

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 August 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence



**WITNESSES**

Mr Tim Piper, Head, Victoria, and

Ms Julie Toth, Chief Economist, Australian Industry Group.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, and welcome to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, the second series of hearings for the Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members are attending these meetings remotely from home or from their electorate offices, and we ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section 7(i). We also advise that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. As a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We invite you to make a brief 5-minute opening statement. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee members. Welcome to the Australian Industry Group and Mr Piper. Thank you.

**Mr PIPER:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for inviting us to be here today. We really appreciate the opportunity. My name is Tim Piper. I am the Victorian head of the Australian Industry Group. I am here today with our Chief Economist, Julie Toth.

Many of you know AI Group. We are a peak organisation supporting businesses across Australia. We have been around for 140 years and we have got about 250 staff across the country that we work with. We have provided assistance, information and advice to literally thousands of companies during this COVID period. We have an infoline, with many people who are on the telephone during this period, and they are taking many, many calls from our members. Our members have experienced activity restrictions, drops in business, drops in consumer incomes and indeed their expenditure. That reduced consumer demand remains the primary concern for Australian businesses, and our Chief Economist, Julie Toth, undertakes numerous surveys of our members to provide an understanding of many of those difficulties, and we will hear a bit more about that later.

The initial reaction to the crisis by business was heavily focused on finding information, followed by what was a rapid period of shutdowns and shifts to remote work. That occurred in April. The JobKeeper wage subsidy announcements in May quickly became a critical support for many. In July, though, it was about how to stay open, how to retain customers, how to reduce costs and how, literally, to see this period through. Further measures will be needed, we believe, to stimulate business activity and employment over the coming months, with a particular focus on Melbourne, which alone accounts for about 20 per cent of Australia's national economic activity and jobs. But the effects of the shutdown that we are experiencing in Melbourne will be experienced throughout the country.

From March to June, 62 per cent of businesses said that reduced customer demand was the primary impact. Other lesser concerns were disruptions to supply, increased workload and the new OH&S procedures that we all know about. However, 22 per cent of businesses said their work was not materially directly impacted by the pandemic. Some have reported that their businesses were even improving, but I guess it was mainly in food- and beverage-related areas.

However, since June the concerns have simply multiplied for members. Reduced sales and orders, cancelled and delayed investment decisions and lower customer demand dominate; even problems gaining access to their customers for sales and maintenance and to prepare quotes for them have been mentioned on many occasions.

Businesses now know that the forward orders that they have will not sustain them with the current pipeline, and some are expecting about 10 per cent of orders that they had budgeted for.

Even in June, 38 per cent have been reducing their working hours and 23 per cent had reduced staff numbers. They are now having further reduced hours, reduced and shorter shifts, and requiring people to take their annual leave and long service leave. That percentage increased considerably in July from where we were before, and our workers on infoline are receiving many, many calls; in fact a cavalcade of calls dealing with redundancies, dealing with absenteeism and dealing with standdowns.

Interestingly when we compare states in the March to June period that our members have told us about, New South Wales had 50 per cent more people working from home, or around 50 per cent more people working from home, than we had in Victoria. Victoria had the most businesses of our members with reduced staff numbers and reduced hours. Most other indices were about similar between the states. When we asked what would help most businesses the three main suggestions were financial assistance, easing of restrictions and infrastructure investment.

I have also personally received many calls from members seeking assistance from the state government, particularly on payroll tax. Victorian companies feel hard done by because any company above about 35 employees has not received any payroll tax assistance, literally none. We have suggested to the government that they should help businesses by forgoing payroll tax on the first \$3 million of payroll. I believe this is likely to cost in the vicinity of \$2 billion, but it could be extremely important to businesses in being able to maintain themselves in the next period. And we have got a number of other suggestions that we would like the opportunity to offer to the committee as well a little bit later.

So this month we are seeing a high level of concern from companies both in manufacturing and services. In manufacturing, as you would be aware, companies simply cannot stop; they need to often be on pilot light, as it were. But they are really worried about getting customers, retaining them and dealing with those internal regulations with their customers with whom they have developed some really good relationships.

Perhaps even more worryingly for Victoria we have heard senior CEOs either musing or even suggesting that their company would be better off in another state. We have already felt that this government has not been pro business, with concerning legislation such as wage theft, a proposed jobs code that is coming through and unnecessarily harsh industrial manslaughter legislation. So combined with some of the pieces of legislation that are being proposed as well as COVID, it is making businesses really question what their involvement is here in Victoria, and that is a concern for us and we would like to make sure that government recognises that. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much—appreciate that introduction. I will hand to Mr Gary Maas, MP, for the first questions.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Piper and Ms Toth, for your appearance. Good afternoon. Look, I would like to just pick up on where we left off when we last caught up in May. We talked about consultation and the engagement that the Ai Group had had with the Victorian government, and I was just wondering if that has continued, and if so, what form that has taken.

