders and the current mass unemployment we are experiencing would have dampened calls from the business super-duper high-immigration lobby groups. That is apparently not so. The Labor government's own minister for slave labour recently sought to grant amnesty to illegal workers. The policy she was chasing was quite frankly dangerous and grossly irresponsible. Not only are these people exploited, but also local people miss out on those positions. I find incredible in this debate that a Labor Party government that supposedly works for our working class people wholeheartedly supports something like this. I was thinking that perhaps after all the modern Labor Party is in fact the useful idiot of our capitalist elites.

Several members interjected.

Hon CHARLES SMITH: Prove me wrong.

Despite numerous inquiries —

Hon Kyle McGinn: What does that make the Liberal Party?

Hon CHARLES SMITH: The member has hit the nail on the head. The major parties are almost exactly the same entity. They just wear different T-shirts at election time.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Member, perhaps you might not be distracted by unruly interjections and continue with your remarks.

Hon CHARLES SMITH: I just want to expand today's motion, which I of course support. We have serious issues in the agricultural sector and a need for workers. What gets me is that despite several official inquiries into these issues, particularly into the ruthless exploitation of workers on farms, the government is still okay to run with this type of policy. I want to remind members of something again, because I have spoken about this issue many times over the last three and a half years. I want to take a brief overview of what I have said previously. In 2016, the Fair Work Ombudsman completed an inquiry into Australia's backpacker visa scheme, which found —

... "many backpackers are being subjected to underpayment or non-payment, unlawful deductions, sexual harassment, unsafe working conditions and other forms of exploitation".

I have firsthand experience of that. In Bullsbrook, where I live, there are many berry farmers. I have spoken with backpackers up there and they have told me, face to face, that they have not been paid for working. They try to get their wages and they are told that they are not getting anything—that they are not even on the books! This is not just a one-off thing. It happens continuously around Australia. This is something that I am personally concerned about. That is why I call it cheap foreign labour; it is modern slave labour, and we need to do something about it. A recent Senate report titled "A National Disgrace: The Exploitation of Temporary Work Visa Holders" documented widespread abuse of Australia's working holiday-maker visa program, which was —

... 'consistently reported to suffer widespread exploitation in the Australian workforce'.

In 2017, the national temporary migrant worker survey found that one in every seven temporary migrant fruit and vegetable pickers was paid \$5 an hour or less, and one-third were paid \$10 an hour or less. In 2018, a group of academics jointly penned an article in a Fairfax newspaper claiming that exploitation of temporary migrant farmworkers was rife. It stated —

Australia ... has more backpackers, and relies more strongly on them for horticultural work, than any country.

...

Unlike agricultural visas in New Zealand, Canada and the United States, and unlike Australia's own Pacific seasonal worker program, there is no pre-approval of employers. Nor is there systematic ongoing regulation to ensure compliance with workplace laws.

There is story after story of this kind of thing.

Thankfully, I heard some good news yesterday. The federal government ruled out an illegal worker amnesty, given the dangerous precedent that it would set for those who wish to flout immigration laws. The Morrison government rejected the McGowan government's dangerous proposition to grant amnesty to illegal workers. This may, I hope, free up jobs for Western Australian citizens. It may also perhaps—I hope—open up the prospect of lifting wages, which will have a valuable flow-on effect as that capital funnels into the economy. It is my view that allowing farmers to pluck a migrant in lieu of paying higher wages to local workers discourages them from innovating and adopting labour-saving technologies, which, I would argue, would boost the economy's overall productivity. I would also argue that it would prevent the so-called creative destruction that enables low-productivity farms to remain in business, which seems to be what this motion is all about.

To put it another way, stemming the flow of low-wage migrants onto farms would force the least productive farms to shrink and go bust, which would transfer workers, land and capital to more productive businesses, thus raising average productivity across the economy. Members can correct me if I am wrong, but that is how markets operate. Further, all farms that observe higher wages would invest more in labour-saving technologies and restructure to raise productivity. There is a reason that farms in advanced countries typically involve a handful of workers operating heavy machinery, whereas in low-wage developing countries farms are manned by many workers doing manual labour. The higher cost of labour in advanced countries should force farmers to invest in labour-saving machinery, which will lift productivity. This is simple economics, which I have not heard so far in this debate.

I know this is hard to hear, but here is a novel idea: maybe farmers should pay a natural proper wage to attract workers instead of gaming the visa system to exploit cheap migrant backpackers and overseas students or relying on taxpayer-subsidised Australian workers. Politicians on all sides of the house tout free market forces such as supply and demand and so on, except when it is time to pay people properly, when the notion of the market goes out the window.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Agriculture and Food) [2.04 pm]: This is an important debate and I respect the way that Hon Colin De Grussa, at least, has framed this motion. Of course we need to discuss these issues. We are in an immensely challenging time. We have never said that this would be easy or that there is just one solution. At all times we have sought to get industry to recognise as early as possible that there would be major challenges so it could not rely on just doing business as usual. We had to open our minds to at least trying to do something different from what we had done before. We saw this right from late March, when the borders started to close down. In fact, we convened our first meetings on this in March to bring industry together to work out how we would deal with this problem. We could see the borders closing, so we asked how we could deal with this problem of agricultural labour.

