



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Hansard 17 October 2000

FUEL PRICES, IMPACT ON TOURISM

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): I rise to alert members of the House to the serious signs of the impact of rising petrol prices on tourism, particularly in northern and western Queensland. While we know that increases in petrol prices are very hard on all of us—those in city areas with their cars, those in small businesses dependent on deliveries and trucking, and certainly those in areas more remote from the metropolitan areas who rely on road transport to bring even food to them—there is a particular segment of the tourism industry that is already feeling the pinch.

We know that tourism is an important industry to Queensland. Most often we hear about the number of visitors to Queensland as they are measured through our airports. I am pleased to say, in case honourable members had not noticed, that last week it was announced that Cairns airport was the only Australian airport to have double-digit growth over the last decade. That is indeed a fine record and evidence again of the rapid growth of tourism in far-north Queensland. That figure comprises domestic visitors to Cairns—those from places in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia—as well as international visitors from the countries of Asia, America and Europe. In a sense, this is a false measure of tourism to our fair State because it does not take account of the tremendous numbers who arrive by rail or by road, which are very hard to track.

It is particularly those travellers by road that we need to consider today in terms of the impact of rising petrol prices. They are most often referred to in the industry as independent travellers. That is because they generally travel in small groups or family groupings and of their own accord, following their own itinerary. Members can think who in their own families might be those who would fall into this category of independent travellers.

Mr Sullivan: A lot of retirees.

Ms BOYLE: There are a lot of retirees. I thank the member for the interjection.

Mr Sullivan: During the winter months they head up to the north.

Ms BOYLE: They do indeed head north in the winter months. In fact, the ambition of many Australians from southern States is to drive to the tip of the cape and to look from that northernmost point of Australia across to Papua New Guinea. This is a very important section of tourism. Yes, they are generally retirees—older people whose children have grown and who can take the time, very often with a caravan behind them, to travel the east coast and sometimes further than that, right around the roads across to Western Australia and around Australia.

There are others, too. There are young ones who may have finished their education, at least for the time being, and who set off in small groups to explore this amazing country that we have. Frequently they find some work along the way, in fruit picking for example, and they take their time, contributing to the small communities in which they stay for weeks or months and discover this country that is theirs. These travellers also are generally known to avoid the big cities. They are not so much—not for long periods at least—visitors to Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane or even Cairns. They like to travel the country roads. They like to visit the small towns. When their numbers decline, the impact is not just directly on the caravan parks or the motels at which they might stay, it is also on small businesses in small towns stretched right across northern and western Queensland.

I will tell honourable members how severe the petrol price increases have been in the regions around Cairns. Some travellers who recently returned from their trip to the tip of Cape York told us in

Cairns that they paid petrol prices as high as \$1.23 a litre. Of course they had not budgeted for such costs and the impact for them was such that they were going to have to hurry home rather than allow themselves the luxury of further exploration of Queensland.

Following their retirement, some good friends of mine have been off over these last six months, caravan in tow, around Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. They said that increasingly over these months they have found the roads and caravan parks deserted. The independent travellers—the caravaners and the campers—cannot afford the petrol prices.

I have checked with caravan parks not only in Cairns but also in Innisfail, up in the Daintree and in Cardwell, and many of them are reporting that this season they have been 50% down on their usual numbers. The impacts for them are serious. The impact is also felt by all those small corner shops that provide the bits and pieces that people need to keep going—the food and the other supplies that these travellers would need from day to day as they pass through these small towns. My information is that the Olympics have probably contributed in a small way but that really it is petrol prices that are ruining this market.

We do need to care for the sake of the tourism industry. We do need to care for the sake of the small towns, which have few choices in terms of expanding industry at the moment and which rely on the extras that are provided by the tourists who pass through. We need to care, too, because our country is so huge and it will be to our detriment if people are unable to afford to travel it and to discover the great differences there are between the Kimberleys, Cape York and the Mornington Peninsula.

There is also the double-up problem. That is particularly because a lot of this market is made up of pensioners. They are people who, when they get their pensions, set aside an amount for rental and an amount for petrol and then attempt to live on the rest. But their information to me is that this is no longer the way. Now they set aside their rental and how much is essential for them to live on in the way food and other commodities and then see what is left for petrol. And the answer is not much. Even Cairns pensioners are saying that, rather than using their cars to drive in the urban area of Cairns, they are pausing and sometimes deciding not to go to events or not to go visiting because the price of petrol is so high.

I call on QBITIA, the Queensland Backpackers and Independent Travellers Industry Association, to take up this matter to alert all Governments to the impacts on independent travellers of these rising petrol prices. Cairns is fortunate to be home of the State president, Stephen Welsh, who has taken a leading role with the backpacker industry. I ask him and his organisation to also attend now to the independent travellers, who may not be so numerous in Cairns itself but who are very important to north and western Queensland and, I am sure, other places in Queensland.

I stress the importance of the situation by confronting members with the news that petrol prices are going to rise further. The estimate is about 5c or so within the week. What does the Prime Minister say? How does he show the importance of this to his constituents right across Australia? He dares still to suggest that the calls for him to take action in relation to petrol prices are a campaign of Labor propaganda. In fact, however, the RACQ, through spokesman Gary Fites, has made it very clear that the Federal Government must take part of the blame and that there is indeed a GST increase, on top of what was promised, of at least 1.2c a litre. What about the Australian Automobile Association, which has backed us? What about the National Farmers Federation? What about Western Australia, which is not in fact a Labor State? South Australia also is calling for the Prime Minister's attention.

Apart from the likely 5c rise in the next week or so, we will be confronted in February next year—unless the Prime Minister and his coalition Government see the light and hear the messages from their constituents around Australia—with another 2c to 3c rise due to Federal Government excise. That is a rise that they do not need and which is impacting in serious ways right around this country.

As we talk in this honourable House, there is a Northern Australia Summit continuing in Katherine, one convened in fact by Mr Howard and the Federal Government. I hope that summit makes it very clear to the Prime Minister that there is no more serious issue across northern Australia than petrol prices, and that he does have the power—and we know he has the power—and numbers of choices for controlling the price of petrol and for cutting back the windfall which he professes to ignore.

I surely join with all honourable members in calling for the severity of this situation to be recognised, not only for the independent travellers but also for all of us—for pensioners and all those affected by rising petrol prices.

Time expired.