**Mr PIPER:** It has varied in terms of the consultation. However, from ministerial level down we have had at different times some excellent consultation, especially since the restrictions were announced. Our consultations with ministers' offices and with the bureaucrats has been excellent. Prior to that though, when the restrictions were being announced and prepared, was the time that we would have liked to have had more consultation and we literally did not. So in those three or four days—and it was probably longer—before the restrictions were announced on the Monday, it was very difficult for us to engage with government and to provide our views, and we think if we had been able to do that we would have been able to offer some changes to what has been proposed, some of which have actually been accepted since that time. But in general, when we have needed to speak to any of the bureaucrats—except on that particular issue—and indeed with ministers we have had decent consultation.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. Look, I think you would appreciate the fast-moving nature of the beast that we are dealing with—and we only have to look to New Zealand to see just how quickly things can change—and

sometimes the sort of consultation that we would all like to have just is not there. But I just want to pick up on the responsiveness element of that. So where in particular have we been responsive to the Ai Group?

**Mr PIPER:** I will give you a very positive example. I sent the Treasurer a text asking if I could speak to him that night, and within 5 minutes he rang me back and said, ‘So what is it you want?’. So that was not a bad response from the Treasurer—obviously he had a few moments and he could talk to me, and that is terrific. And indeed the bureaucrats have been very engaging with us at the most senior levels, from the secretaries of departments down, to make sure that we have been able to put our views forward, particularly around the restrictions. And we have been involved in round tables, we have been involved in one-on-ones, and that indeed has not been a problem. Minister Pakula, we have had access to him and to his office as well. So the information has been forthcoming both on a confidential and non-confidential basis, so in that sense generally speaking it has been good. It was just in the lead-up to that really pivotal time when we wanted to talk about the restrictions, we wanted to make sure that they were not too prescriptive, that they were actually targeted properly. And there were areas that should not have been included that were that we would have preferred to have had some better consultation.

**Ms TOTH:** And, might I add, the other area that members were asking about with that consultation was about not so much which types of activities are going to be restricted, because we could not answer them with that, but the mechanics of how it would work, the logistics. So Tim mentioned earlier that our infoline team has had huge numbers of calls asking for assistance, and in fact last Tuesday was one of our peak days ever. But a big one has been the work permits—how to get them, who needs to get them, who is responsible for doing that—so that this is not so much about the restriction itself but about the implementation and the logistics, and I think that is probably a key area of where consultation prior to implementing the restrictions would have been beneficial for everyone.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. And, yes, again I just note the fast-moving nature of the pandemic. Just in terms of continued engagement, I know that last time we all caught up there was discussion about easing restrictions at that time. Obviously things have changed quite quickly. But what sort of engagement are you seeking when we are positioned to reopen again?

**Mr PIPER:** We are after the same sort of consultation that we are getting now. So we are getting it from premiers, we are getting it from the department, we are getting it from the Treasurer’s office. That sort of consultation is really important. And right now I think it is the best we could have hoped for. We are getting responsive answers directly for our members. When we have found anomalies the heads of the department and other senior people have reacted very quickly. We hope that will continue so when we get to a stage where we are reducing our restrictions, hopefully again we can have a discussion with them about what is appropriate.

I guess one of the questions that we would like to know from the government is: what is the endgame here? Is it to reduce to restriction 3 after the six weeks? Is it eradication? What actually are we trying to get to? Because that is the other question that companies are asking us, and that is what we would like to have a discussion with government about and indeed with the bureaucrats to make sure that we are all working on the same level.

**Mr MAAS:** I am sure we would all like to get to that same point. Of course social distancing is one key factor in ensuring that we do get to that point, Mr Piper. Given the importance of that and the infection control measures to protect your members and our community, do you feel that your members have access to the information they need to keep their workers and customers safe?