In the first couple of months, our focus was very much on the existing backpackers and making sure that we kept as many of them as possible in Western Australia. We thought about how we would get them from Manjimup up to Carnarvon and how we could work through the various intrastate restrictions and processes that we had put in place and make sure that those backpackers were able to travel. We lobbied very hard for the commonwealth government to extend visas for those backpackers and those in the seasonal worker program. Much of the work early on went into that. That far out from the harvest season, we recognised that we would have to try to mobilise more Western Australians. Hon Dr Steve Thomas seems to think that that is impossible and that in these exceptional times we cannot possibly do anything other than what we have always done. That is completely stupid!

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: I think the member may have referenced one of the grain harvesting training programs—2 Workin Oz. We have interesting information from Ley Webster, who trains people each year for these jobs as header operators et cetera. She states —

... we ALWAYS have a few Australians but in general the internationals are the bulk of our numbers as they are looking for better opportunities and willing to pay for the training .. But currently our courses are almost half and half with internationals and Australians ...

...

Extract from Hansard

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 21 October 2020]

p7056c-7074a

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

From Pilots to Beauticians... from Physicists to Dance Instructors... What a Diverse group this was and All are Champions ... Stepping up to the plate and putting their boots on to [#workandwander](#) thru the [#grainharvest](#)

There is the evidence. We are not saying that this solves the whole problem, but that demonstrates very clearly that it is possible. I have another quote from Ley from 20 October —

... This has been a training season like no other and like many small businesses we wrestled with the fear and then excitement of what Covid was going to do to our clients and the services we provide.

We dug in and managed to run training from July–October and initiated new programs for both Uni students and Year 12 School Leavers as well as our amazing scholarship program run with support from Grain Industry Association of WA Inc and Careers In Grain.

We have trained physio's, airline pilots, hospitality workers, students, retirees, artists and so so many more. It has been a pleasure to help each and every one of you ...

Of course we can do something. Of course we have to try to do something. Of course we cannot just sit back on our shiny bottoms and say, "Let's just open up the borders and bring them all in from Paris and Berlin. Let's bring those people in. No, no, no—we cannot possibly train Western Australians." Well, we can. It will not be easy. There is no easy solution. I agree that a lot of the work, particularly in the horticultural sector, is hard. As Hon Charles Smith said, it is not always the most generously rewarded work, although some people manage to develop a great deal of confidence and develop those skills. As it has got closer to harvest, the government has put more and more effort into those sites. There is no point running a program in June to recruit people for a harvest that will not start until late October. Of course the government has intensified its efforts as the time has come closer.

I agree with one thing that was said here today. I think the government could have done much better with the visuals in the Work and Wander Out Yonder program. I have been firm on that. However, I do not think that has been a major detractor. Tens of thousands of people have come onto that website looking for work, many of whom are university students. There are some incredible stories from people. I am looking at some of the examples of people who have accessed the government accommodation and travel allowance. A high school leaver who previously had not worked in a primary industry moved from Manning to Cold Harbour near York to work in on-farm plant and maintenance harvesting. In the past couple of weeks, an unemployed person moved from the south west to the wheatbelt to work also in on-farm plant and maintenance harvesting. Another gentleman in his 60s moved from the south west to help with harvest. A young person from Cloverdale who was employed but wanted to work more hours than he was able to get—he had not worked in agriculture before—is now working in grain and livestock. There are people coming through.

Several members interjected.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: I do not have four hours to list every case. I could go on. I could talk about the physicist, the dance instructor and the beautician who have all gone out there.

It is difficult. We have always looked at the options and at what point it might be safe to bring in seasonal workers. However, I want people to understand that in Vanuatu and East Timor there is not a lot of broadacre farming and there are not a lot of experienced harvest operators. They tend to be people who are working in the horticultural sector. They do an amazing job when they come out here and we would all love them to be able to come back. I was one of the people who pioneered the guest worker program with the East Timorese in 2007 because I could see the great benefit to both the people of East Timor and Western Australia of having such a program. However, the government had a paramount concern that we had to ensure that we kept COVID-19 from the state. Although we absolutely understood that this would be a partial solution if we were able to do this, this is not something that we were able to embrace without considering what the challenges might be. I know that Hon Dr Steve Thomas has some pretty big tickets on himself and it is all him who has created this, but I can tell members that in August I wrote to David Littleproud and said that WA would look with interest at the trial in the Northern Territory. We were then able to get to a point at which we agreed—this is after representation was made to us by industry—that we would be prepared to allow participants in the guest worker program to come through the Howard Springs quarantine centre. We have had discussions with the Northern Territory around that since August. We were finally able to land on an agreement that we would be prepared to participate in. Once the 300 or so workers who are there already finish their duties in the Northern Territory, they will be welcome across the border.

With respect to a third plane that had been considered, there was a lack of grower demand at that point, but we would be prepared to work with the Northern Territory for our growers to underwrite a third plane from Vanuatu. That is dependent on there being sufficient grower interest and I understand that a number of labour hire firms that charter the planes were looking at it.

