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TRANSCRIPT

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Interview on ABC Radio Adelaide Breakfast with David Bevan.

Topics: Tourism sector in SA; re-opening of borders, aged care Royal Commission

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David Bevan: Right now though, we are joined by Senator Simon Birmingham, Minister for Trade and Tourism and South Australia's leading Liberal. Good morning, Senator Birmingham.

Simon Birmingham: Good morning, David, and good morning to your listeners.

David Bevan: What does the latest tourism data tell us?

Simon Birmingham: It shows us that during the months of April and May we saw, unsurprisingly, a significant drop in domestic tourism activity - that is Australians holidaying themselves across Australia - a drop of around \$12 billion worth of visitor spend at the time. That's of course on top of the loss of international tourism activity which is worth usually \$45 billion to the nation. For SA, that's a drop in domestic spending about \$670 million in April-May alone. Not to mention again hundreds of millions of dollars you usually see in international spend.

So it's, it's a sign, a reinforcement I guess of what we already knew and that is that many tourism operators are doing it incredibly tough right now and the financial lifeline of JobKeeper is important to them and other business assistance that's been provided. But also a reminder to those who can get out there and take a break, that one of the ways they can help local businesses and save local jobs is to do just that - take a break if you're in a fortunate position to be able to do so.

David Bevan: The Australian Tourism Industry Council Executive, Simon Westaway, says: the state and territory leaders are trying to outdo each other on being tough on borders. Do you agree?

Simon Birmingham: I think some who seem to have tried to project out 12, 18 months into the future are unhelpfully undermining any sense of hope that exists in people's minds about what they could plan or at least think about into the future. And they're getting well ahead of what they can possibly know in terms of how things are going to evolve in different states or territories.

I think here we've seen with Steven Marshall a fairly proportionate and considered approach taken. South Australia has opened its borders up to WA, to Northern Territory, to Queensland and Tasmania but kept them closed to, to New South Wales, ACT and Victoria. And that's shown a considered and measured approach that where states are in a similar position they ought to be open to one another; where there's a threat - as is clearly posed by Victoria - they ought to be closed.

I'd like all states and territories to show a similar type of considered, proportionate approach. It's disappointing for example that, that West Australians can travel into South Australia but they'll face restrictions if they try to go back home to WA. And I was just over at Ceduna earlier this week and talking to tourism operators there. You know, that absence of cross across the Nullarbor travel is, is really hurting and it's hurting because WA remains, I think unnecessarily, closed to SA.

David Bevan: So WA- what about Northern Territory? Are they also literally putting roadblocks in the way of recovery?

Simon Birmingham: It doesn't help - as I say everybody, everybody understands why you'd be closed to Victoria right now, that's completely necessary and justified. And I can understand the risk analysis that sits around New South Wales. I hope we can get back to a point where, as SA we came close to doing, we can open up to New South Wales.

But I think the other jurisdictions are all very much in similar situations and they ought to be open to one another, if not right now then they ought to be looking at what a sensible timeline is to, to allow that opening to occur. Because tourists travelling outside of their own state will be a little bit more adventurous in what they do and that means they'll be more likely to book the added tour, the added experience. It won't just be going to a known holiday spot and relaxing by the beach or enjoying a bit of nature - wonderful though that is, it's not necessarily propping up and sustaining all of the tourism businesses that we want to support. And so, if you can get people moving across the country again a little bit, well then those tour operators and experience providers we'll also see a bit more of a lift in their activity.

David Bevan: This is a little of an interview we had yesterday with Ali Cupper. Now, she's the Member for Mildura in the Victorian State Parliament and she says the Federal Government needs to intervene to help the border communities. Here's a little of what she had to say yesterday.

[Excerpt]

Ali Cupper: This is political. This shutdown that happened yesterday is political. Steven Marshall going to the border to inspect the border controls is political. It is playing well politically in South Australia and you're playing politics, your state is playing politics with people's lives and it is not Australian.

We think the Federal Government needs to come over the top to start to try to negotiate with the states in good faith to say, look, where there are pockets of low risk or no risk you need to allow those communities to keep operating. Otherwise it is simply brutal without just cause.

[End of excerpt]

David Bevan: Is she right?

Simon Birmingham: I don't think she is right. I think there has been an increase in reported cases of COVID in some of the closer border communities in different parts of regional Victoria, and that's what's driven South Australia to take the increasingly tougher approach over a period of time. SA's approach, in many ways, has followed the spread in Victoria and that was that there was a looser approach to border communities at the outset because the threat in Victoria was mainly present in broader metropolitan Melbourne. Then, as that threat has grown in regional areas, unsurprisingly SA has had to take a tougher approach.

Now, as a Federal Government, you know, we have sought to engage and facilitate discussions between the states around essential things like the movement of freight and the facilitation of that type of transport of goods and services. We know that there's enormous disruption for people whose lives usually rely on crossing over the borders, but I do understand the cautious approach the state is taking there. I just hope, though, that the same common sense as I was discussing before about being proportionate around these things, and that as and if the risk reduces in certain border communities or areas, then hopefully, hopefully an approach can be taken that reconnects them as quickly as possible.

David Bevan: Simon Birmingham, has your Government let down the most vulnerable Australians in aged care during this pandemic?

Simon Birmingham: David, I don't believe so. We've deployed a lot of resource in planning and preparedness to try to work with people in our aged care facilities and the management of them. We've put extensive, additional funding support into helping aged care and...

David Bevan: Well, counsel assisting the Aged Care Royal Commission, Peter Rosen, says the aged care sector continues to be unprepared. Now, it's your Government's responsibility. How can they continue to be underprepared in the opinion of counsel assisting, four or five months into a pandemic?

Simon Birmingham: Well, let's let the full Royal Commission do its work, rather than take one comment in that regard. The harsh reality is that this is a terrible virus which does target vulnerable, and particularly the elderly, and that's why we...

David Bevan: Well, it's not just one comment, though, is it? It's not just one comment, and it's not just from anybody. This is a QC, he's counsel assisting the Royal Commission - he wants the Royal Commission to find that you have left them unprepared five months into a pandemic.

Simon Birmingham: His submissions to the Commission are not findings of the Commission, and you shouldn't confuse the two, David.

David Bevan: No, I'm not. But he's asking them, and I'm asking you – is he right?

Simon Birmingham: Well, David, everybody is right to say that the aged care sector is increasingly, or a terribly important part of how we manage this pandemic. It's why we put \$850 million extra into support for aged care services, why we've funded, I think, around 450 additional surge staff to support in aged care facilities to deal with this, including uses of Defence Force medical or nursing personnel in some instances. We have been trying to respond as well as we can to assist the aged care sector through this and to make sure that they have advice. And I know you've spoken to aged care providers here in SA who've talked through the planning and the preparedness work that they've undertaken.

Now, it's devastating in those centres in Victoria where there has been an outbreak, and there've been some shocking, devastating consequences. We need to all keep learning the lessons from these things as to how we can better manage in each and every incident going forward. Because, tragically, there probably will be other cases into the future that we'll have to manage, and hopefully the lessons from these will help us all to be better prepared in the future. But certainly, there has been a huge surge in staffing, in financing, and in planning and advice and support for the aged care sector.

David Bevan: Senator Birmingham, we know you have to go, thanks for your time.

Simon Birmingham: Thank you, David.

David Bevan: Minister for Trade and Tourism and Investment, South Australia's, Simon Birmingham.

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