**Mr PIPER:** We are conscious that the government has had to implement these procedures very quickly, and we are thankful that there has been flexibility in those procedures, so it has not just been, ‘This is it; take it or leave it’. We are really pleased that they have made changes. Under those circumstances it has enabled companies to get hold of information. We know that there have been literally hours of waiting on the Business Victoria infoline; that is understandable under the circumstances. Companies have been given support around the COVID-safe plans that they need to introduce. It will over a period of time obviously improve, but many companies were wanting information immediately that they were finding difficult to get. That is understandable. I think we are getting to a stage now where companies are certainly better versed in what they are required to do and probably are feeling more comfortable, although we are still getting many calls just to clarify what the restrictions really are.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. I might cede my time to Mr Richardson now. Thank you.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you. Thank you, Tim and Julie, for your time today during these difficult times. I want to just go to the mental health and wellbeing support for your members and their staff as well. Aside from obviously the cash flow and tax support initiatives, have your members been forthcoming with any suggestions for other types of support they might need to get them through these difficult times, and particularly in that mental health and wellbeing support frame?

**Mr PIPER:** If I could mention—and Julie you might like to also—the mental health issue, if I can add to that the domestic violence matter—

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Absolutely.

**Mr PIPER:** because in a sense they are one and the same. I had a CEO speak to me last week when she was trying to determine whether she was going to be open or closed, and not far south of a thousand people were working for her. She was most concerned at the domestic violence implications of having these mostly men return home and be forced to be in the home the entire day. She said that she was already getting much higher domestic violence concerns through the restriction period. If her business was forced to close down, she was going to be very concerned that that would just spike significantly. I believe that her HR department passed it on to her to talk to me about it. So that is a factor.

Mental health: you know what the concerns are in the community, and indeed many of our members are mentioning that as well. Whether there is an answer for it that we have got for you, I am not sure at the moment. Julie?

**Ms TOTH:** Look, we have been collecting a lot of information from businesses nationally about their experiences dealing with the pandemic, and we are trying to report on that each month. So we are still in the process of collecting information for August. What started coming through in late July and into August is a bit of a split between New South Wales and Victoria that Tim already mentioned. In New South Wales we were seeing a greater proportion of businesses trying to move everyone to home, whereas in Victoria we are seeing more in the way of reduced work hours and standing people down and unfortunately redundancies. Now, that is partly a response to the demand management—demand for their business products has fallen—but it also appears to be related to the tougher restrictions in Victoria and particularly the home-life balance challenges of home-based schooling. I am still teasing through the data and picking through the anecdotes, but it appears that part of the reduced working hours in particular is related to businesses and employees really struggling with trying to balance continuing to work as well as they can and managing the stresses of the home requirements, and particularly school and childcare responsibilities. So I know that is not strictly mental health, but the attempt to do all of that at the same time is putting a huge strain on people. The response at the workplace level does seem to be leaning more towards reducing paid work and in some cases stopping work completely so that they can deal with those stresses.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** We can see how altogether that makes for a recipe with a lot of challenges and pressures, especially when you are trying to keep your workers on JobKeeper, you are trying to make ends meet, you do not know whether your business is going to survive. It all comes together to create a lot of pressure.

**Ms TOTH:** Correct.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And it is described as the second wave of the pandemic.

**Ms TOTH:** And I think the open-ended timetable that we are looking at at the moment also lends itself to people not so much giving up but just really needing to take a break from trying to do everything at once. So we are definitely seeing reduced attachment to the workplace, even with the home-based workers as a result of this.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Julie. Obviously there is a lot of coverage around the outbreaks in workplaces and particularly the challenges in the infection rate and how infectious this disease is in its movement through workplaces. Given the importance of social distancing and infection control measures that we know protect your members and our community, do you feel that your members have access to the information they need to keep workers and indeed the community safe?

**Mr PIPER:** Our members have not complained that they have not had enough access. They do come to us for clarity and they come to us for the more complex areas. So they have been able to get different COVID measures from government and they have received a great deal of that from us as well. Their biggest problem has been whether they have been able to deal with the social distancing as well as maintain their efficiencies, as well as maintain the types of machinery that they are operating on. I guess in addition to that there was a level of complacency amongst the community. I think that was pervasive then into workplaces, and people were probably not being as conscious as they should have been. I think that may have been a little troublesome for them. But I think that the information that they have received now and have been getting in recent times, because they have taken it much more seriously, has not been too bad. So I cannot say that they have been complaining about it.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Maybe an extension of that, then, is also the work of the Australian Industry Group with businesses and members around the COVID-safe work plans. How have the Ai Group worked to ensure that your members and stakeholders have that access to the health and safety requirements and that they are upheld and maintained?