This is an iterative process. Our number one responsibility is to keep the state safe, but to work as hard as possible within those boundaries to free up labour. It would be absolutely ridiculous if we did not make an effort to bring those workers on. We were conscious that we needed to make this financially more attractive to some of those workers because many people who would move would be required to keep their permanent accommodation, which is why the government offered the \$40 a night accommodation allowance, plus the travel allowance. We recognise that travel to the regions is expensive, particularly to the north, which is why a \$500 travel incentive is offered to people who go north.

With respect to the issue of whether workers are properly paid and whether that is a disincentive, the comments I raised about that were about the header operators. The industry has often said that those are highly skilled jobs. For example, when the airline pilots went through the Muresk Institute training program, very successfully—virtually everyone has a job coming out of that program—they were shocked to find that they were offered only \$25 an hour. Of course I raised that. Of course that had to be raised at an industry meeting. I said that this appeared to be a problem.

A member interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Adele Farina): Order, members! May I remind members, as the President did yesterday, that members who are not sitting in their seats are not able to contribute to the debate because it is against the standing orders.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: They were the confines. I understand that horticulture is in a different position. I stand by the comments I made. It cannot simultaneously be argued that it is a highly skilled occupation requiring lots of training and that being paid \$25 an hour is okay. I accept horticulture is a more challenging space to operate in. There is something in what Hon Charles Smith said that perhaps, to some extent, the reliance on overseas labour in that space has reduced the amount of innovation. Some interesting developments in technology have been looked at, which would not remove the demand for labour but would increase the productivity of labour. Perhaps we will see more of that being given priority in the horticultural sector because of the COVID outbreak and the borders being closed. We cannot presume, and nor should we, that COVID-19 is going to be the last pandemic we will have. We have seen an increasing frequency of pandemics, particularly with zoonotic diseases and because we have such a global economy.

We have never said that this was going to be easy. We have never said that we do not understand the challenges that people are facing. We want to do everything that we can to assist them, whether it is through financial endeavours or otherwise. The work we have done includes a task force to make sure that when agricultural workers cannot be sourced here, they have a right of exemption to come across the border. Workers have been coming in across the borders. I think it is important for us to understand that opening the state borders is not really going to change this problem because these challenges exist right across Australia. There are not huge swathes of people in the eastern states who are looking to do agricultural work. We know that the number of backpackers and seasonal workers has halved. Even though I suspect we will see some increase in seasonal workers, we are talking more about hundreds rather than thousands of them. We have to continue with every possible endeavour to mobilise as many Western Australians as possible and do what we can to get seasonal workers in when there is a clear and safe pathway to do so. We have always said to industry that we know it is a problem. We have been right on this case since March. All our development commissions have been working on this problem, making sure that no stone is left unturned to mobilise the labour that we can. We are now working very hard with the government of the Northern Territory in order to see how many workers who are currently in the Northern Territory we can get into Western Australia. We have not had any negative response to that from the Northern Territory. I have had discussions with the previous minister, Paul Kirby, and the current minister —

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN: We have been having discussions with them for a couple of months. Once the workers are finished there, the government is more than happy for them to come to Western Australia. They are happy, if it can be accommodated, to get subsequent planes in under the seasonal worker program.

We are working hard on this. Some very exciting new programs are happening at Muresk Institute this month involving refugee workers who are incredibly enthusiastic about working out yonder.

HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural) [2.24 pm]: I would like to thank Hon Colin de Grussa for bringing this motion to the house. I think it is a very pertinent, emerging issue as we get into the period when we need a lot of seasonal workers. At this time of year, it is the shearing season, so we need shearers. Shearers are not needed all year round; they are seasonal. They are imported at this time of year to undertake the wool clip. The vegetable and fruit season is also coming up. We are not right into it yet, particularly for stone fruit.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Some of it has started, but it is the beginning of the season. As we move into the season, seasonal workers are absolutely crucial to undertake these tasks. We have not yet seen the full impact.

I will come back to seasonal workers a little bit further on in my contribution in relation to lower skilled workers, because I really want to highlight that it is not just seasonal workers in our workforce who we have problems with at the moment; there is also a massive shortage of skilled labour. I can give members an example from the transport industry. I have been in contact with a few people in the transport industry. They are really struggling to get qualified drivers to drive their vehicles. In some cases, transport companies have trucks parked in their yards but they cannot get drivers for them. Consequently, they are having to spend large amounts of money on contract operators to haul their freight. A lot of these companies transport goods in frozen food delivery vehicles but they do not have workers. It is getting worse by the day. With the mining industry doing so well in the north west and the Pilbara, the problem is compounded by it taking skilled labour out of the workforce. To the government's credit, a pilot training program was set up in Collie for truck drivers. I understand that about 57 people originally enrolled to undertake that program. However, a fault was that the program did not upscale the classifications of their drivers' licences. There was no ability to go from a heavy rigid licence to a multi combination licence. As a result, of the 57 participants, 50 dropped out, leaving only seven. People are after a qualification to get an MC-class licence or at least a medium rigid licence to be able to get a job.

