

Matter of Public Importance - Tourism

Mr HODGMAN - I move that the House take note of the following matter: tourism in Tasmania.

I bring on for debate as a matter of public importance Tasmania's tourism industry because it is an industry I firmly believe in. It is one that I am keen to seek support for and one I am also keen to see grow. I have consistently said it remains one of our cornerstone industries, a key part of our economy and indeed our social fabric and, of course, it is one which is a major employer and generator of economic activity. It is an industry that leverages off our greatest assets, our brand and our people, the wonderful natural assets our State has by way of its natural beauty and indeed built heritage and one which in many ways encapsulates what is attractive about living here, including those who live here for short periods as visitors and as tourists to our State. It is an industry that we want to see continue to grow.

Part of our economic vision for this State is in fact to see our key cornerstone industries such as the tourism sector growing, not being shut down as is happening with the forest industry, which, ironically, is being seen by some as potentially the solution for our economic difficulties because some, mistakenly, believe - and I do not think the tourism industry even believes - that locking up another 500 000 hectares of Tasmania's productive forest estate will drive some kind of tourism explosion. As wonderful as that might be, I do not think that even the tourism industry is saying that that will happen if we go down such a course. So I will stand in this place and certainly argue for ensuring that another one of the State's cornerstone industries, the tourism industry, is provided with the support it needs.

There are some disturbing trends, as we have heard and we have read about, in visitation numbers, especially in regional areas and the minister would be well aware of this. They have been hit especially hard by the lack of throughput into regional parts of Tasmania. Occupancy rates are low and I would urge the minister and the Government to show a greater degree of urgency in addressing this issue and in supporting the industry. The most recent occupancy rates have shown a drop in consecutive quarters. The Tasmanian Hospitality Association statewide occupancy levels for September showed another month of decline in all three regions - a decrease of 5.31 per cent in occupancy levels overall for the State compared to the previous year with an overall occupancy rate of 61.11 per cent and in all three regions showing a decrease. In the south, it was down by just under 9 per cent, in the north about 1.5 per cent and in the north-west it was 5.34 per cent down from last year.

Obviously, there are significant challenges some of which cannot be addressed by the State of Tasmania alone. Yes, there are obvious issues with international markets and exchange rates, and we are under fierce competition from other places including our nearest competitors, the other States of Australia. It is hard not to

notice reports from other States, most notably Queensland, posing an even greater threat to our domestic market.

Whilst it does appear that there has been some success with the most recent of our marketing campaigns albeit a relatively modest one.

The Spring campaign - it is certainly a far cry from last year when tourism operators, the industry and to an extent even the Government itself acknowledged that it had misfired, mistimed, badly directed and bungled a marketing campaign, and that is something we cannot afford. Indeed, the Auditor-General also said that as well when in a report released this year he found that the campaigns of last year lacked clear and measurable objectives. He also found that closure reports reflected an inability to assess achievements, which meant that there had been an inability to ensure that the same mistakes were not being repeated.

As I have said on many occasions, we cannot afford to miss opportunities; we cannot afford what is a modest marketing budget to be misdirected and not to secure a greater visitation to this State and especially into those regional areas which are being hard hit. So there are certainly no more excuses or second chances and the minister needs to ensure that does not occur again.

Some of the things that we have proposed should be happening and I await a more substantive response from the minister and the Government to the Legislative Council's review and recommendations from their extensive inquiry. I am not sure if what we have seen from the Government is it, insofar as a response is concerned, but it was an extensive inquiry with many recommendations, I think 31 in all. I think there was a seven- or eight-page response from the Government in relation to that. I hope that is not it and that was merely an executive summary of what we can expect from the minister because there were some very good recommendations, one of which of course we had proposed should occur.

In my reply to the State Budget earlier this year, I said it was Liberal policy that in government we would take Tourism Tasmania from the State bureaucracy to make it more streamlined and effective in its ability to respond to what are very dynamic markets and challenges within the tourism industry. That is something which has occurred in New Zealand to properly equip their tourism authority. The Legislative Council Select Committee report noted, and I said in my budget reply, that there is in the broader community and the tourism industry strong and longstanding support for removing Tourism Tasmania from the public service and establishing it as a marketing body similar to the system which exists and operates so effectively in New Zealand.

I saw a report in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago that the minister might in fact be moving in this direction. I am not sure whether or not that is the case but I would encourage you, Minister, to look at this policy which has broad support within the community. The tourism industry was one of the key recommendations of the Legislative Council select committee report. It makes sense and would have many

benefits, most notably being one which best allows that entity to operate and respond to the ongoing challenges but also opportunities facing our tourism industry. So I would appreciate a response, if possible today, Minister, as to where the Government's head is at in that respect.

I have, in the past, also argued and in fact our alternative budget showed that despite the significant financial challenges after your Government wrecked the Budget and finances are scarce, we would in fact make provision for additional funds to support regional Tasmanian tourism and major events in this State. Major events are an important opportunity to attract people here. So notwithstanding the fact that we identified some \$200 million of savings in other areas, one area where we advocated for additional funding and support was in promoting our tourism asset and our industry, especially with a focus on regional Tasmania and regional tourism operators, who are doing it very tough. We have also outlined other opportunities which I hope the minister is familiar with that we would urge him to take up.