**Mr PIPER:** We do that through our OH&S team. We have got a team of three here in Victoria who are literally on the phone most of the day answering inquiries from members. Sometimes it gets into industrial relations areas, but generally it has been into the OH&S: what has been expected from them, what WorkSafe has expected from them, the information, assistance and guidance that WorkSafe has provided. We have sent that out to our members as well. Where members have needed information specific to their businesses, we have been able to engage with them, but then again, you know, we have got thousands of members, and it is very difficult for us to get to them all. But generally speaking, we have been able to help them. We have had three webinars over the past week which have discussed the restrictions and discussed OH&S measures. On those webinars we have had around 400, 500 or more, members who have been listening and have had the opportunity to engage with us on all those areas, and that really has been the direct feedback mechanism that we have used in order to talk to the members.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. The member's time has expired. I will hand to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan, MP.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Chair, I will be taking this session.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, I will hand to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr Piper and Ms Toth, for appearing today. I would just like to pick up on some points that you made in your presentation earlier. You mentioned that you are hearing from the ground a number of businesses contemplating picking up altogether and leaving Victoria to set up in another state. Could you describe that a little bit more for the benefit of the committee—perhaps which sectors, to what extent you are hearing that and what that will mean for Victoria's economy?

**Mr PIPER:** We are concerned, Ms Vallence, about the reaction from some of our members and how they are feeling impacted by this, and that does not seem to have just been a reaction as a result of what has happened over the last couple of weeks. It has been a bit more pervasive than that.

I have just got a quote from a member. He says that, 'We will be taking heads out of Victoria, and we are going to be putting them elsewhere', and he is talking elsewhere—not just elsewhere in Australia but elsewhere in this region. That was made at a meeting we had about six weeks ago, and there were nods around the table and there was a reaction from others that that was what they were being asked to contemplate as well. I guess the internationalisation of this needs to be recognised at the same time. They are concerned that they are going to be losing customers to interstate and overseas sources and companies, and as a result of that they are just wondering whether they are better off anywhere else. But I guess off the back of that, they are working off the back of a number of decisions that have been made—pieces of legislation that they believe, and we believe, are making business that much more difficult in Victoria. So it all builds into them considering this as an option.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So the pandemic but also other pieces of legislation that have been implemented by the government are contributing to this—some of the most recent legislation? I think you mentioned some in your earlier presentation.

**Mr PIPER:** I did mention some of the legislation. I do think there is concern that it is not being pro-business, and we are concerned that that is continuing. The pandemic is obviously the major issue here; it is a significant factor. But it all is about the view that business has that it is not an easy place to do business at the moment.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Okay. With the pandemic as well, you mentioned that there had been some challenges around consultation prior to the implementation of the restrictions of stage 4, but you are getting engagement and consultation now. But, of course, consultation is one thing, but in terms of support—a realistic, meaningful level of financial support made available to business—what is Ai Group's and your members' assessment of the business support made available by the government so far?

**Mr PIPER:** There has been not a great deal of support being given to businesses, and I have had many calls about payroll tax in particular. There has been some support for the very small businesses and for those under about 30 to 35 employees, but beyond that businesses felt like they had been left to deal with it themselves. That is where I have received many of the calls from companies. Those up to \$10 million in turnover are saying, 'We need some support at the same time'. I have written to the Treasurer and asked him to consider the possibility of having payroll tax relief being given—in fact no payroll tax—for those up to \$3 million in payroll.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Have you received a response from the Treasurer?

**Mr PIPER:** No, I have not as yet—not officially, although I think the answer is probably that it is a very expensive option that we are considering. But at the same time I think it is going to be one of the things that will save companies and enable them to continue perhaps through these severe restrictions that we have got at the moment—that and the JobKeeper, which in Victoria is going to need to go well past September of course.

**Ms VALLENCE:** And you have mentioned as well around the lack of consultation prior to the implementation of the restrictions, and then you have also talked about some of the challenges that you are hearing from your members around implementing the COVID-safe plan, the worker permits and so forth. Are you hearing at all from your members around whether businesses might be choosing to pause their operations even if they are actually allowed to continue operating under the current restrictions, that they are actually deciding that it is too much in terms of the red tape, the permits and all these challenges? Are you hearing that at all?

**Ms TOTH:** Anecdotally we are, yes, particularly for businesses that have got multiple sites. Where they are able to move production to another state that does not have all of those requirements, then they will do so. This has included some big food-manufacturing facilities where at the beginning of this year they were actually picking up production activity from their international operations that had been closed down. So there are swings and roundabouts here. They picked up activity in Melbourne and elsewhere around Australia because they could no longer produce in Europe or China. Now, as Tim mentioned earlier, those locations are back in play, and we are looking at scenarios where it is not just about shifting activity to another state. These are multinationals and they do have facilities internationally, so the option for them is to actually move that activity offshore again.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes. I mean, I am hearing from a lot of businesses as well around how challenging it is to get on with their business in this current environment, but then they have got to spend a lot of time with the paperwork on the permits and so forth. It is a challenge, and we are hearing that.

