

Thursday 26 March 2020

SITTING DATES

[10.01 a.m.]

Mr FERGUSON (Bass - Leader of Government Business) (by leave) - Madam Speaker,
I move -

That the House at its rising today adjourn till Tuesday 18 August next at 10 a.m.

It is highly regrettable that the circumstances of the health emergency dictate that we need to be prepared to change the way we work and follow advice about keeping our distance and setting an example for the community.

The Government wished, and intended, to continue our normal sittings as per the published sitting pattern. After listening to advice and considering that, as well as speaking with colleagues from across the Chamber, we are instead moving to agree and resolve to move to our next sitting date being the commencement of the published calendar beyond the winter recess. I will explain that in more detail in a moment after I put a few points on the record.

We had initially intended that on the adjournment today parliament would return on the next scheduled sitting date of 28 April. However, that is not appropriate or healthy for MPs and parliamentary staff. Given the fast-changing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that parliament has now approved legislation for critical decisions to be able to be made during the public health emergency, together with health advice to avoid where possible unnecessary contact, it is prudent and appropriate to adjourn the sitting of the parliament until the first scheduled sitting week after the winter recess, which would be 18 August for our House and 25 August for the Legislative Council. We note the resolution of the federal parliament to act in a similar fashion.

To be very clear to the listening public, the Government and indeed all members of this House will continue to work for our community performing our roles from our offices and, if necessary, perhaps on occasion from our homes. Should there be any urgent need for parliament to meet before 18 August, that can be done.

For any pressing or unforeseen matters, the Government would rely on section 13 of the Constitution Act 1934 whereby Her Excellency the Governor can recall the parliament at an earlier date for the dispatch of any business. If this were to eventuate, the Government would work with members in settling the specifics of such a meeting prior to being formally recalled. To make a simple point of this, we can easily reconvene earlier than 18 August if circumstances call for it, but it is much more difficult to sit later than the next agreed sitting date if it was unsafe to do so.

I thank members for their off-the-record or at least out-of-the-Chamber discussions on this. I look forward to other members' comments but note that I expect others would share my view that it would have been ideal if we could continue to meet in a predictable fashion. Given these unprecedented times that is not a luxury we can rely upon.

I commend the motion to the House.

[10.05 a.m.]

Mr O'BYRNE (Franklin) - Madam Speaker, the Leader of Government Business outlines a way forward which is acceptable to the Labor Party. These are most extraordinary times and we need to act on the basis of the best interests of the health and safety of not only each other but also the workers in this place, staffers and a whole range of political officers. We support the Government's intention to have people's health and safety at the forefront of their mind.

We have passed in this House a number of pieces of legislation which allows the Government to respond to the times we are in, and the decisions and the scope that they have to make, to respond on behalf of the community. We believe that legislatively, in the short term, there is no reason for us to come together.

We have had assurances from the Government that if they need further legislation to be passed, they will recall parliament. We take that at face value and trust as a commitment given to the Labor Party that if there is a need to come back to respond with urgent legislation we will be recalled and the Labor Party will be here to support the Government taking strong and decisive steps, as we have done since this emergency has occurred.

We also acknowledge the commitment that has been given by the Premier to the Opposition Leader, Rebecca White, on the level of communication and the level of briefings. There have been not only daily but almost hourly updates and discussions between our Leader and the Premier briefing us and working through issues as they arise and as they need to be made. On that basis, the Premier and his personal commitment to briefing our Leader, and our Leader obviously briefing our caucus in turn, gives us confidence that we are able to deal with any occurrence.

This is an unusual step. Parliament is a key component of our democracy. Accountability of government to the people is crucial and this House is a key part of that. However, we are in the most extraordinary of times. Parliamentary scrutiny is important and we reluctantly agree to this but we acknowledge that the circumstances dictate that we must take extraordinary steps.

The trust built over the last couple of weeks and the discussions between ourselves and the Government give us confidence that if a situation occurs, we will come back. If there is a need, the Government will recall parliament. Therefore, on those commitments, we accept and support this motion.

[10.08 a.m.]

Ms O'CONNOR (Clark - Leader of the Greens) - Madam Speaker, we support this motion with a very heavy heart. Many Tasmanians are looking to this place for clear and strong cooperative behaviour, for good clear messages to come out of here, and for us to be working together in their best interests.

However, I understand the safety issue. This is a very difficult motion to support but we will, because our clear understanding is that this is being undertaken on health advice. It is one thing for us as elected representatives to come into this place and to know that we are doing so, potentially in a climate of risk, but there is a large number of staff in this building and people who work with and for us, so we need to keep the people we work with safe.

It is regrettable that we do not have the agility to have an IT solution here so that parliament could come together remotely. I hope that this awful period we are in will lead to new thinking, and creative and innovative ways of us to work together as a parliament.

I am also appreciative of the Premier's openness to briefing the Greens and having regular conversations to keep us up to date with developments. Yesterday, he spoke to the Leader of the Opposition and me about weekly briefings and that is much appreciated.

A small, warm ray of light that has come out of these dark times we are in is the level of cooperation and mutual concern for the people we were elected to represent in this place. I look forward to working closely with my colleagues from both sides of this Chamber in the interests of the people of Tasmania.

I will make this observation, however. We are all very lucky in this place that we have secure employment. There are tens of thousands of people who lost their jobs this week and those economic impacts will continue to pound our economy and make people's lives very hard. That puts on us an extra responsibility to find new ways of working together to immerse ourselves in our communities in new and creative ways from a safe distance. It is a common misconception that when members of parliament are not in the Chamber we are not working. Everyone in here knows that is completely untrue. In fact, we are often busier, and indeed happier, when parliament is not sitting because we are out and about.

Mr Ferguson - Sometimes.

Ms O'CONNOR - Sometimes happier. I think we all love being amongst people. That is why we are elected representatives and why we stood for parliament.

We will accept the need for parliament not to meet until 18 August but with a very heavy heart. I hope we find some very good creative ways of making sure Tasmanians know that even though we are not in this room we are working together for them, for our love of them. We will be reluctantly supporting this motion, Madam Speaker.

[10.12 a.m.]

Ms OGILVIE (Clark) - Madam Speaker, I will make a couple of very brief comments. Much like the previous two speakers, I rise with a very heavy heart. We are in unprecedented and uncharted times and territory.

