



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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TOURISM INDUSTRY

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (12.23 p.m.): I rise to inform members of the House about a difficulty that some of our tourism operators in far north Queensland are facing. I dare say the same problem is affecting tourism operators throughout the State, particularly on the Gold Coast. I am not so much referring to the international tourism operators—the biggest operators, the five-star operators—as the little tourism businesses. These are the people who are feeling the pinch.

In Cairns, tourism operators are facing a very difficult issue—an issue which has recently received considerable publicity. I refer to commissions, and perhaps graft and corruption, that exist in guiding, or even forcing, overseas tourists—particularly Japanese tourists—to certain approved businesses in the city. We do not have firm evidence, but it is believed that a system of monetary kickbacks is taking place. There is a system of vertical integration which results in a lot of local operators being shut out. This has tremendously serious consequences for the businesses affected. Because of a number of factors, these businesses are already in some difficulty. Some are struggling for survival.

There is no doubt that the GST has not helped. There is no doubt that increasing petrol prices are not helping. The Prime Minister has denied the seriousness of the problem. It is also evident that the Olympic Games have drawn tourists to Sydney this year—and quite properly so. The tourism business had a very quiet September in Cairns. It would appear that the remainder of the 2000 season will not be very vibrant. Forward bookings for 2001 are good. We have been assured by the experts that the flow-on benefits for regional areas from the Olympics comes in the first two years after the Games. I hope that this forecast is accurate.

As members of this House we must be concerned about the tourism industry because it is so important to our State. We must also be concerned for the future of our Queensland-based tourism businesses. These are the people who put their own money on the line in order to establish some type of tourism experience for overseas visitors. We must be concerned about the way in which our local businesses are being denied the opportunity to service Japanese tourists in particular. These small businesses are suffering losses if they are not part of a cartel.

Anger erupted in Cairns in recent times. This was a knee-jerk reaction of "let's blame the Government". As it happened, the people affected targeted the State Government in the first instance. They now realise that a lot of the issues are Federal Government issues.

The real difficulty with this matter is that we have no firm evidence of wrongdoing. The people who take kickbacks, and who stand at the door of the bus and guide the Japanese tourists ever so firmly into the preferred business, do not offer evidence to enable the Government to launch prosecutions. It must be mentioned that senior people in the tourism industry have been virtually accomplices to the offenders by turning a blind eye to this practice. They say, "It happens the world over. What can we do?" They do not investigate the problem. They are not interested in seeking ways to minimise, or even eradicate, the problem.

Very often the people involved are employees of major tourism organisations. Some of them belong to international tourism companies. The small local operators, such as the small dive companies and the small safari operators, are not involved. These are the people who are putting their own money on the line. They are not the people who are represented on the boards of major tourism councils and

bodies. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why such bodies have not been as active as they should have been in addressing this issue.

There is one way in which we can minimise the effect of such graft and collusion, and that is by encouraging all international visitors to feel that they will be so well looked after that they can travel singly or in family or in friendship groups. They must be told that they do not have to travel on bus tours where they are forced, in some sense, to engage in approved activities offered by approved operators.

The brochures that we produce for foreign tourists—particularly our Japanese visitors—do not really address the issues. They do not sell clearly enough the message that Australia is not a dangerous place to visit. They must be informed that our tourism industry is ethical. They should be informed that people operating tourism businesses are kind and will look after people if there are language barriers. We have not sufficiently informed Japanese tourists that we have large numbers of Japanese language speakers in Cairns. These people range from high school students to the operators of tourism ventures. As a result, there is no language barrier and there is no need for tourists to travel in such large groups.

Current statistics indicate that 80% of Japanese tourists in Australia travel in large groups. All activities are organised before they leave Japan. This discourages such tourists from experiencing the services offered by smaller operators.

May I give honourable members an example of the kind of operator for whom I speak? I want to mention a young man—still in his late twenties—who spent some years in Japan for the primary purpose of becoming fluent in the Japanese language and in understanding how Japanese culture influences their wish to visit other countries. On his return to Cairns he set up his own Australian experience tourism business. Small groups of tourists are offered morning tea Australian style. It is possible for them to leave the main tourist drag and see some of our country towns in far-north Queensland. It enables the tourists to meet the locals and to experience something of the true flavour of Australian living. There is no doubt that this young man's customers rave about the service, but the problem is that not enough customers are coming to his kind of market.

I call on Tourism Queensland, Tropical Tourism (North Queensland), the Cairns tourism body, the Gold Coast equivalent, the Australian Tourism Council and all our major tourism bodies—which by and large are run by people who represent the five-stars and the internationals—to take some time to address the issues for the small tourism operator. The best estimate that we have is that, in the Cairns area alone, there are about 500 such businesses. They employ between two and 10 people. Yes, they are small businesses but, in a sense, they are the true Australian labour force of the tourism industry, and their issues—the one that I have raised and others—are not addressed because they are different from the issues about which those at the bigger end of the industry are concerned.

I have even heard those at the top end of the industry in Cairns—the five-star hotels, the internationals—refer to the smaller tourism operators as bottom feeders, as though those people take the crumbs, or the remainder of the tourism industry that the big organisations do not snare. That is indeed short-sighted, because the Olympics have proven to us that tourists want to be cared for, they want to see a friendly, Australian face, and they want to know who we are as a people—our indigenous people as well as the rest of us with all of our cultural diversity. They really want to get a feel for and an experience of this country that they are visiting. That is where the small tourism operators, the Australian-based operators, can offer their experience.

I hope that there will be better promotion in Cairns—on TV, on the information TV screens in hotel rooms and in brochures—to say to Japanese tourists and other internationals, "When you visit, you can feel safe to walk around on your own, to ask for help and to know that there will be a friendly and caring response, that you will be well looked after and that you can take a risk in order to discover the real Australian experience while you are in our country."
