



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Petition Debate

15 October 2020

REGIONAL SENIORS TRAVEL CARD

The DEPUTY SPEAKER:

I take this opportunity to explain the process and rationale behind this unique debate. It is unique because it enables the public to directly bring their concerns to the attention of the House. The intent of this procedure is that the petition debate will start with a speech from a member, which in most cases will be the member who lodged the petition, followed by up to four other members, followed by a Minister in response, and to conclude the debate the first speaker will speak in reply. After all members have spoken, the House will vote on the question that the House take note of the petition. This question will in most cases be determined on the voices and be passed. However, if this is challenged by a member it may proceed to a division where the bells are rung and members vote on the motion to take note of the petition by moving to the appropriate side of the House.

The question is that the House take note of the petition.

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (16:01:34)

I am pleased to speak in support of the 11,000 people from Wallsend, Newcastle and Charlestown who signed this worthy petition. Earlier this year the Government rolled out the regional seniors travel card. It provided a \$250 prepaid Visa card to seniors living in regional areas to help with travel costs. This was very welcome news to seniors across the electorate of Wallsend. I wrote to 2,000 local seniors who were deemed eligible and provided them with application details. Sadly, over 12,000 seniors

in my electorate were deemed ineligible as the Government does not classify the Newcastle local government area [LGA] as regional. Consequently, many seniors in the Wallsend electorate, who would really appreciate the support and need the support, missed out.

The Wallsend electorate is at the western end of the Newcastle LGA and the northern end of the Lake Macquarie local government area. The suburbs of Minmi and Black Hill have semirural properties and the suburbs of Beresfield and Tarro, which are 25 kilometres from the Newcastle CBD, cannot be described as metropolitan areas. Local residents were left gobsmacked that they were ineligible for the regional seniors travel card. Residents of Rankin Park, Elernmore Vale, New Lambton Heights and Cardiff Heights were told they were not eligible as they live on the Newcastle side of the suburb, yet residents on the Lake Macquarie side—sometimes their next-door neighbours—were deemed eligible for the card. Go figure. One side of the street gets the card, the other side of the street does not get the card.

Beresfield and Tarro residents were left fuming because they attended the Maitland Service NSW centre to apply. They were initially told they were eligible and received confirmation that their applications had been received, but a few weeks later they were told they had been rejected. Woodbury, situated in the Maitland local government area, was eligible. The only thing segregating Beresford from Tarro is a rail line—the same rail line that takes everyone to Newcastle. Newcastle is broad, though compared with surrounding local government areas it is the smallest council and the smallest cousin, with Lake Macquarie and the Central Coast much larger in size and population. Yet Newcastle was the only one excluded. Why? What is confusing is how the Government determines what is regional and what is metropolitan. Often Newcastle is considered to be neither of this to the Government. When I write to Ministers or put questions on notice regarding Newcastle issues, they are directed to the Minister for Regional Transport and Roads. So the Government classifies Newcastle as "regional", but when applying for many large regional grants it suddenly classifies the area as "metropolitan". This classification excludes Newcastle from applying for significant funding pools for key infrastructure.

Policy documents from the Government's Making it Happen in the Regions: Regional Development Framework categorically reference Newcastle within the context of regional New South Wales. Yet Newcastle is defined as metropolitan for the purposes of the Regional Growth Fund, thus making it ineligible. It is also ineligible for a range of other New South Wales funding projects, including the Snowy Hydro Legacy Fund. In contrast, Newcastle is eligible for regional funds through the Resources for Regions scheme, as well as a number of regional State government funding schemes. This inconsistency makes Newcastle residents question the Government's decisions. Why on earth does it consider them as regional, but when it comes to handing out money it considers them as metropolitan? The 11,000 people who signed this petition believe that they are regional. I ask the Minister for Regional Transport and Roads to ensure that eligible Newcastle residents are included in the program.

Mr GEOFF PROVEST (Tweed) (16:06:21):

I thank the member for Wallsend for bringing the petition. I also thank the petitioners for their interest in this issue. More than 330,000 seniors have successfully applied for the regional seniors travel card. The card is now in operation across the State. It gives each senior \$250 to spend on fuel, taxis and NSW TrainLink train and coach services. Already we have seen more than \$56 million put back into the New South Wales economy through spending at fuel stations, as well as on taxis and NSW TrainLink services. Most pleasingly, 92 per cent of these funds have already been spent in regional New South Wales. That constitutes a \$52 million boost to regional economies that have been doing it tough over the past few years.