I understand my particular role in this House. It is an unusual position to be in. I would like to ask that Labor and the Greens engage with me as we go forward. It is time to do that and I make that offer very openly.

I thank the Government for everything they have done and have confidence that they will continue to deliver what needs to happen. As members know, I am on the record on how we go forward in this place together. I believe we are going to make ways of doing that as individuals and as parties. We will do that with good communication and with the trust that has been built.

I will be supporting this motion. I am sad that we are in this situation. I know that people who contact me, and there has been a deluge of those, like the fact that we come together and are able to immediately talk about their issues. Let us find some other ways of doing that. We need to hit the phones, we need to be practical people - maybe we need a WhatsApp group. We could do things together. I am hopeful that we will do that. In these very sad and difficult times I too will support this motion.

[10.13 a.m.]

Mr FERGUSON (Bass - Leader of Government Business) - Madam Speaker, I thank my parliamentary colleagues for their statements. To be very clear - and I now speak on behalf of all members because I am only repeating what has been said - we will keep working outside this Chamber for the health and future prosperity of our wonderful state of Tasmania. While the House of Assembly will remain quiet and empty for a period, the Government, the Opposition, the Greens and Ms Ogilvie will be continually working.

Thank you to members for the expressions that have been made, particularly around trust. The COVID-19 Disease Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill specifically sets out a way that Government can continue and decisions can continue to be made absent this Chamber but with the scrutiny of the *Gazette*, the scrutiny of the Subordinate Legislation Committee and the added scrutiny of the informal meetings which will happen each week. Of course parliamentary committees can continue to do their work. The Budget has been delayed, but the supply bills and the appropriation bills have been put in place, which demonstrates that we have made all the necessary decisions in this place to take care of the interests of our state.

The final message, then, to those in the media who will be communicating this decision to Tasmanians is let it be known that we are not going to stop working even though we are not physically in this Chamber.

I look forward to seeing members again on 18 August, or sooner, because if circumstances permit us to meet sooner we will do so. Let us hope we can get through this with minimal damage with support for each other, support for Tasmanians and for those of us who are able to do so to find ways to look after people who are not able to look after themselves.

Motion agreed to.

SUSPENSION OF SITTING

[10 16 a.m.]

Mr FERGUSON (Bass - Leader of Government Business) - Madam Speaker, I move -

That the House suspend until 12 noon, when the Premier will make a statement in relation to the next support package for Tasmania.

Sitting suspended from 10.16 a.m. to 12 p.m.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

COVID-19 - Tasmanian Social and Economic Support Measures

[12.01 p.m.]

Mr GUTWEIN (Bass - Premier) - Madam Speaker, today I wish to provide members with an update on the Tasmanian Government's response to addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our community. This is a rapidly moving situation and there have been many changes since I last formally updated the House on 17 March and it is important to update members on

developments since then. As well, I would like to detail to the House the next stage of our Social and Economic Support Package.

I thank my Cabinet and every member of my team and staff for their support through this period. I also express my thanks to this parliament, its members and the staff who support us. We have a long way to go and I know that whilst we will not always agree on the steps that are taken, I do know that every person in this place is of a single mind and that is that we want the best for the people who have entrusted us to be their representatives.

Our state is currently facing an unprecedented health and economic challenge and the package I will be announcing today is necessarily equally unprecedented in terms of both its scale and breadth.

Our Plan

Madam Speaker, first I want to very clearly lay out our plan to get our state through this crisis. Keeping Tasmanians safe and secure during the coronavirus outbreak is our number-one priority. Being an island state, we have a unique chance to control the coronavirus. To date, we are fortunate that we have not had the same level of the coronavirus in our community as other states.

We have gone hard and early with strong border protection measures, which are being enforced. As well, forced business closures and restrictive social gathering rules are reducing public interaction to minimise the possible spread of the virus. We are aggressively tracking, tracing and isolating those who have contracted the virus and their close contacts.

Already we have shut down significant parts of our economy to limit the social interactions and physical contact we have with our fellow Tasmanians. Thousands of businesses have been closed and tens of thousands of Tasmanians have lost their jobs, but if these actions work, there is a chance that we can get through this without the need for even tougher, more economically and socially destructive lockdown measures. Then, hopefully, just as we were the first state to shut our borders, we can lead the nation in beginning to return to normal again once we contain the virus.

As always, our plan is based on what is in the best interests of Tasmanians and we will do what we think is best for Tasmania, not necessarily what is being done elsewhere, but this plan can only work if everyone plays their part by taking personal responsibility and by following the rules. Limit your contact with other people. If you follow the rules, you dramatically reduce the risk of catching the virus and dramatically reduce the risk of spreading it. If you need to go out to work or to the supermarket or corner store, practice good social distancing, but my message is clear - if you do not need to go out just stay at home.

If out working or because you need to go to the shops:

- stay a minimum 1.5 metres away from other people;
- avoid physical contact; and
- wash your hands - properly - with soap and water for at least 30 seconds.

Please follow the rules because it will help us to save your life, the lives of those you love, your family and our community and, importantly, if you are not working or needing supplies, simply stay home.

Madam Speaker, I want to be very clear that we will move to a harder lockdown if required if the rules are not followed. However, if possible, I absolutely want to try to avoid a harder, more destructive economic and social lockdown. The reason for this is that I do not want to inflict more harm on our community than we need to defeat the coronavirus.

The forced sacking of tens of thousands of our fellow Tasmanians this week, at the stroke of my pen, broke my heart. Tasmanians, do not let their sacrifice be in vain. Follow the rules and save lives.

I have already thanked members in this place for their support and assistance. It is important to explain that in the current environment three pieces of budget-related legislation have been urgently passed by the parliament, including a supplementary appropriation bill for this budget year and two supply bills in relation to the 2020-21 budget year. In addition, further urgent legislation has also passed through this House to ensure the state Government and Tasmanian councils have the ability to ensure continuity of services as our response develops. I thank all members of this House and the other House for dealing with all bills swiftly and responsibly.

These bills are designed to provide the necessary flexibility to allow the state Government and local councils to respond quickly and effectively to this unprecedented public health emergency. They allow us to take account of the advice from experts and act promptly, to make decisions and provide assistance to the community in a flexible manner. I thank the House for their trust and support. We will use these powers wisely and only as intended.

