

PERTH–BROOME BUS SERVICE

Statement

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan — Minister for Transport) [10.00 pm]: I do need to reply to the comments of Hon Ken Travers. Let me place some things clearly and squarely on the record. Firstly, it is not a non-inflammatory question when a member asks, "Does the minister agree that any cancellation of this service will be a disaster for communities along this route?"

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I responded to that question by saying that the importance of this service is acknowledged. In the event that a company such as Greyhound Australia makes a decision to withdraw its services, the government will most seriously consider how best it might replace those services. We agree that, although it is a limited number of people, the absolute numbers do not matter; there is a public transport need between and around coastal communities between Perth and Broome. That is recognised and we would like those services to continue. In relation to the central question—that is, the way that a company has gone about seeking to do business in this matter—I do not want to fight with service providers, but when they want to start fighting with us, I have to protect the interests of the state of Western Australia and the interests of taxpayers. The fact of the matter is that almost an ultimatum was put to my office in March this year that unless the government was prepared to stump up a large six-figure sum, the company would take certain actions to reduce or, indeed, cancel services. I was concerned about that. My staff sought that day to contact the chief executive officer of the company in question and has sought to contact the CEO since then and has received no response. The Public Transport Authority has been a little more successful this time and has obtained some further information from Greyhound, which helps us to understand the situation but, more importantly, gives us the actual hard data—the passenger figures and other matters—that allow us to make decisions about whether taxpayer-dollar subsidies should be provided to a private company just because it asks for it, rather than through the normal way that we provide services, which is by going to tender. That does not mean that we have shut the door on the company—not at all. In fact, at this time, we are exploring through the PTA, a possible option whereby we might be able to achieve the outcomes that are desired. That is why it does not help when a proponent that purports to want to talk to government will not respond and will not return calls, but does, apparently, liaise with the Labor Party. Both Hon Ken Travers and, I believe, the Leader of the Opposition have commented on this. We have just heard that Hon Ken Travers has the information that was previously not provided to the government to help it make its assessment.

Hon Ken Travers: What information did I have that was not provided?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: The member talked about the data that the PTA had requested.

Hon Ken Travers: I don't have it; you guys have it.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I thought the member just said that the information was available to him, which is interesting because it certainly has not been provided directly to me.

Hon Ken Travers: My understanding is that the information has been provided to the PTA, which is what you asked it to do.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Let me make a couple of things clear. We as a government demonstrate to the public transport-reliant people of Western Australia our concern that we provide the services they need for their essential transport communication needs. That is why we have done the things that we have in public transport, and it is a pretty good record by any measure with the initiatives that we have introduced in this term of government. It includes maintaining, with a subsidy, the inland route between Perth and Port Hedland, which was looking as though it might go under. But we said no, even though it cannot turn a dollar and is going to cost money, we will keep it going. We are prepared to look at this particular matter. We are looking at ways to ensure that we maintain the services that are needed by people. However, we are not going to just roll over when there are demands for cash. We are not going to respond to the sort of blackmail—that is the term I use—which says that —

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Shut up! It says that if we do not immediately guarantee, as per a message sent on 11 May, to provide the funding support by 19 May, the company is going to suspend services altogether. If that is not an ultimatum, I do not know what is.

Hon Ken Travers: Because they're losing money, minister. It's a private company.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: The member would not understand how to run a bus company. He would not have a clue how to do it. The fact of the matter is that we will not give away taxpayers' money —

Hon Ken Travers: At least we had a bus company. What about you?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Perhaps the member needs to get back on it. Taxpayers' money is not there to be simply demanded and shovelled out. We will provide the service, just as we provide other public transport services to people in regional and remote areas. We will support private companies to do it, but we expect that when there is a need to engage, they will do so and will not try to sort out these matters on the floor of the house, which is a highly unsatisfactory way of going about it, as we have seen tonight. If the member would concentrate a bit on getting an outcome rather than looking up to the mantelpiece, which is his main game, we will get some results. The member should not worry, because this government is going to make sure that it delivers to the people of Western Australia.

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Hon Ken Travers will come to order!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I hope that has clarified the position of the government: we are strongly sympathetic to the patrons and others who require this service.

Hon Ken Travers: Do something!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: We are doing something, but we will do so in a way that all members in this place and all taxpayers in Western Australia can understand is not done with a laissez-faire attitude of throwing around their money.