Some transport operators also said to me that they would invest very heavily in training people. That is not cheap. It can cost between \$5 000 and \$10 000 for transport companies to train staff, putting them through truck driver training school. It takes a long time. When they eventually get their licence, within a couple of months they may be gone—poached by the mines. This is an emerging problem for our supply chain within the state. We have issues when it comes to skilled labour.

As I said, we are now moving into the season for seasonal workers. A lot has been said about fruit pickers but there is also the harvest. As with skilled labour, there are a lot of issues around workers being able to operate some of the machinery. Mic Fels farms near Esperance—maybe Hon Colin de Grussa knows him! In an article, Mr Fels said —

... the WA government had ignored grain industry warnings about skilled worker shortages then launched a misguided recruitment campaign.

“Their Work and Wander campaign targets young and inexperienced people, but we are already flooded with applications from young and inexperienced people,” he said.

“Do you really want to put someone with no resume, no references because they've never had a job, no experience and no knowledge of agriculture on a \$900,000 machine where they could either break it or kill themselves?

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: No; we are saying that they go through one of the training programs.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Minister, I am quoting the article. If the minister would not mind, I would like to continue.

There is a lot of concern about the qualifications for people to operate some of this heavy machinery. My understanding is that there are TAFE traineeships for farming staff such as a certificate I, II, III or IV or a diploma in agriculture. I know of only one person who has ever undertaken that traineeship to get themselves up to a certificate IV and I know one other person who ended up with a diploma, but these qualifications are not widely promoted or used as a means of getting skilled labour. That traineeship is there. As has been explained to me, the incentives for apprentices are quite high; the incentives for traineeships are low. Consequently, farmers are not able to find people who have gone from school into these traineeships to take on as skilled labour for their farms. I think that the government should work on training people to operate this machinery and undertake all sorts of farm skills, because farm skills are broad and wideranging. If these traineeships were explored further and people given incentives to do them, they could be very, very valuable to the farming community.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: If you could decentralise them a bit so that you're actually providing them closer to home, that would probably have an impact as well.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Quite possibly. It is perplexing that we currently have an unemployment rate of around seven per cent and a youth unemployment rate of 15 per cent, yet we require thousands and thousands of workers for seasonal work. It might be easy to say, “We'll pay them more money. We can get them out there at \$50 an hour picking strawberries”, or whatever, but, of course, that is going to translate to the supermarket price. If we have to pay high wages for seasonal workers, food prices are going rise. There needs to be a balance. The unfortunate thing about a lot of this seasonal work is that it is not the type of work that people will aspire to—picking fruit in the hot sun, getting up at five o'clock in the morning, in dusty conditions, with flies, climbing up and down ladders. The backpacker workforce has been very successful. Firstly, backpackers do not get unemployment benefits. They are travelling from overseas. It is part of their adventure in Australia; they get paid and it keeps them going on their travels, so they are prepared to do that work. They will get up early and work and do all those things.

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Unfortunately, for our citizens here in Western Australia, that is not so attractive for them. In fact, the president of the Shire of Moora, Ken Seymour, has said again in the media that many farmers are finding it impossible to attract people to the bush while the JobSeeker scheme is in place. He said that it is really difficult to attract people who are getting paid—this is going back a little while, I suppose—\$550 a week on JobSeeker to sit at home. When the COVID restrictions were starting to lift and cafes and restaurants were starting to open, I saw many media articles in which a lot of those cafe operators and owners were complaining that they would ring their usual workforce to say they had a couple of shifts available and the workers would say no. They were getting their \$550 or whatever it was on JobSeeker and they were not interested. These businesses are really struggling to get their hospitality staff. I read an article this morning about a cafe in Broome that has limited the hours that it will open each day because it has a very limited number of staff who are available to work in that business. All these issues arise out of this.

When it comes to the seasonal workforce and Wander Out Yonder, it sounds romantic to go down and visit a few vineyards and pick a few apples or whatever, but it is just not cutting the mustard. Even though the minister gave us a couple of examples of people who have moved to take up work somewhere, it is nowhere near the 7 000 people that we need. The reality is that we need to import that labour. We have to bring that labour in.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Where would you like to bring it in from?

Hon RICK MAZZA: Just let me finish, minister. I know the minister has a lot of questions and she wants some ideas from me, and I am happy to provide those, if she would like. At the moment, we have only around 76 000 backpackers; usually, we have around 140 000 backpackers in the state. We have a very limited number of backpackers.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: That is nationally. That is not in the state.

Hon RICK MAZZA: That is nationally; all right. There is a limited number of backpackers available to do that work. There has been some discussion, and I think Hon Dr Steve Thomas raised the fact that the Northern Territory had done a deal with the federal government to bring in workers from overseas.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: From Vanuatu.

Hon RICK MAZZA: They are from Vanuatu. He was concerned that we might try to poach them. Quite frankly, as far as Western Australia is concerned, I think that if we poach them, good luck to Western Australia. I am more concerned about Western Australia than the Northern Territory, so if the minister wants to go and get them, go for it, minister!