Tasmanian and Australian Government Support

Madam Speaker, we are all very aware of the escalating impact the global and national situation is having on our state. While our Government's priority is looking after the health, wellbeing and safety of all Tasmanians, we know additional steps must be taken to help support and protect Tasmanian businesses and jobs and to support those who have lost their jobs and livelihoods.

Last week, my Government announced a \$420 million support package aimed at sustaining our strong economy and keeping Tasmanians employed. As I outlined, this was the first stage of support and the package includes a range of initiatives to assist businesses and individuals in need.

Last weekend we were pleased to welcome the Australian Government's announcement of the second stage of its economic support plan that provides a further \$66 billion to support the economy, keep Australians in work, businesses going where possible and provide a vital safety net for those who have lost their jobs. We were pleased to see this package has a significant focus on measures to help small and medium sized businesses. The Reserve Bank of Australia has also announced a package that will put downward pressure on borrowing costs for households and businesses. However, in these unprecedented times, we must do more.

Second Tasmanian Social and Economic Support Package

My primary task today is to update the House on the next stage of our Social and Economic Support Package. I expect that as these circumstances continue to develop more support will be

required and we will respond quickly, as need arises. Combined with stage 1 that I announced last week, the total value of our response to date will be nearly \$1 billion. The package has four elements – health, business, households and individuals and the community.

Health

Our health professionals need support; they are the front line. My message to Health is and will remain - spend what you need to save Tasmanian lives. In the bills that were passed this week we have established a provision of \$150 million and if that is not sufficient to combat this disease we will spend more.

We must also ensure that we can support our primary health network to support our community. We will increase the funding to Public Health Services and GPs by a further \$3 million dollars, bringing total assistance to \$5 million. This will assist GPs, pharmacists and dentists to obtain the necessary supplies and take the necessary measures to protect themselves and our wider community in coming months.

Madam Speaker, for many Tasmanians this is an incredibly stressful time, likely to be exacerbated by long periods of relative isolation. To support the wellbeing and mental health of Tasmanians during this period, an additional \$3 million will be added to the initial \$1 million provided in our first stimulus package, including support to establish a dedicated 1800 phone number to allow the Tasmanian community to call in and receive psychosocial support. We will supply increased capacity to provide mental health advice, support and referral for vulnerable Tasmanians living in rural areas, as well as targeted support for Tasmania's migrant community and other vulnerable groups.

Business

There are more than 38 000 small business and sole traders in Tasmania; they are the backbone of our economy. We want to do everything we can to support these businesses to survive the coronavirus crisis and come out the other side.

Small business support measures in the new package include:

- quarterly relief on electricity bills to all small business customers on Tariff 22, 94, 88 or 75, including those small businesses on market contracts that could access those tariffs. This waives altogether the payment of their first quarterly electricity bill issued on or after 1 April 2020 for energy consumed in the previous billing period.
- small business customers who receive the electricity waiver will also receive a waiver on their first quarterly water bill issued on or after 1 April 2020. I thank TasWater for their engagement and involvement.
- for all businesses on regulated tariffs, electricity prices will be capped for 12 months.
- water and sewerage prices will also be frozen for 12 months.

Last week I wrote to all local councils and requested that they do what they can to support their communities and proposed that a freeze on general rates as well as other fees and charges occur for

the next 12 months. I have had very constructive discussions with LGAT on this matter and I am certain that in coming days our local government sector will also step up and provide significant support to those who are affected as well.

To assist the sector we will provide an extension of the \$50 million interest-free loan scheme that I announced in our support package last week to a total of \$150 million. The Government will also waive fees, charges and taxes, including land tax for 2020-21 for businesses shut down or severely impacted as a result of the recent restrictive directions implemented. This is estimated to be in the order of \$20 million. For our small businesses, the \$20 million interest-free loans introduced in our first stimulus package will be increased to \$50 million and the eligibility for business loans will be extended and available to all businesses with a turnover under \$10 million per annum.

The Government will also establish a \$40 million small business grants program. To be administered by the Department of State Growth, the program will comprise a \$20 million emergency grants program of \$2500 that provides immediate cash support for businesses suffering financial hardship; and a \$20 million larger grants program. These grants will be available to all small businesses who have suffered financial hardship as a result of COVID-19 restrictive measures imposed.

We will provide an additional \$750 000 to provide business continuity and accounting advice to small businesses, ensuring they have authoritative advice on cash flow management and business options. This includes \$50 000 to support the Small Business Council of Tasmania to assist their members to navigate the assistance available to them.

An amount of \$200 000 will also be provided to the Rural Financial Counselling Service for the extension of financial counselling and support services to provide helpful advice and guidance for small and micro businesses and sole traders, especially in our regional areas; and \$150 000 will be made available to boost the Digital Ready for Business Program to help small businesses understand the most effective ways to successfully take their business online via targeted one-on-one coaching and advice.

The tourism and hospitality sector has borne the brunt of the economic hit, so in addition, the Government will provide an additional \$200 000 to the THA to provide targeted business continuity, cash flow and accountancy advice to tourism and hospitality businesses.

Also very hard hit but somewhat 'under the radar' has been our creative and cultural industries. To businesses in that sector, we will be providing \$1.5 million in support, including an Arts and Screen Digital Production Fund to enable Arts and Screen Tasmania to commission excerpts of digital versions of now cancelled or postponed performing arts events, as well as supporting recording projects of music ensembles and support for contemporary musicians to record music and video for digital distribution and business relaunch. In addition, arts organisations who had been in receipt of a single year or final year of funding will have their funding extended for a further 12 months.

We also understand that many small business and sole traders rely on using motor vehicles, so for our taxi industry, which is also hurting in the wake of tourism and hospitality closures, the Government will waive annual taxi licence fees for the calendar year 2020, supporting hundreds of taxi plate owners and owner-operators. For a taxi licence in Hobart or Launceston, this will provide annual fee relief of \$710, and where licence fees have already been paid, a refund will be provided.

We will waive registration and the road component of motor tax fees for heavy vehicles where those businesses have been severely impacted, and in addition, businesses that have closed can apply to suspend vehicle registrations and then re-activate them when they reboot. The total support is estimated to be around \$20 million.

