



Speech By
James Lister

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2021


APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL

APPROPRIATION BILL

Consideration in Detail (Cognate Debate)

Appropriation Bill

Education, Employment and Training Committee, Report

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (5.07 pm): I, too, rise to speak on the report of the estimates hearings for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training. It gives me an opportunity to talk about a contemporary issue for the people of the Southern Downs electorate—the border closures. We heard my honourable friend the member for Buderim recount how it transpired at the hearing that no modelling had been undertaken by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training into the effects of COVID lockdowns and COVID measures on small business.

I will give an example how that matters on the ground. In an electorate like mine, which has 500 kilometres of border country with New South Wales where on either side of the border we have communities that are connected socially and economically, where the community of interest is continuous regardless of the presence of the border—

Mr Boothman: Just like the Gold Coast.

Mr LISTER: Just like the Gold Coast; I take the interjection from the member for Theodore. The failure to plan, the failure to understand the implications of border closures and the failure to plan for exceptions for small business operators, small business owners and the staff of small businesses to be able to cross the border—as is intended by the Chief Health Officer—causes great economic and social hardship in the communities that I represent.

I was speaking to Ray and Connie Taylor, who run a fruit and vegetable growing business on the Granite Belt. Ray prepared paddocks on the other side of the border at Liston in a very remote area, a long way from any other centres in New South Wales. On the Monday when he went to start planting—he had \$2 million worth of work to do—he could not cross the border. The exemptions for essential agricultural workers were not properly considered. They were not properly implemented. As a result, he and many others have lost a lot of money. Mr Taylor told me that it has cost him \$350,000 just to this point, with much more to come. More importantly, 10 people have lost their jobs as a result.

The operators of the Wallangarra General Store provide not just food and takeaways but gas and fuel. They are a very important service in the town of Wallangarra and for the people of Jennings as well. The operators live in New South Wales. They have on several occasions been turned around at the border and told, 'No, you are not essential workers,' because the police on the border are forced to make a value judgement without having the necessary support and qualifications—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Pause the clock. Member, I have been listening carefully to your contribution. It seems to me that you are talking about the impacts of the government's policies in relation to border restrictions. I am struggling to see where that is relevant to the debate around the estimates report.

Mr LISTER: Thank you for your guidance, sir. I am speaking specifically about the impacts of the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to plan for and to take into account the needs of small business in the plans for border closures and lockdowns and so forth. It is entirely relevant to the revelations—can I ask that while I respond to the point of order the clock be stopped?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Yes.

Mr LISTER: I should have had another 20 seconds, I think.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Pause the clock.

Mr LISTER: It is in my view very relevant to question the department, which is supposed to lead the government's understanding of small business and the needs of small businesses on the ground. It should be planning for—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you. You have made your point. I will take some advice. Resume your seat. Thank you, member for Southern Downs. Can we put some time back on the clock please? You have two minutes.

Mr LISTER: Because of the flimsy regulations, the flimsy descriptions of what is an essential worker, the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training should have been on to this because it is small businesses that are being impacted.

I talked to an auto-electrician in Goondiwindi who is cut off from his customers on the other side of the border. He is an essential member of the community. His business is essential. Why is it that, this government having locked down the border before, this department was not able the plan for people like the Goondiwindi auto-electrician who needs to go into New South Wales to work on equipment on cotton farms and other primary production businesses?

Farmers, families, small businesses and workers—their livelihoods and their welfare is at stake when borders close. I am not disputing that the borders should be closed. What I am saying is that this government has been at it for long enough. The department, if it is true to its title, ought to be considering the needs of small business in communities like those that I represent along the border between New South Wales and Queensland. They are the people who work very hard and invest their own money with no guaranteed outcome. They work hard to employ people and generate taxes that they themselves pay and their staff pay in order that we can have hospitals, police stations and schools.

The department has been silent on this—and all of my correspondence indicates that internally it is not having a go at sorting out these problems. My communities are suffering. People are suffering severe economic and social hardship. I ask that the department, through the minister, does something about that and starts thinking about the impacts on small business of the government's decisions on border closures to make sure the impact is minimised.

Ms Grace: New South Wales is in lockdown.

Mr Lister: Yes, but—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! You had time on the clock. You could have continued your contribution. You have chosen to sit down. The House will come to order.