A member interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Absolutely! You go for it, minister. But at the end of the day, we are going to have to try to get them in. I do not know the conundrum that the minister will have to try to unravel to get that workforce in, but if we do not, we will not find a local workforce that is able to undertake this work. A lot of that unpicked produce will rot on the trees or on the ground, and we will find that our supply lines will be in trouble because we will not have the truck drivers and the workforce in the transport industry to transport that food, and that is going to translate to high prices in supermarkets and a limited supply of fresh fruit and vegetables amongst other things. We have not seen the impact of that just yet. I empathise a lot with the government because this has come on fairly quickly. It takes years to get traineeships up and running and to get skilled labour into the workforce. Even the government's shearing programs, which are quite noble, take time. It is not something that can happen overnight.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Can I just say that the backpackers do their short-term courses, so sometimes we are exaggerating these things. A lot of the backpackers do those training programs. They do their five days or their two weeks. That is what they do to make them head operators. Let's not exaggerate.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I am not exaggerating anything, minister. In fact, the minister was exaggerating the Wander Out Yonder success earlier when she indicated that it was somehow a great success, with some of her stories.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Adele Farina): Order, members! Hon Rick Mazza has the call.

Hon RICK MAZZA: It has even been reported that Minister MacTiernan admitted that the programs in place had not been sufficient to solve the worker shortage problems.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order, members! Hon Rick Mazza has the call.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Thank you, Madam Acting President.

As far as the workforce is concerned, first of all, we have to get people into traineeships and try to get some of this skilled labour up, whether it is in farming or truck driving or the many other areas in which we have shortages.

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

As I say, the mining industry tends to take all the workforce when it is busy, and that is occurring right now. As far as our seasonal workers are concerned, I encourage the government to find ways of getting that workforce imported, whether it works with the federal government like it does with quarantining, or whatever the case is. If those workers do not come in in the short term, we are not going to have the workforce to be able to undertake the work that we have.

I find the Wander Out Yonder program to be a bit woke-y, to be honest.

Hon Stephen Dawson: It's a bit what?

Hon RICK MAZZA: It is a bit woke-y; it is a bit woke.

Hon Stephen Dawson: What does that mean?

Hon RICK MAZZA: You know what it means, minister.

Hon Stephen Dawson interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: The Labor Party is very woke.

Hon Stephen Dawson interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I woke you up! There you are. Suddenly the minister jumped into the action when he heard the word “woke”! Obviously he is excited by that. It looks good in the brochure, but it is not going to cut the mustard when it comes to the workforce we require.

I support the motion that has been put forward by Hon Colin de Grussa. I think a lot of work needs to be done, and some of it quite quickly as we come into the agricultural season. It is not an easy fix and I am not saying that the government can wave a wand and sort this out in a couple of months. It is a huge, huge task to try to get the workforce that we need for our agricultural regions. But I implore the government to work more on the traineeships. I am surprised that the pilot program in Collie to train truck drivers has failed so dismally, starting with 57 people and ending up with only seven after a short time. Surely there has to be some pathway for people to get the licence qualification needed to operate trucks.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: It takes time. Even after someone gets their multi combination licence, it takes a lot of experience, and quite often transport operators will have a mentor with them. If someone is to drive a huge vehicle on the road travelling at speed, they cannot be given just a few hours of lessons and be allowed to fly. They have to work towards getting experience and competency. I support this motion.

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [2.39 pm]: I read this motion and I thought that it sounded interesting because no harm was intended in the written words; they were just stating that we should look at this issue. One good thing that came out from what we have just done, I hope, is that we get this issue in the news more often, more regularly, and keep it in front of people so they realise that it is an issue and that jobs are available and training is available. This motion is one of those opportunities for—dare I say it again—collaboration. This is one of those times when both sides of politics—like the crossbench behind me does when it tried to add some really useful information, ideas and thoughts on it—could actually work together, rather than going back to the adversarial system and yelling at each other, “You did this!”, “No; I did that!” and whatever. This is an opportunity to do as it says in the motion, which is discuss the strategies. That is what I am looking forward to.

Given that Hon Dr Steve Thomas is so happy to quote himself, on 17 March, I said —

... farming communities will need a workforce as the steady stream of backpackers we once had dries up.

That is in *Hansard* on 17 March.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas interjected.

Hon DIANE EVERS: On 5 April, if the member will let me continue —

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon DIANE EVERS: — the borders were closed. That was said before the time when we needed to close the borders, and I have to say that very soon after I said that, the government announced its first step, which was getting the Facebook page open so that people could connect and start putting forward this idea. But, as the minister said, we could not really start in April to give people jobs that we need filled in November, but a process needed to happen and through the COVID pandemic we learnt of many different processes and many different changes that we had to make. We were always trying to be ahead of the ball and always looking out for what was coming next.

Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Colin Tincknell; Hon Charles Smith; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Diane Evers; Hon Darren West

Maybe there were some slow steps along the way. The Wander Out Yonder campaign did not really work out as intended. In fact, I tried visualising a commercial in which we actually showed people really picking fruit and looking sweaty and grubby and so forth, but still carrying on through the day, making some friends now and then and having a bit of relaxation time at the end of the day after hard work. Hard work does not kill people, but the campaign put forward this glorified image of it and maybe that did not connect with a lot of people. But I think the hard work might not scare them off either.

We need to go on from that, but there are some underlying issues and one of them is the culture that that work is for backpackers and we do not have to do it because we can work in our city jobs and do the things we want to. I am sure that anybody who comes from a regional area knows plenty of young kids who did that work through their summer. They were picking strawberries in Albany. My daughter was one of them, picking asparagus. There are lots of possibilities down there for adults, too. If adults were not able to consistently work a full-time job because of whatever issues they had, they were still able to work in the seasonal areas, and they still can. It is just that culture that is the issue, and that is something that the advertising campaign could present realistically and show it as part of life and part of growing up. Kids can finally get their parents, who were telling them to go and get a job, off their backs. They can go out and do a couple of days of fruit picking and it is not so bad and then they can do it a little bit more. That is the sort of cultural change that we need, but we will not make that change today.

This is an ongoing issue and, as was stated earlier in this place, it is not a new issue. There have always been difficulties getting the right people at the right time, and many places just carried on. One of the wineries in Albany goes out to community groups and gets the people who drink their wine to come and pick the grapes, and the winery makes a donation to the charity of their choice. Thinking outside of the square like that creates more opportunities. Again, it is not an overall solution; it is just one of the ideas that other people have come up with.

Another underlying issue is the expectations of employers and employees. Employees need a fair wage. There is no point in discriminating against them. Many backpackers and some Australian kids do not get paid appropriately and that is abysmal. That needs to be dealt with, as it should be dealt with in the system that we set up. However, employers also need somebody who is going to show up and put in a day's work. Therefore, there has to be a balance; it is a fair trade. But the regulations have to be there and be enforced to make sure that discrimination does not happen.

Piecework is often used for paying very poor rates and that also needs to be addressed. There has to be some balance. We have to make it right. Employees need to be looked after and employers need to be able to make a profit or they will go out of business.

This comes to the third underlying issue and that is we do not pay the real price of the cost of growing, producing and transporting our food. The COVID pandemic has highlighted a definite flaw in the system, whereby if our local growers cannot grow something at the cost we want it for, it is imported, because somebody else is growing it. That is a real problem that we have to address and face on a national basis. Somehow we have to find a way wherein people can continue to grow, produce and provide that food here to make us food secure into the future. There is no point in driving the price down so low that it puts the growers in our communities and in our state out of business. That is another issue that we should be discussing and looking at how we can address it.

I understand that it falls to the government to work all this out, but I like the fact that in this chamber we have 36 people who, hopefully, get out and talk to people—18 of them are from regional areas, so, hopefully, they get into the regions as often as possible to listen to people, find out what is going on and feed it back here. But if we can feed it back in a way that is not so adversarial, maybe we can work together and move forward to try to find better solutions.

I have come across a couple of other troubling areas and one is transportation. A lot of young people do not have vehicles. They do not know how to drive yet, but they would still like to have employment. However, once they get outside the metro area, there are very few opportunities for transportation. That is something that we can address. I appreciate that the government has put in the subsidy to get people to the community. Farm owners will often pick up the young people from wherever they are staying and bring them to the farm or they have on-farm accommodation, so that helps. If someone is 20 kilometres out of Manjimup on on-farm accommodation and they want to go into town to have a drink or something, their options are limited, so transportation is an issue that we need to address.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: You gotta hope the farmer's thirsty, too.

Hon DIANE EVERS: Maybe that is the case!

Skill levels are something that Hon Colin de Grussa raised as well. I am pleased with all the training programs that are going on. It is really a good idea to train up the youth of our community and our state—and adults as well—because the more skills someone has, the more employable they are and they can find work more consistently. In the regional areas we have to accept that a lot of the work in agriculture and hospitality is seasonal. That means that the tourism season may be at a different time from the farming and harvesting season. However, I would not put it past a lot of people I know to be someone who is good at both jobs and has additional training.

We started talking about where we should get these people from, whether it is from interstate, overseas or within the state—that is another issue that I want to get to—but it is a closed pool of people. We could go out internationally, but even then the number of people that we need to get from COVID-free-ish countries limits that potential, so we have to work together and not be taking people from one place and putting them in another. That actually occurred, and I will read a little bit from a letter that the Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry wrote to me. It said —

During the pandemic restrictions, when hospitality businesses were dealing in a lock down environment, businesses in the health services sector advertised positions that did not require the completion of the usual certification, but rather on the job training. These organisations attracted employees from the hospitality industry. Many of these employees have made the decision to remain in the health services sector where they believe they have greater job security should there be a second wave.

Of course, taking people out of the hospitality or agricultural industry and putting them into health services has now caused an even greater shortage. I hope that we can somehow address the fact that if people are being taken from one area, another area needs to be filled.