Our medium-sized and larger businesses have also been hard hit. The four-month waiver of payroll tax for the hospitality, tourism and seafood sectors announced in the first stimulus package will be extended to ensure that these industries pay no payroll tax for the entire 2019-20 year. The three-month waiver of payroll tax for all Tasmanian businesses with a payroll of up to \$5 million which are impacted by COVID-19 will be extended to ensure that these businesses also pay no payroll tax for the entire 2019-20 year.

Both of these measures together will cost approximately \$75 million and will assist with paying their loans, restructuring and meeting employee costs and benefits and, importantly, will provide an immediate cash injection.

Air Freight

The maintenance of our supply chains at this time is absolutely essential. The Government is working with potential service providers to secure a direct international air freight service from Tasmania and with the Australian Government to establish solutions for freight across a network of essential aviation routes within Australia. An international air freight service, if established, is expected to primarily be a market-driven model, with anticipated demand exceeding available capacity. We have allocated \$1 million in funding to partner with our exporters to establish this service.

Bass Strait Islands Support

Air transport from Melbourne and northern Tasmania is critical to maintaining essential access to King and Flinders islands, including essential consumer goods for island residents. The Government will provide up to \$1.6 million to underwrite the maintenance of essential air services to the islands for the next three months.

Fisheries

Finally, our fisheries industry. This sector was the first to be hit by the coronavirus when it shut down exports to China just before Australia Day, and the pain continues, so for our fisheries industries, the Government will provide \$1.8 million for initiatives including:

- \$604 000 for fee relief for a range of wild fisheries licence fees;
- \$427 000 for licence and rental fees relief for shellfish farming for 12 months; and
- \$770 000 for ShellMAP Program fee relief.

These initiatives are in addition to a 12-month waiver for annual fees for rock lobster, giant crab, fin fisheries and abalone divers, which has a full cost of \$3.7 million.

Households and Individuals

Madam Speaker, with businesses being forced to close down and people losing their jobs, unprecedented pressure is being put on household budgets.

Electricity relief

For all households, businesses and community sector organisations on regulated tariffs, electricity prices will be capped for 12 months. The cost of the electricity relief measures in this package are expected to be around \$41 million. A \$5 million fund has been established by Aurora to assist customers with bill relief, waiving fees or charges, freezing debt, payment plans, in addition to a range of other support measures. Aurora will deliver this through a dedicated COVID-19 response team. In further support of Tasmanian residential and small business customers, I can also confirm that Aurora Energy will not be disconnecting any residential or small business customers, without their agreement during this crisis.

Water/sewerage relief

For all household customers and the community sector water prices will also be frozen for 12 months. The cost of water and sewerage relief measures in this package will cost an estimated \$37 million.

Rates relief

As mentioned earlier, we are working very closely with local government to enable councils to freeze 2020-21 rates at 2019-20 prices. We will be freezing the Community Fire Service contribution that is paid by households on their rates, while ensuring the Government will continue to invest in emergency and fire service capabilities. This measure will cost \$4 million.

Government fee relief

We will freeze all government fees subject to the Government Fee Units Act for both households and businesses for the 2020-21 year, costing \$500 000.

School levies

It makes no sense to charge parents for the usual school levies for what is clearly going to be a severely disrupted school year, so to further assist parents, the Government will also be refunding school levies for students attending a government school. This initiative is estimated to cost an additional \$13 million.

Rapid Response Skills Initiative

Supporting displaced workers is also very important. Individuals who have been stood down or lost their jobs will be able to access immediate support to connect to work or training. Through the Government's Rapid Response Skills Initiative, up to \$3000 will be available to individuals to gain new skills or licences to help them into a new role, and businesses that have immediate job needs and opportunities will be able to access a job-ready pool, including to match people to immediate priority skill needs, such as in health and food retail industries. A total of \$6.3 million will be available for this initiative.

Community

Madam Speaker, it is vital that we support our community and our community sector at this time.

Community Support Fund

In addition to the community support measures announced in our first stimulus package, the Government will be providing an additional \$5 million to enable community sector organisations to support vulnerable people in our communities. These measures will include:

- more funding of an additional \$1 million for emergency accommodation, on top of the \$1 million already announced in our first package;
- \$800 000 for emergency food relief to assist in the production of ready-to-eat nutritious meals and also increasing delivery frequency across the state, including increased support for the elderly and most vulnerable;
- \$350 000 to TasCOSS to ensure a joined-up and connected community sector response, including helping ensure frontline community sector staff can keep services open or adapt their business model to continue to deliver services for the most vulnerable, as well as an Essential Technology Fund to enable community sector organisations to access technology to continue to deliver vital support services to vulnerable Tasmanians by phone or online, and work from home;
- \$130 000 to Volunteering Tasmania to activate EV-CREW, the state's emergency network of registered volunteers. This funding will help support community sector organisations who rely heavily on volunteers to assist them in supporting Tasmanians in self-isolation with food, medications and psychosocial support;
- \$200 000 to support the Youth Network of Tasmania, the Council of the Ageing and Tasmanian Men's Sheds to help support young and senior Tasmanians and men, respectively, through communications, phone assistance and helping to keep these vulnerable groups connected and safe, including from elder abuse;
- \$260 000 for Community Transport Services Tasmania to maintain essential statewide regional transport for the most vulnerable, including the frail aged, helping to support an additional 250 new consumers per week, through transport for shopping and medical appointments, or alternatively, delivery of food, medicines and social support - CTST would also recruit 10 additional FTE for this work; and
- \$700 000 for all Neighbourhood Houses, with \$20 000 one-off for each of the 35 houses to continue to provide support in their own communities, assisting those in most need during this crisis.

In addition, we will provide an additional \$1 million to increase the provisions of the No Interest Loan Scheme to enable the NILS network to significantly increase the provision of loans to those in need, to avoid turning to payday or fringe lenders for those in financial distress.

Family Violence

An analysis of the impact of COVID-19 internationally indicates the prevalence of family and sexual violence can increase as households experience financial pressure from loss of income and social isolation requirements increase.

While our own data analysis shows no current spikes, we are increasing funding by an additional \$2.7 million, including \$1.9 million to increase the capacity of the Safe at Home family violence integrated criminal justice system, with more funding for the Family Violence Counselling and Support Service, the Safe at Home Coordination Unit, court support and liaison services, legal practitioner support services, and specialist family violence police prosecution services. Funding will also be provided to increase the Rapid Rehousing pool by 20 additional properties for a 12-month period and to provide specialist family violence and sexual assault support services to increase operational capacity.

