



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

EXCERPTS.

Monday, 19 October 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 19 October 2020
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Questioner
Speaker Shorten, Bill, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

I want to talk about one group of people. If they are not the hardest hit, no other group is any harder hit. I talk about the small and medium-size businesses of the travel agency sector. They've been terribly hard hit in Australia, in Victoria and in my electorate of Maribyrnong and they are concerned that, without proper, targeted support, it will be the death knell for their businesses. I listen to this government sickeningly regurgitate a claim to be the party of small business, but I hear them not talk about travel agents.

I recently met with a group of travel agents from my own electorate and Mr Darren Rudd of AFTA, their peak body. They made the directness of their plight very plain emotionally, truthfully, factually, painfully. Let's consider how the travel agency industry was travelling even just a year ago, with 12 years of consecutive growth, helping Australians travel for commerce, culture, leisure, family, friends and fun. Travel agents in Australia employ 40,000 Australians in metro and regional locations. Thirty thousand of the employees in the travel agency sector are women. They are the fabric of each community. They sponsor the local clubs and the local high street traders. They are part of our landscape.

Australians cancelled \$10 billion worth of travel where funds were sitting offshore with suppliers like airlines, cruise lines, tour operators and wholesalers. The refund machine—a machine that has only ever been designed to go one way—had to be put into reverse. Of the \$10 billion in refunds the travel agents have spent their working days getting back, they've managed to get \$6 billion back to the people who paid for their holidays at a time when no-one was paying them. There's still a further \$4 billion to get back for Australians. But, in giving back this refund, the travel agent invariably has been asked to give back not only the price of the tickets but the income, So the travel agent has the sunk cost.

It pays the bills. But, in getting the refund, it's all had to go back, so the travel agent has been getting back the money not only for the portion of the holiday which hasn't been utilised but their own portion and refunding it.

Let me put this story very directly. In the travel agency sector, payroll is down, hours are down, unemployment is up, international sales are dead, job ads in the industry are down and the mortgages that people working in the travel agency industry have to pay still have to be paid. The rent which travel agents have to pay for offices or franchises still has to be paid.

There is nothing for them in this.

Many have made losses last year and this year. The peak body of travel agents predicts: 'If no funding is provided, special sector assistance, we will lose over 50 per cent of our valuable travel agents, including 15,000 women from the sector who will lose jobs.' This, of course will lead to a flow-on for Australian consumers and travellers. You might remember that there is still \$4 billion in refunds to claw back. And if the travel agents can't keep their doors opened, can't employ staff, that's \$4 billion gone for Australian mums and dads, pensioners and holiday-makers. This will leave Australian consumers out of pocket tremendously. It is not as if the government is going to get this money back for them; it's been hard enough to get them to bring Australians back. So if you've paid for a holiday, good luck getting that out of the government!

This is why the travel industry deserves some support. Their particular payment structure means they've had to pay back not just the unused portion of the holidays but also their own.

I was quite moved when I met the travel agents..... They're all very committed to their staff. If you close your eyes, you can't think of a single shopping centre or high street in the nation which doesn't have a travel agent

They do their work. They turn people's dreams into memories and experiences.

Now is not the time for spin. It is the time for substance. I think the fairly haphazard, ramshackle approach taken by the government belies their real priorities.

We all like our holidays. We all like our travel.

I think it's come as a shock to multiple generations of Australians that we can't simply get on a plane and go somewhere. But I think it will also come as a shock if, when the borders reopen internationally, we don't have anyone to help organise our trips and our memories.

We can go to work every day, and what we do is important, but the things that our families remember in our working lives will be the holidays that week take them on, not necessarily the minutes we took or the meetings we attended.

These travel agents, these small and medium sized businesses, deserve imagination. They deserve passion. They deserve a bespoke approach. They deserve respect. Forty-thousand people who helped make the rest of us have a much more enjoyable quality of life.

Let us, who have benefited from the travel agency industry, not abandon the travel agency industry, because certainly if we booked with them they wouldn't do that to us.

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