Another suggestion that the Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry put forward was that the federal sponsorship visa program is quite onerous. It takes a couple of months between finding the person with the skill level needed and getting them the correct visa and then having them go through the quarantine period. There has to be some way to facilitate that if we want to get those skilled workers here. We may have missed the boat on that, but that is assuming we do not go through another period with COVID, and we are very likely going to.

Hospitality also is referred to in this well-written motion. A lot of times businesses are looking for someone with experience. We have TAFE training in agriculture skills, so maybe we should have free TAFE training in hospitality skills as well. Although people might not think that a barista provides an essential service, in a community that is heavily reliant on tourism, it is very important to have enough baristas to keep the shops open.

The Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry also said —

To remain operational, businesses are reducing operational hours, working significant hours in their business and taking on increased cost to increase salary offers and training on the job.

Again, although we have been very good at getting tourists out there, a lot of small business owners in tourism areas now have to either shut their doors for part of the time when they could be open or work in their business themselves and also get their family and friends to work to do whatever they can to keep the shop open. That is a difficulty. It is really going to change the amount of revenue that flows through the state—gross domestic product and all of that. We have to look at that and maybe make TAFE training free for hospitality services, including cleaning. There could be a lack of cleaners; it is hard to get them. To give them on-the-job training, a week's worth of their time may be lost while they go out with someone else to learn what the job entails. It would be useful to provide more training in that area as well. Of course, that also affects the reputation of the regions. People may have planned to visit Albany for five days, but instead, because they cannot find the services they want, they leave after two days. It just does not work.

I want to go back to the motion, because, as I said, it is quite reasonable. It states —

That this house —

- (a) notes the current impact and future issues with recruiting agricultural and hospitality skilled workers in regional Western Australia;

Yes, we are noting that. It is what we have all been saying. It is difficult and we need to do something. Paragraph (b) states —

calls on the state government to provide transparency on its plans to ensure skilled workers in these sectors are available as soon as possible ...

I learnt quite a bit about some of the other things that the government is doing now, but not everybody has been able to sit in this chamber and hear those things. I do not always agree with governments advertising their own things, but this government is not just advertising what it has done; it is advertising that this is still an issue and it is trying to address it and that more trained people are needed. It is letting people know some of the areas they can go to and some of the areas that have been filled. That information needs to get out. Hopefully, from this discussion, a media release will go out from whoever has been in the room to remind people in the city in particular that there are jobs down there.

The last paragraph of the motion states —

- (c) discusses strategies to improve the availability and reliability of such workers to strengthen the resilience and populations of regional Western Australia.

That is lovely. I really like that part, because I am a very strong believer in the idea that we need to decentralise the state. More people need to understand how good it is to live in regional areas, how many opportunities there are and how much industry could happen there if we had cheap power, which we will have over coming years; automation; a workforce; and services, because I really believe that we need to get the services going much more strongly in regional areas to keep people there. What I mean by that is better health services, better education opportunities and so forth—the things that governments get asked for all the time.

That is the thing; if more people live in those areas, that is where our future can lie. The discussion that we are having here is just an awakening to those opportunities to get more people to go out to the regions not just for a short-term seasonal job, but to establish a home, a family, a career, a path and a future. We can be processing things and minerals out where we grow them and where we extract them. That is where we can add to them through innovation and activity. We can develop the industries out there. We have the space out there. If we get our transport structures right, it will be cheaper and easier to transport those goods, because once they have been processed out there, the transport needs lessen because the goods are not being sent in bulk. They are more refined in some way and there are smaller amounts.

As I said earlier, in addition to getting people out there and getting industry happening, it will make us more resilient into the future. That will make us more likely to continue to produce the food that we want out there and to come up with an even greater variety of products that are grown or raised in Western Australia and expand on those opportunities. We need to support the people who are learning these things and support the cultural shift from thinking, “When I graduate from high school, my point is to get to the city, establish a career, earn the mega-salary that I know the city is going to provide and establish a base there because that is where all the excitement happens.” That is an idea that many young people in regional areas have. Later on in life, if they get the opportunity to move back there, they realise that in regional areas they have the opportunity for basically free entertainment, because they have this environment around them that allows them to go fishing or bushwalking or to look at the wildflowers.

There are also job opportunities through tourism. Regional areas really provide a huge amount of opportunity. COVID is giving us that opportunity. We know that people immediately tried to flee to regional areas, so much so that we had to close the borders to stop them all going out there. When we opened the borders, tourists flocked out there because they could not go anywhere else. The idea is that when they go out there now, they are given a really good experience. They are seeing how beautiful it is, how lovely our forests are and how clean our waterways are. Some of this is a little bit of a dream, but some of it is true. We are working on making the rest of it true, because our forests are outstanding and we need to keep them that way. We need to make sure that they flourish and grow and become resilient. We have some very clean waterways, such as the Donnelly River and the few that are not salt affected or tainted with chemicals and things like that. We need to expand on that, because then the people who go out there for seasonal work will find out that it is really nice, the people are wonderful and the food is fresh and wholesome, and then more people will move out there.