For the child safety system, we will provide an additional \$2.5 million to enhance child safety and wellbeing, including funding for the Child and Young Person in Care Fund to ensure children and young people have internet access and mobile technology for communication and home learning. A total \$1.2 million will be provided for an enhanced after-hours response service to deliver additional after-hours support to children and families at risk. Support will also be provided to establish an informal kinship carer liaison and support function, providing grandparents and other informal kinship carers with access to necessary advice and support when they require it.

Tenants

The COVID-19 emergency bill currently proceeding through the parliament will provide protection to tenants in financial distress. In terms of social housing, the Government will not increase rent for social housing tenants over the next six months, and will not take federal or state government emergency assistance payments into account when calculating income for this period. This will leave more money in the hands of low-income Tasmanians.

In addition, we will add up to 75 homes to the Private Rental Incentive Scheme for two years, at a cost of \$2 million. The Scheme offers landlords an incentive to lease their homes for a two-year period at a rental that is set at an affordable level for clients on the Social Housing Register.

Sport and Recreational Clubs

Madam Speaker, not even our sports and recreation sector has been spared, with virtually all competitions going into recess, so for our community sports and recreational clubs, the Government will provide \$2 million for a grants program to support the ongoing viability and operation of sporting clubs and associations.

RSLs

The Government will also provide \$500 000 for grants of up to \$10 000 to commercial trading RSL sub-branches and ex-serving organisations impacted by COVID-19.

State sector

Our own State Service workforce is at the very front line of fighting this battle and supporting those who support us is one of our highest priorities. Employees who are not unwell but are required to self-isolate or to not attend work do not have to apply for or access any form of leave for the isolation period, and are to be paid their normal salary, including regular allowances, for the duration of the absence. Working from home arrangements will be encouraged and implemented in these circumstances where possible.

We are also making provision for employees to access special leave when their personal leave entitlements have been exhausted and who are unable to access flexible working arrangements, such as working from home. In addition, we will be providing casual State Service workers with access to two weeks paid special leave should they be directed to self-isolate.

Conclusion

Madam Speaker, my Government understands that this is continuing to be a difficult time for communities across Tasmania, and specific groups within our community will be affected in different ways than others. Many people are working night and day to assist with our effort, and I want to say this: wherever you are in our community, I want to acknowledge and thank you for your efforts. It is what Tasmanians do at times like this. It is what makes our state so special and what stands us in such good stead for the fight ahead.

I say a sincere thank you to all our staff across government who are managing our response to the pandemic. Our health professionals are doing an incredible job on the frontline delivering health services and our teachers continue to provide high quality education even in the face of great uncertainty. The secretaries in charge of their departments who have been working day and night and are now involved with the State Emergency Management Committee have just gone above and beyond and every single one of them should be thanked.

To you all, I offer my sincere thanks for your hard work and dedication. My team will continue to work on this urgent priority and will be responsive to advice to ensure that our response is focused on protecting the health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians. The sole focus for our Government during the coming weeks and months will be on supporting the Tasmanian community, businesses and industry to get through these difficult times as we all respond and adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, our work will focus on tasks that are essential to responding to this unprecedented public health emergency and continuing the delivery of essential government services.

I will continue to keep the House and the people of Tasmania updated on our response to COVID-19 in the coming days, weeks and months. This crisis will end; we will get through this, but to get there, I ask all Tasmanians to hear this simple message: follow the rules and save lives.

MOTION

Note Statement - COVID-19 - Tasmanian Social and Economic Support Measures

[12.27 p.m.]

Ms WHITE (Lyons - Leader of the Opposition) - Madam Speaker - I move -

That the statement be noted.

I acknowledge the effort the Government has gone to and the announcement by the Premier to support all Tasmanians. Everybody has been impacted by this virus. I commend the Government on the work they have done to pull together the package that has been just announced. I have no doubt that further measures will be required in future as necessary in response to the virus. You should know that we provide our full support to you. Do whatever you need to do to make sure you can save lives and provide support to all Tasmanians.

We have not yet seen the health impact of the virus here in Tasmania but we sure have felt the economic impact. We see it on the faces of our family and friends and those people who have found themselves unemployed as a result of this virus, which has devastated individuals and businesses. We know the health impact is coming and that is why it is necessary to support people now to make sure that we ease the pressure on them so that they can stay home, stay safe and save lives.

We have watched as thousands of people have found themselves out of work over the course of the last week and we know they are struggling to pay the bills. The wait for income relief and income support is too long for many, with the queues at Centrelink and the support that has been offered by the federal government simply taking too long to hit the bank accounts of those people who have found themselves already out of work. The initiatives announced by the Premier today will assist to ease the pressure on households and business by limiting the bills they are required to fund out of their pocket, and they also provide some protections against eviction, which is very important.

I again thank the Premier for his willingness to engage with all members of parliament to identify different ways we can solve some of these really terrible and complex challenges. It is a good demonstration of the parliament being able to work together. For those people who are at home today who are worried about the notice they have just been given to evict their premises, they should know that that is not something they need to worry about. The Government has taken measures with the bill that was passed by the upper House just now that people will be safe in the place where they are currently residing throughout the period of emergency. It is really important for everyone to know that they will be safe in their homes and will not have to face eviction, and with the additional supports the Government has announced today and the additional support coming from the federal government hopefully quicker than what has been forecast, people will not be facing poverty. We need to be doing everything we possibly can to make sure people are not put in those sorts of precarious situations.

Putting money in the pockets of workers at this time would be the ideal way to respond and I acknowledge the Government for the statement the Premier made yesterday that every public sector worker will be able to maintain their job. That has given them confidence and a sense of comfort and security at a time when everything else is so uncertain. I know that has meant a lot to many different people in the public sector. We would like to see an extension of that guaranteed to all workers in the local government sector and across GBEs and state-owned companies, to give security to the workers in that workforce. At a time when we are losing so many jobs, any entity associated with the government should be able to give a guarantee to their workforce that they have a job and, even if right now there is no work for them to do, they can come back to that job and will be supported financially in the interim.

We have been focusing, and rightly so, on making sure people have economic security at this very difficult time, but we have to remember why all this is happening, and that is the coronavirus.