The card was designed to ease the pressure of travel costs for seniors living in the bush, help them stay connected with family and friends and access other services. The boundaries of the card's distribution were drawn based on the Restart definition of "regional" as outside Sydney, and the Newcastle and Wollongong local government area borders. The Government recognises that often many regional residents only have two options available to them—driving or walking. They do not have the luxury of subsidised public transport options with the same frequency and route operations as major cities such as Newcastle, Sydney or Wollongong. Newcastle is not regional. It has an established transport network with frequent bus and train services, as well as access to other transport options like Uber and light rail.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER:

The member for Newcastle will have his opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Mr GEOFF PROVEST:

Let us consider the Newcastle Light Rail. It represents a \$650 million investment into Newcastle by this Government. It was delivered on time and on budget, and it provides turn-up-and-go services from 5.00 a.m. until 1.00 a.m. daily.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER:

I call the member for Newcastle to order for the first time.

Mr GEOFF PROVEST:

The light rail runs for 2.7 kilometres through the city centre to Newcastle Beach. As of 31 July 2020 it has carried over 1.47 million passengers since opening in February 2019. The light rail is a fabulous service for the people of Newcastle. There are a large number of regional MPs, including myself, who would love to have had \$650 million spent on a light rail running through their electorates. But it does not stop at light rail

for the people of Newcastle. The Government also introduced Newcastle Transport on 1 July 2017. This new model for public transport saw a single operator running multiple modes to deliver timetable efficiency, easy connections and a locally based approach to ensure the best service for customers. Newcastle Transport operates four frequent routes, providing a 15-minute service between 7.00 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. weekdays. These routes meet high demand between key sites, including the John Hunter Hospital, the university, Charlestown, Cardiff, Wallsend and the CBD. Three of the four core bus routes also extend to the outer suburbs every 30 minutes. As a result of this model, 37 per cent of the population in Newcastle Transport area of operation live within 400 metres of a bus service offering a 15-minute frequency.

The Government also introduced on-demand off-peak bus services from 4 January 2018. Newcastle Transport has improved bus access to Cardiff station from locations such as Warners Bay, Belmont and Swansea, and has installed bus stops at the major entrance to Broadmeadows station on Graham Road. This is a world-class public transport system and the product of millions of dollars of investment from this Government. While we are investing in more buses and trains to improve connectivity in the regions, we know that seniors in small regional towns do not have the same transport options as those in the big cities. That is why we have introduced the regional seniors travel card, to allow this cohort to experience the support from the Government that seniors in big cities receive every day.

Mr Tim Crakanthorp:

It depends which street you live on.

Mr GEOFF PROVEST:

I look forward to the card entering its second year of operation in 2021 and I encourage all eligible regional seniors to apply, if they have not already done so. So far, they have been applying through my office on a regular basis. Another way that the Government is injecting money into the bush is through an \$82 million investment that will boost regional fuel stations and taxidrivers, a commitment that Labor refused to match at the last election. This funding boost to the regional economy could only happen under this Government. I note the interjection from the member for Newcastle. He was the one who complained about light rail. He has complained about every piece of progress that we have made. But still we deliver for the people of Newcastle and, more importantly, for regional New South Wales.

Mr TIM CRAKANTHORP (Newcastle) (16:11:43):

I apologise to the postie doing the run along Hunter Street in Newcastle. Any reimbursement that he might need for chiropractic care should be sent to the Minister for Regional Transport and Roads. That is how weighed down he was with post when the member for Charlestown, the member for Wallsend, along with our great shadow Minister for Seniors and Volunteers, launched this petition against unfairly making seniors in the Newcastle local government area ineligible for the seniors regional travel card. I thank the shadow Minister for Seniors and Volunteers, along with volunteers, for being such a great advocate for this campaign, because it goes right to the crux of cost-of-living pressures. So many people in the Newcastle local government area [LGA] struggle to put food on the table every day, especially our pensioners and older people who would have benefited so much from this card.

