

SCHOOL BUSES

Mr GRIFFITHS (Goyder) (15:46): In continuing the theme of grieves from the opposition side, I also wish to talk about school buses operating in regional areas. In my case, I had a visit from three operators some two weeks ago. These three people have been in the industry and have been providing services to the school community for 112 years in total. One chap has been doing it for 50 years—he must have started very young, I must admit—another chap for 30 years and the other chap for 32 years. The common theme from my near 90-minute discussion with them was a fear about the industry which they are a part of and which provides an important service across much of regional South Australia where the yellow bus fleet operated by DECS does not provide the school transport needed for students.

I am advised that approximately 300 or so buses are part of private fleets operated by small businesses, in the main. One chap who spoke to me has 14 people working for him. Some of those people are based at the depot and are only part-time, but he operates some seven buses. One other chap operates four buses, and another chap (I think) operates three. These people are dedicated to the community they serve. They approached me out of an absolute sense of frustration that the efforts of the Bus and Coach Association (of which they are members) to ensure that the government accepted the responsibility to put in place the processes it announced on 16 August 2006 about ensuring seat belts would be fitted to buses, as well as air conditioning, and rollover protection would be increased to ensure kids were provided with greater safety and comfort, and that they as small business operators had the time to plan for that have been ineffective.

One strong message I took from it was: yes, they will do everything they can to ensure that they have the opportunity to be successful when it goes to tender, but their greatest frustration is that, because they operate older fleets, they will need to purchase new buses. Their commitment is about ensuring Australian industry gets the opportunity to produce the buses. They told me that, because of the relatively small production levels in Australia for buses it would be some 18 months from an order being placed and the receipt of the bus, it is going to make it impossible for them. It forces them to look overseas for buses. The member for Flinders has already talked about the evidence provided to him of a Korean bus driving on one of the many roads in regional South Australia (which needs a hell of a lot of maintenance on it and which is quite rough) and the back window falling out.

These people really want to make sure that there is an opportunity for them and the other people who operate within the Bus and Coach Association to remain in business. That is the key thing. They are a small business. I know the Minister for Small Business is here and I am sure he is interested in this, because he wants to make sure that good South Australian businesses which have existed for years, which have invested heavily, which have good staff and which ensure that they provide good facilities for staff and, importantly, develop very good relationships with the school communities they serve, have the opportunity to remain.

The great fear of these operators is what will happen as a result of the government's inaction since making this announcement in August 2006. The fact is that some 65 of these contracts will expire by the end of this year and 100 contracts will expire in 2011. The operators tell me that the people who work within DECS need to be removed completely because they are not very good at managing the process. Indeed, as part of my investigation with the minister about this, I received a copy of a newsletter produced by DECS which was to be sent to bus and coach operators and school bus operators but which had not been forwarded to them, even though it was 12 months old. It absolutely defies belief that I was given the newsletter, but the operators were not. It is meant to be an update on how the process is going and, indeed, what operators need to do to ensure they are in a position to get successful contracts.

It just shows that there is a poor process of management here. The previous member for Adelaide, the Hon. Jane Lomax Smith, had responsibility for this portfolio for the majority of that four year period. She should have ensured, if she actually understood how important this was, that something was happening there—and it is not.

Now the new Minister for Education has responsibility to try and fix it. I am advised that he met with the Bus and Coach Association members in early June. All I can do is urge him to ensure that absolute haste takes place here so that this matter is fixed as soon as it possibly can be. Operators need to have confidence in knowing that they are going to be successful in their tender and will not be subjected to quotes at a much lower price from interstate competitors, who were only able to operate buses up to 12 years of age and, therefore, will have potentially 13 years of use in South Australia still and will try to undercut South Australian operators. We need to ensure that we have operating across

all of South Australia small businesses that have a strong future. If we do not get this right, it is going to be a crisis.