There is a health emergency that confronts our state and our preparedness to respond to that becomes essential now, as does the support we have to provide to the health workforce as they get ready for the influx of cases we can expect over the coming weeks. I echo the comments of the Premier in thanking all our health workforce and all those responding to the crisis that is coronavirus. Their dedication is unquestioned, they work incredibly hard and they have our full support as they respond to this crisis over the coming weeks and months ahead.

Tasmania's priority now has to be about saving lives. We are sending clear messages that people should stay home if they can, work from home if they can, and if they are over 60, or vulnerable, or have an underlying health condition, to stay at home.

We need to be providing support to our health workforce to ensure they have the capacity, the beds, the ventilators and the personal protective equipment they need to make sure they are safe to respond and we can keep them well so they can look after other people. That is why we have been calling on the Government to close schools and non-essential services so we can get ahead of this. If we do and we can slow down the spread of this virus and treat people, hopefully we can start recovery sooner too.

Border control is a critical part that we need to ensure is very strong right now if we are going to be able to protect all Tasmanians. I hate to bring this up, given this important time to talk about how we are working together, but we are very concerned about the lack of appropriate controls on the border at the moment around the TT-Line. I am not sure if the Premier is aware but there is a two-week delay now for people trying to exit the state. We have been contacted by people who are trying to get their caravans on the TT-Line and being told they cannot get a booking until 15 April, which is a big problem. They are currently in caravan parks and want to comply but it has been impossible for them to find a booking. At the same time, they are being charged \$250 every time they change their booking. Tasmanians trying to get home on the TT-Line are being charged \$70 every time they try to change their booking to come home earlier.

TT-Line should be endeavouring to support people to comply with the rules and not price gouging at this very difficult time. I implore the Premier to work with the TT-Line and issue them a directive to do everything possible to get people home, not charge them extra to change their bookings, and make sure people can get off the island without charging them extra for trying to comply with the rules too. There is a real concern that TT-Line has not been upholding its end of the bargain. I implore you, Premier, to work closely with them to make sure they do everything you are asking of them and Tasmanians expect of them so we can have really strong border security and give comfort to people in Tasmania who are doing the right thing that that is not being undermined at the moment with a lack of compliance on our borders.

I will finish by saying we welcome the announcements by the Government today, acknowledge there might be more to come in the future, and will support you every step of the way, Premier. Anything you need to keep Tasmanians alive and well and healthy, you have our full support.

[12.35 p.m.]

Ms O'CONNOR (Clark - Leader of the Greens) - Madam Speaker, the level of stress and anxiety and, uncertainty across the Tasmanian community right now is palpable. We have all felt it. We are all receiving the phone calls, the emails of distress, we are going out into our communities and into empty streets and empty shops, and we can feel that fear and uncertainty.

However, there has been some things done by this Government and this Premier that have eased people's fears. I will say this: a really great friend of mine, who is a raving greeny, has developed a crush on you, Premier. I believe there is a sense of relief in the community and an understanding that Government and this parliament has the community's back and is prepared to take tough measures but also work together very closely dealing with large, complicated, structural issues to look out for every Tasmanian we possibly can. There is a sense now in the community, people are feeling more unique as islanders and Tasmanians because we made the first moves on cruise ships, we worked to secure the borders better, and now there is a suite of assistance measures in place for people who are made vulnerable through loss of employment, people who are tenants in the private rental market and in social housing, and for businesses.

There is a real determination to support our health and emergency services workers in a tangible way. One of the most important messages that has come out of the Premier's statement is signalling to the health sector that their only goal, their only mission, is to save lives. This is not going to be a situation where the pennies are being counted. It will be a relief to people working in the health sector, particularly, that they know this Government, this Premier and this parliament understands the need to unfetter them in their work to keep Tasmanians safe and to help to prevent a community transmission of this awful virus.

I went upstairs earlier to watch some of the debate in the other place on the very consequential legislation that we passed last night, the COVID-19 Disease Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020. Again, you had that same sense up there of everyone working together, getting on with it, making sure these measures are in place, and placing a huge amount of trust in Government to do the right thing with the powers that it has been given. I was very pleased to hear that the Government has made a commitment around freezes on evictions, other than for someone who is wilfully destructive to their property. That will provide such comfort and lower the cortisol levels of people who are living in private tenancies now, some of whom would have lost their job in the hospitality or tourism sector. That is a very significant and important step forward.

As the Premier said, we do not know how long this crisis will continue. There is no certainty over what responding to this in a decent and compassionate way will cost. As Ms White has said, we will you back you in, Premier, on measures that need to be taken. I urge the greatest possible transparency, though, around the distribution of things such as grants to sporting clubs or RSLs given the recent history and controversy at a federal level.

I will say a couple of things about casual workers and I support what Ms White said about the importance of extending that protection for casual workers in other areas of public service. I give a shout out to Legislature-General in here, Madam Speaker. Through no fault of their own, our Hansard crew will not be coming into parliament to do the work they would usually do if the sitting schedule had been what it was agreed to earlier this year. Given that we have passed the Supply Bill (No. 2) that made the allocation for Legislature-General for it to be able to continue to operate and keep this very important democratic institution functional, I think there is a case for making some allocation for Hansard. I would like that to be noted and, please, considered.

Although there is no evidence of community transmission in Tasmania, that is not something we can be certain about. I am sure other members in this place have been contacted by people who are concerned that, because of the restricted testing regime, some cases may be being missed. I note that, at the federal level last night, the strict criteria around testing people, whether they are symptomatic or not, has been expanded, but I could not see any specific allowance for people who

are in the community who have not travelled internationally or into areas of high transmission interstate to be able to be tested should they be highly symptomatic.

I understand there is a shortage of testing kits and a particular chemical, as I understand it, that is needed for these tests. I am absolutely certain that the Government is working hard, as a priority, to increase the number of test kits available to health workers. I encourage accelerating that tendering process so that we can have the capacity to test more widely symptomatic people in the community who have had no obvious connection with someone else who is a confirmed case or someone who has come here from overseas or interstate.

Madam Speaker, there is no question that the social and economic impacts will continue to unfold and deepen. We will be standing here working with every member of this place, simply to do the right thing by the people of Tasmania.

[12.43 p.m.]