But back to the poor old postie. Day after day I had never seen my letterbox fill up so quickly. These petitions did not just have one signature on them, they contained sheets and sheets filled with the names of locals and visitors to Newcastle alike from as far away as the Upper Hunter, the Blue Mountains and even the far North Coast. That is how strongly these communities feel about the shameful treatment of our seniors, and how incomprehensible it is that this card splits suburbs and even streets in two.

To give an example, no seniors from 75 Madison Drive, Adamstown Heights, Newcastle LGA will be eligible for the cards, yet seniors living at 77 Madison Drive, Adamstown Heights, Lake Macquarie LGA will be. I challenge the Minister to explain to this Chamber, and to the seniors of Newcastle, why these next-door neighbours should be treated differently. How can a few metres make one household's occupants worthy of help yet their neighbours not? These two LGAs share train lines and bus routes. The residents frequently traverse council lines to access shopping centres and health facilities. These people live side by side and share services. I ask again: What makes them so different that one set of residents is worthy of receiving transport assistance and the other set of residents is not?

Let us head north and talk about the suburbs of Stockton and Fern Bay. Both are separated from the Newcastle CBD by the Hunter River. Both catch the same ferry into town. Both are faced with a 20-minute drive to access the city or to connect to other forms of public transport. But if you are an eligible senior living in Fern Bay you can access a \$250 card to help with the cost of driving into Newcastle or catching that ferry. If you live in Stockton you cannot. Again I ask: What makes these communities so different? What makes this ridiculous situation even more unbelievable is that when the costing was initially done Newcastle was included. But when it came to implementation we were suddenly gone, which is typical of this Government, which tries to make things it does not like simply disappear. That is what it is in so many different classifications in Newcastle. Try getting a reasonable sporting facility grant in Newcastle—no, you have to go outside the LGA right onto the border where you are actually eligible. That is where we sporting facilities are put, on the side.

Look at other various grants and funds available and, well, it just depends on what mood the Government is in. One day you are metropolitan and one day you are regional. But the Government wants to be a bit tight on this one. It does not want our pensioners getting the card, so just forget about it. The seniors of Newcastle are not immune to living off paltry pensions, needing to access specialist and sometimes expensive medical care or having very little in their bank accounts. They are not

immune to this, despite where this disgraceful Government decides to draw its arbitrary line in the sand. The long and short of it is 25,000 Newcastle seniors have been kicked to the kerb by this Government, and they are not asking for the world. They are just asking to be treated the same as their neighbours.

Mrs WENDY TUCKERMAN (Goulburn) (16:16:44):

I thank the member for Wallsend for this petition and I thank the petitioners for their interest in the issue. The regional seniors travel card was an election commitment by the New South Wales Liberal-Nationals that has provided eligible seniors with \$250 to spend on fuel, taxis and NSW TrainLink services. Eligibility is based on the Restart NSW definition of "regional", as outside Sydney, as well as the Newcastle and Wollongong local government areas [LGAs]. The reason this definition was used is that residents of Newcastle have access to an enormous public transport network that regional residents simply cannot access in their towns. The New South Wales Government had been investing millions in boosting the public transport network in Newcastle and in many ways it is now the envy of the State.

To name a few achievements, since the new operator took the keys to the Newcastle Transport network in July 2017 on-time running targets have been met each month for the past 12 months. The new Newcastle Bus Interchange became operational on 5 July 2020. On-demand bus services were extended on 30 June 2019 to an additional 27,000 residents in the Lake Macquarie suburbs of Redhead, Jewells, Floraville, Croudace Bay, Valentine, Belmont North and Belmont. Both of Newcastle Transport's ferries have undergone refurbishment, the Hunter in the second half of 2018 and the Shortland in mid-2019, delivered as part of the Newcastle Integrated Services Contract.

And of course we have the Newcastle Light Rail, which carried its millionth customer on 5 December 2019. This amazing milestone was achieved in less than one year of operation. Light rail has clearly changed how people move around the city. While the New South Wales Government has been investing millions into public transport in regional New South Wales, the extent of those networks simply cannot compare to the world-class system that residents of Newcastle can access every day. The regional seniors card provides the State's regional residents with a leg-up to assist them to deal with their travel costs. Travel is one of the most significant household costs faced by those living across rural and regional New South Wales. With further distances to travel, country seniors rely more heavily on their cars—that means more fuel and more money.