I see this motion as an opportunity for us to move forward and focus on our regional areas and make the rest of the state realise just how wonderful they are and encourage people to go out to those areas and enjoy them. If those people have the opportunity to spend three months down there, they could get a job while they are there.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [2.58 pm]: I, too, thank Hon Colin de Grussa for bringing forward this motion today. Clearly, the member cares about this issue, as we all do. The motion was framed constructively so that we could all discuss it.

As members know, I am the only working farmer in the Western Australian Parliament and this issue has affected our farm this year. We just finished making our hay, and we had to make some changes because we had three fewer workers than we would normally have. I have said before that there is never a year when we do not get the crops harvested, the hay made and the sheep shorn. We will get our sheep shorn this year, the hay has been made and the crops will be harvested. Madam Acting President may be interested to know that Hon Ken Travers, a former member of this house, is our number one hay rake operator this year. The tallest hay rake operator in Western Australia is on our farm this year helping us with the hay. It has been great having Hon Ken Travers on the farm with us. He has really embraced country life in his work and his wander out yonder. I think that most farmers will adapt.

Hon Sue Ellery: Has he had a haircut yet?

Hon DARREN WEST: The hair is longer than it was in his parliamentary days, but the Leader of the House will be pleased to know that the beard has been removed! Hon Ken Travers is looking very much at home on his Case 2090 tractor with a Vermeer R2300 hay rake in tow. He has done an outstanding job keeping the balers operating this year. Today, he is having his first day on a Caterpillar loader, picking up hay bales and putting them on a truck so that they can be carted into the shed.

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We decided that rather than raking, baling and carting hay simultaneously, we would leave the carting until after the baling. We have managed that way. We are a few workers short, but my son Dylan has taken charge. He has rung the changes and we will get our hay made, our harvesting done and our sheep shorn this year.

Hon Jim Chown: Is Hon Ken Travers working for love or are you paying him?

Hon DARREN WEST: Hon Ken Travers is being paid handsomely. He is getting more than \$25 an hour and he is very happy to be up on the farm and doing it of his own free will.

However, I do not want to get stuck too hard into the mover of the motion, because I agree pretty much with what he said. However, there was a paragraph (d) missing from his motion that would have provided some good ideas and opportunities. We did not hear a lot about that.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Member, I am required to interrupt you to give Hon Colin de Grussa, the mover, a right of reply under the temporary standing orders.

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural) [3.01 pm] — in reply: I appreciate that there is never a shortage of diversity in the debate in this place. Perhaps we could have a sign outside the chamber celebrating that diversity.

During one particular contribution, though, I was reminded of a 1980s TV show, which some members might remember, called *Charles in Charge*. I thought, “Thank our lucky stars that isn’t the case.” Hon Charles Smith’s contribution was very interesting. He said that these industries in our state are essentially employing slave labour, and that because we have a reliance on overseas workers, they all work under slave conditions. That is not the case. Operators who do that should be found out and they absolutely should not be part of the industry. Certainly, operators do not do that in the main, and that sort of thing should never be supported.

I thank all members for their contributions to the motion. It is an important debate to have had. A lack of labour is causing a great deal of angst in communities right across Western Australia, whether it be in the agricultural industry or the hospitality and tourism sectors. It is a very complex issue, but one thing we cannot do in the middle of a pandemic is restructure an entire labour market. We absolutely need to have a discussion about our reliance on particular overseas workers, even though they are skilled. That absolutely needs to be addressed in the longer term, but it is not something that can be done during a pandemic, and I think that generally most members recognise that.

There is a real issue, particularly in the horticultural industry, around the availability of workers for picking or harvesting produce and around planning ahead for the next crop in those industries that has resulted in a reduction in productivity. There will be a reduction in plantings because producers cannot get reliable harvest labour. As a result, some senior managerial positions have been removed and there may well be a significant impact on the price of fresh food at the supermarket. That will have an impact on the consumer in general, but, of course, it will impact on the most vulnerable members of our community who simply cannot afford to pay more for fresh food and who may choose to go down a less healthy path when deciding what they will or will not buy. That is a problem and it certainly needs to be addressed.

During this debate, only three or four minutes ago a little message flashed up on my phone on the Department of Education’s Connect Now app, which one of my kid’s school uses. There was a link offering free training opportunities for young people to work in the horticultural industry. It is great to see that that message is getting out there. I hope that some young people take up that opportunity, notwithstanding the difficulties they may face getting to some places. But it is good to see those initiatives are happening in the background.

Longer term solutions will be needed to find the labour that is needed, but in the short term, we must focus on getting that crop off. It will mean that people in the industry, particularly in the broadacre grain sector, will have to work harder and longer hours. They will need to be careful about not putting themselves or their workers at risk. There is a penalty for delaying harvest. Plenty of research has been done on the effect of not getting grain harvested in time. There is an economic penalty and a resultant quality penalty depending on the conditions at harvest time. That can impact on the bottom line of some businesses. I think most businesses are cognisant of that and that they will need to work harder to get the crop off as fast as they can.

I thank all those members who contributed to the debate. The mining industry has done very well out of this pandemic, but we cannot eat iron ore. This is about the food industry. In pandemic circumstances one of the first things we need to plan for is keeping our food secure.

Question put and passed.