Mr FERGUSON (Bass - Minister for Infrastructure and Transport) - Madam Speaker, I rise to respond to the Premier's statement. For the second time this fortnight the Premier has been leading our state and our Government has delivered a very important bolstering message of very strong and meaningful, but also practical, support for Tasmanians in a wide range of circumstances.

Before I get into a range of things that I have planned to say, I want to say thank you to members of this House who are not in the Liberal Party for supporting our Premier. We need to support our Premier. He needs our support, he deserves it, and it will help him to do an even better job as he goes forward and as he carries the weight of responsibility. He is doing it extremely well and we support him. We pray for him that he will continue to have the strength to carry on, just as we do for our Prime Minister and every other Premier of this country. They deserve and need our full support as they adapt to these changing times - Liberal or Labor - and as they take onboard health advice which, at times, is very difficult to accept, particularly when they are mindful that while we are not making the health advice, they are the ones responsible for the consequences of implementing that health advice.

I say that with the highest regard for people in these high offices who carry that burden. We have seen that reflected in the debate today, the way in which a person has to carry that responsibility. I applaud you, Premier, and I thank you for your work ethic, your diligence and your care. I absolutely applaud it.

These are very extraordinary times. It was only a few short weeks ago that it seemed to us whatever was happening in other countries and in other states, that it was more or less a continuation of the Tasmanian success story.

We were talking about the strength of the Tasmanian economy only three weeks ago at the Premier's Address. We were talking about the number of people loving to come to our island. We were talking about the improved quality of life for our community, and we were talking about jobs that were looking for people. People were talking about the need for more skills support because we did not have the traditional problem of chronic numbers of people looking for jobs.

This has all changed. It is all turned around, and it is not Tasmania's fault. It is not an individual family or businesses cause but they are feeling the impact. For the foreseeable future our supports have to be about grabbing onto the resilience of Tasmanians, our ability to adapt to these challenging times and to be flexible and to find what is in our hand and to use for some greater good.

There is an old proverb that necessity is the mother of invention. We are already seeing small, medium and larger businesses adapting and trying to find ways to get through this using what they have, which at the moment, in many cases, is very sparse. We know that in many cases they have simply had to close up because their incomes have in some cases either significantly reduced or disappeared, and they have to continue to try to find a way to face these challenges and to try to find a way to sustain the business to a level that they can re-emerge when our state gets through this emergency, this health crisis.

Our hearts do stay with these individual people, these fine people, these women and men in business and who are in employment, who are not sure what tomorrow will bring for them. I believe that this second round of support from the Government, announced by the Premier, will give them hope, that there is a reason and a purpose for what we are going through that will be worth hanging on to. That tomorrow will be better. We will need to stand with them, to remain engaged with them, and to listen further about how they are travelling and how this second stimulus package will be received by them and help them, hopefully, to weather the storm be they a business, be they an employee or a community sector organisation working with disadvantaged or people who are struggling.

This package is deliberately broad. It is deliberately targeted widely. It is designed to cushion our people and the Tasmanian economy from the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, as we now know households' utility prices and fees having been announced will be frozen to ensure that they pay no more than last year and refunding the full amount of Government school levies for the year, for example. We accept and we know already from the personal stories that many families are managing on much reduced incomes. In conjunction with the federal government's package, this package will ease the financial pain on families as they adapt.

It is also pleasing that we are able to support the community sector. I know my colleague, the Minister for Human Services, will focus on that. I would like to spend a moment focusing on some of the supports for Tasmanian businesses. In so doing, I would like to say that I represent minister Courtney's comments on this as Minister for Small Business, Hospitality and Events. We have been working together as a team on a range of measures aimed at keeping the doors open and the lights on, and a plan for businesses to know that there will be a purpose to the pain and that they can re-emerge and be viable in the future. I commend her for the work that she has been doing while being Health minister and on also engaging with individuals in business and those peak bodies.

In many ways small business has been the back bone of our state. I acknowledge small and medium businesses in particular, the hardest working people in our state, and many of whom will face perhaps the biggest challenge of their lives over the coming weeks and months because in small business it is your personal wealth which you are placing at risk in your business.

Importantly, the waiver of your power bill is going to be a meaningful shot in the arm for business. It is also about ensuring that the TasWater fees and bills relief will make a meaningful difference. In my portfolio of Infrastructure and Transport I know just how much the taxi drivers are already saying thank you, Premier, for the relief in the 2020 calendar for the licence fees which were due on 1 April and they are so pleased because many were not sure how they were going to manage that payment. Some have been talking to their bank, some have been asking for support, others have paid it and were somewhat regretting it because of their cash flow situation. They will get their money back if they have paid it.

Pleasingly, the package also includes a range of loans and grants, which will help to keep businesses keep their lights on. We hope that businesses that get payroll tax rebates and waivers will be able to use those funds in their businesses to attempt to keep staff on and to plan for a future where they can re-engage staff that they may have had to stand down.

There is a particular focus in the sectors that we know have been hit hardest. I will mention them briefly. Businesses in seafood, tourism, hospitality, retail, arts, entertainment, health and hospitality sectors are all suffering financial hardship at the moment.

In conclusion, I will say these are very challenging times and it has been one of the most encouraging fortnights in this House. Many of us have been members of this House for a long time, and members who are political opponents have seen fit to recognise the pain in the community and set aside those opportunities for the greater good. I applaud that.

[12.51 p.m.]

Ms OGILVIE (Clark) - Madam Speaker, I will keep my comments short.

At the risk of being overly personal, I want to say to the Premier, that as I move around town people are saying with one voice that they appreciate what you have done, that they recognise your strength and your decision making, and that is something that I think has galvanised people. They feel there is leadership and we need that now more than ever. I genuinely thank you for that, and I believe you are a person of deep personal character and integrity, and that it is really showing through at the moment.

We have traversed many topics in this House over the last few days and I will not go through it again but, as we know, things are moving very quickly. We are all inundated with requests all the time; it just keeps coming and keeps rolling. The issues keep turning up. I have been sending them through. They are being responded to by the hard-working staff in the ministerial offices and government. We are deeply grateful for that because every request is something that is very important to particular individuals.