It is clear that the cost of living is a key concern for seniors around the State. The regional seniors travel card is just one way the Government is helping people with this challenge. The card complements the suite of cost-of-living measures already announced by the Government, including an expanded Seniors Card and energy rebates for self-funded retirees in addition to existing rebates for pensioners and families. It has been great to see the uptake of the regional seniors travel card around New South Wales. It has been embraced by so many communities and individuals. I

think of the time when Mr Neil Wright popped into my electorate office to thank the State Government for the wonderful initiative.

In my electorate of Goulburn over 9,801 people have accessed this card. We have seen more than 15,000 cards issued in the Port Macquarie LGA, more than 13,000 in the Tweed LGA, almost 8,000 in the Maitland LGA and more than 5,000 in the Wagga Wagga LGA, all the way down to more than 100 in small, isolated LGAs such as Bourke, Balranald, Central Darling and Carrathool. These seniors cannot access a light rail line, an on-demand bus service or even a heavy rail network in some cases. It is for this reason the Government is proud to support them with the regional seniors travel card, which will provide them with \$250 this year and next year to assist them with their considerable travel costs.

Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (16:21:13):

I speak in favour of this petition and to urge the Government to correct its transparently unfair treatment of residents of the Newcastle local government area [LGA]. At the outset I recognise the 11,000 petitioners across the electorates of Charlestown, Wallsend and Newcastle and indeed right across the State who have signed this petition, many of whom signed the petition not because they were ineligible for the regional seniors travel card, but because in fact they were and they saw the inequities of their neighbours and their friends in nearby suburbs not being eligible for it. The regional seniors travel card is a welcome relief for many elderly people in the regional areas of our State, helping to offset travel costs for a significant demographic that is often less mobile and more likely to become isolated.

I do not quibble with the people of Goulburn, Tweed, Port Macquarie or Myall Lakes being able to apply for this regional travel card. I do quibble with the fact that people living in part of one suburb in my electorate are eligible whereas their friends who live down the street are not. Unfortunately the policy's design has resulted in a blatantly unjust outcome for many of my constituents. From the outset it was clear that the policy had been poorly designed. Some elderly people who desperately needed this kind of relief could not access the travel card because they happened to be on the carer pension, a widow pension or any other payment besides the Age Pension. I thank the people who raised these issues and had them fixed. It is good to see the Government come to its senses and revised it but there is still a serious problem at the heart of this policy and this Government's attitude towards people who live in the City of Newcastle.

The bulk of the Charlestown electorate is located in the City of Lake Macquarie, which is considered regional. Its residents can register for and make use of the regional seniors travel card. But a significant portion of my constituents live in the Newcastle LGA and they have been left out. This Government's decision to stop classifying the Newcastle LGA as "regional" while at the same time refusing to classify it as a metropolitan LGA has left the city and its residents in a governmental limbo, unable to access or make use of grants and programs such as the regional seniors travel card.

How is it fair that residents living in one part of Highfields can apply, but residents living in the rest of the suburb cannot? How is it fair that residents in Kotara cannot access

the travel card but residents in Kotara South can? Why is Adamstown excluded but residents in large swathes of Adamstown Heights are not? It is absurd that residents at one end of a street, which happens to be in Lake Macquarie, are eligible for the travel card, while residents at the other end of the street, which happens to be in Newcastle, are not. Take Princeton Avenue, or Ellerslie Road—a street that I used to live in—or a huge number of streets in the suburb of Adamstown Heights. The northern ends of those streets are in Newcastle and the southern ends are in Lake Macquarie—a street less than 500 metres long. Some people are eligible, some people are not.

Other than a quirk of local government boundaries, what real difference is there between the two ends of those streets? How is it fair that residents of a suburb of Charlestown, a thriving commercial and transport hub with relatively strong public transport links—even given the bus cuts—can make use of the travel card? Sure, public transport is better in Charlestown than it is in Goulburn, and I acknowledge that, but how is it that they can make use of the travel card while residents in places farther away, such as Minmi and Beresfield that are in the Newcastle local government area, cannot?

I thank all of the constituents who took the time to sign this petition. Many of them live in the Lake Macquarie local government area. They could already apply for and access the travel card but they saw the injustice inherent in the design of this policy and they took the time to stand up for their neighbours in Newcastle. This is exactly the kind of community spirit that makes the Charlestown and Wallsend electorates and the electorates of many members on this side of the Chamber such extraordinary places to live in and to represent in this place. I urge the Government to fix this inherently unjust aspect of the policy and reconsider its approach to the people of Newcastle.

Mr STEPHEN BROMHEAD (Myall Lakes) (16:26:24):

I thank all the petitioners on the regional seniors travel card and the speakers on this matter. Isn't it good to see so many people supporting a National Party program that The Nationals in government have delivered for seniors in regional New South Wales? The seniors in regional New South Wales know that it is only The Nationals in government who deliver for them. The people in the mid-coast area, which is part of Myall Lakes, and of course in Hastings in the Deputy Speaker's electorate know that it is The Nationals in government who deliver for regional New South Wales.

The member for Newcastle misled Parliament when he said that Newcastle was part of the original plan. The policy was costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office before the election. The costing assumed the same definition of regional New South Wales as used by Restart NSW, therefore the member for Newcastle was wrong. He is mistaken. He has misled Parliament. The policy was delivered in line with what was promised and costed, which did not include Newcastle. The member for Newcastle knows it but he is misleading the people of Newcastle by saying that it was originally in when it was never in. He should not let the truth get in the way of a good story.

Mr Tim Crakanthorp:

You never have.

Mr STEPHEN BROMHEAD:

He has been watching Graham Richardson. He has got the book. Whatever it takes; that is the member for Newcastle. I will enlighten members a little about the regional seniors travel card. The regional card is a pre-loaded \$250 Visa card which can be used to purchase fuel, pay for taxi services or to travel on New South Wales TrainLink trains and coaches. This is about easing the pressure of travel costs for seniors living in the bush and helping them to stay connected with family and friends and to access services. As the other speakers have outlined, the card has already had an enormous impact on regional economies, putting money in tills when it is most needed. I can appreciate that the member for Wallsend and others want the card extended to their electorate given its success. It is a great Nationals policy. However, the card was designed to help seniors in regional areas with their specific transport needs.

Newcastle is not regional and, as others have outlined, it has benefited from hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in public transport by this Government. That includes Newcastle's electric rail, the \$650 million light rail line that has been constructed, our investment in a new bus interchange, the overhaul of local bus services, the introduction of more train services and better ferries, and investment in the local walking and cycling network. These provide a range of options for local seniors to access every day. They are also able to access a subsidised rate to use these services. The mid-coast area of my electorate has seen 18,949 successful applications, which amounts to more than \$4.7 million going back into the Myall Lakes economy. I look forward to delivering it in the next term.

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (16:29:40):

In reply: I thank the members representing the electorates of Tweed, Newcastle, Goulburn and Charlestown. I also thank the member for Myall Lakes, although I am disappointed that the Minister did not take the time to listen to this important debate. The debate is about inconsistencies. It is about boundaries. I reckon the person from the Government who drew up the boundaries must have done it first thing in the morning before they had their cup of coffee. They just drew a weird line across Wallsend and said, "That'll will be good enough. One half will get it, one half won't and that is okay." It is a very inconsistent rule. That is what members on this side are talking about.

The other point I make is about public transport. There seems to be an idea that if you live in Wallsend, Charlestown or Newcastle there is brilliant public transport. Half of my electorate does not have good public transport or public transport at all. For people who live in the Blue Gum Hills area there are two private buses every weekend. That is not good public transport. We are talking about investing in local regions. It would

be great if you lived in Wallsend or Charlestown and you could come into Newcastle and use the light rail. Unfortunately, if you are a working class senior living in Beresfield, 25 kilometres away from the inner city, you will not be able to afford it because you did not get the \$250. We are talking about an inconsistency. I ask the Minister to tidy the boundary up. I am disappointed that the 12,000 people who signed this petition were shown disloyalty by the Minister who did not show up today. That is sad. On behalf of all of the people who signed the petition and those that missed out on \$250 that they deserve, I ask the Minister to support this sensible and logical petition.