We are in it for the long haul and the train has left the station. We are on this journey. We do not exactly know where it will go and which stops we will be stopping at, but we have to be in it together and we have to all be on that train together. Tasmanians, with one voice, have agreed to do that and to go on this difficult journey, difficult task. We are very much working together as a team and Tasmanians have seen some of these times before from the depression era, through world wars and other challenges that have happened. We as a state are a people of great capacity, resilience and stoicism. We have grit and determination. We see that every day out there, particularly people who have suffered the first wave of losses and challenges. I certainly think we might see more of that.

I will raise very briefly that I am still concerned about families and family finances. I appreciate the jigsaw puzzle of the economics and how that fits together with the various parts of support that is happening. I see families desperately trying to restructure quickly to be on one salary, or perhaps a much lesser salary or even no salary. I am quite concerned about that.

I am concerned about the social response to working from home and schooling from home. There are suddenly big changes in dynamics, in family dynamics and also interactions with community, which have now lessened.

I will leave on that because I know there is a minister who wishes to speak. But one last comment is that in the package I note that there is support for businesses around the accountancy side and that is fantastic. We also probably need to look at support through Legal Aid, perhaps outsourced through Legal Aid, to commercial lawyers. People desperately need help with reading their leases, understanding their leases, entering into negotiations and what will happen across a range of those legal business sides, on the commercial side. Can I flag that with you and put it on the radar? I believe there is a way of doing it. I know that the Law Society has already reached out to ask people to do pro bono work. I have put my practising certificate back on so I can do pro bono work in that commercial area if people are desperate but I think we sometimes forget about that. I will leave that with you, but truly, thank you, keep going, go hard, get it done.

[12.55 p.m.]

Mr JAENSCH (Braddon - Minister for Housing) - Madam Speaker, I thank the Premier for his extraordinary leadership and heart in these extraordinary times. I thank and recognise the parliament as well as a whole for its support for him and us as government and the trust that has been in this House this week for this extraordinary period we are embarking into. I add my assurance that it is not misplaced, it is very valued. It is a rare thing here and we need more of it, particularly at times like these. It is well placed.

This is an extraordinary period and a time of great contradictions. It is a time when we are being asked to keep our social distance but strengthen our social networks. We are being asked to keep ourselves apart but to work closer together. It is a time when we are going to be seeing each other less but needing to look out for each other more.

In my Human Services portfolio areas of community and children, in particular, there is no truer place than that. Without repeating the list of initiatives mentioned by the Premier in his statement, I thank and acknowledge the broad range of community sector organisations that have stepped up quickly and have very rapidly known what is needed and how to respond in their areas where they know the people and the need on the ground. Our relationships with them are very valuable to us and have never been more important to Tasmania.

I thank the various emergency food relief organisations, TasCOSS, Volunteering Tasmania, the Youth Network of Tasmania, the Council of the Ageing, Tasmanian Men's Sheds, Community Transport Services and the Neighbourhood Houses of Tasmania for being prepared in a heartbeat to tell us what is needed for the people they serve and work with in very different ways. There is no better example of that than the Neighbourhood Houses, that have evolved as a place to drop in but have reinvented themselves as an outreach service into their communities at a very local level for needy people. I acknowledge the work of Tracey Tasker and her board, in particular, in being able to respond when we have called out to them.

I will speak very briefly about housing. These are changing times and I acknowledge the support of this House for the bill we have dealt with in the last little while to strengthen certainty for tenants and to complement the changing relationship, the changing market, that is out there at the moment, and acknowledge also those property owners who have reached out to their tenants and through their organisations to seek to ensure that tenancies can be maintained and people are not left without housing.

In our child safety system in particular, it is a time when we need to be looking out for our most vulnerable people. I am very glad that we have been able, through this package, to invest in technology which will ensure that our young people in out-of-home care can stay connected and

can be accessed in unconventional ways as well in terms of their visits and interactions whilst they may be more isolated in their homes.

I am very proud we have been able to also recognise the circumstances of those informal carers, the kinship carers in particular, where sometimes we have older people looking after very young people who are going to be spending more time together over the next while and need extra support, even though they are not part of our formal care network. The fund that has been set up for the liaison and support for them could not have come at a more important time.

We need to also, through this list, recognise the investment that has been increased - a \$1.2 million increase - in an enhanced after-hours response service. I wanted to highlight this because after hours and around the clock, we need to not only be able to receive calls coming in but respond to them immediately when we are able to. The enhanced capacity to do that is part of this package and it will be reviewed and increased if it is needed to ensure we have the ability to respond to people who need help.

I thank my department and Children and Youth Services in particular for their work to restructure their workforce and work flow to ensure we can deal with all eventualities thought this coming period. To anyone listening to or reading this, my special message throughout this next period of time, know and use the Strong Families, Safe Kids advice and referral line.

Sitting suspended from 1 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

MOTION

Note Statement - COVID-19 - Tasmanian Social and Economic Support Measures

Resumed from above.

[2.30 p.m.]

Mr JAENSCH (Braddon - Minister for Housing) - Madam Speaker, in summary, the Department of Communities Tasmania is strengthened and prepared for the challenges ahead. I ask that all Tasmanians know and use the Strong Families, Safe Kids advice and referral line on 1800 000 123 if they know or know of a family that is not coping or needs help to provide for the safety and wellbeing of a child. In these extraordinary times more than ever we have to look out for and support each other.

I commend the measures announced today that will help us do just that.

[2.32 p.m.]

Mr BARNETT (Lyons - Minister for Primary Industries and Water) - Madam Speaker, with a very short time to support the Premier's announcement and the very strong and decisive leadership, I thank him particularly on behalf of the agriculture and fisheries sector, the veterans' community for the support of the RSLs, and likewise for small business across this great state of Tasmania.

We are in unprecedented times, we are in uncharted waters, but this Government stands shoulder to shoulder with those in need, those doing it tough and will continue to do it tough.

Having talked to the fishing industry in particular over the lunch period, they are very grateful indeed. I thank the Premier for that and thank the House.

Statement noted.

**COVID-19 DISEASE EMERGENCY (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS)
BILL 2020 (No. 14)**

Bill agreed to by the Legislative Council without amendment.

ADJOURNMENT

[2.34 p.m.]

Mr FERGUSON (Bass - Leader of Government Business) - Madam Speaker, I move -

That the House do now adjourn.

I wish everybody all the best until we meet again at a later date.

Madam SPEAKER - I thank everyone for such a wonderful session and wish you all safety and good health.

Members - Hear, hear.

The House adjourned at 2.34 p.m.