**Mr PIPER:** Correct.

**Ms VALLENCE:** I am just wondering if you are hearing anything from members or in fact non-members—you do have a wide reach—around being able to access any support or answers. The meat industry, for example, and other small businesses—what are you hearing from them?

**Ms TOTH:** Not so much on the small side; that tends to be more in the anecdotal camp. Small businesses are more likely to have closed completely, and they are less able to access the permit system in particular.

**Ms VALLENCE:** And do you have any assessment at all of businesses in terms of the volume of businesses that perhaps might not make it through—numbers of businesses—and also businesses that might be able to

access some of the support available, like the \$10 000 and \$5000 grants, but really that will not be enough to make it through to the next budget period?

**Ms TOTH:** I think the best guide to that is actually some of the ABS data that you have probably already looked at on the business side—*Business Impacts of COVID-19* that the ABS has been publishing, one of the data series of most relevance. The ABS have asked businesses nationwide about their cash flow and about how much revenue they have available to see them through and how many weeks of money they basically have on reserve with nothing coming in. And the proportion of businesses that say they only have cash reserves to see them through for less than three months is extremely high, and that went up quite a bit as a result of the earlier lockdown period. So as we go into this second period, you know, there is less in the tank to start with to see businesses through, and that is a real concern.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Finally, and you might take some of this on notice and provide it to the committee, but we have got complex supply chains that reach right across the country and out externally. What impact is the shutdown having on interstate supply chains and the operation of businesses?

**Ms TOTH:** Yes, it is definitely having an effect, and we are getting quite a few calls from businesses interstate—not just in Victoria—regarding the impact that this is having.

**Ms VALLENCE:** I think the government—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, I am sorry to speak over you, but your time for questions has expired. The call is now with Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Toth and Mr Piper, for appearing today. Mr Piper, you raised a very good point earlier that some of the legislation that we have seen before the pandemic has made lots of businesses wonder why they are doing business in Victoria, and then with this shutdown I imagine that there will be a lot of businesses that have had to shut down that might be reconsidering whether they bother opening up in Victoria again. I want Victoria to be a competitive state and open for business. What are some things that the government in Victoria could take during and after the pandemic to make us more competitive and make businesses want to open up here again and employ people and not see Victoria as a basket case? What can we do to make things better and be more competitive?

**Mr PIPER:** There are a number of things. I will not go into detail with them, Mr Limbrick, but will make a number of points. Better engagement with business—we have talked about that—particularly before decisions are made, would be important. We have been disappointed with the engagement with local communities—with, for example, the African-Australian community. I think that could have been improved in order to assist them and to give them some guidance and to give their communities the opportunity to understand exactly what has been going on in this pandemic. I think that has been an element of real concern for us.

We think that with buying local the government has been very good—very good during this period—on buying local, and we want that to continue. But we want that to continue as much in manufacturing as anywhere else, because manufacturing is going to be the bedrock of the economy going into the future. So they need to be given support. There needs to be investment allowance and investment support for them. There needs to be innovation, and that probably means working with the universities. At the moment the universities are going to be struggling because they have lost all of their overseas students. So let us get the universities, business and government working much more closely together. That could be a role that the state government could very easily play, and business is ready for it and I hope universities are.

We need apprentice support. At the moment what we are finding is that many of our members across the board and people in other sectors are letting go of their apprentices. They just cannot afford to have them. We need to have those apprentices still around in two, three, four years when they are skilled people. So that is certainly something that needs to be really given some consideration. And indeed over the next month or so—month or six weeks—how to get these companies back online, back working, back regenerated, and what sort of support is provided to them to make that happen? Some targeted incentives would be helpful.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Mr Piper.

**Ms TOTH:** Can I add, the other thing that businesses call for fairly consistently is a stronger focus on infrastructure more broadly—so not just freight and transport but digital technologies like the ones we are using today. They want better reliability and better affordability of digital services—and that extends particularly into the regions, where reliability and affordability of digital services, you know, is a big kicker for regional areas—and also energy costs, energy reliability and, going forward, water waste and other utilities. So that whole basket of infrastructure and utilities: support, reliability and cost.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you. And Mr Piper, you raised something else, which was a focus of my questioning yesterday around the endgame and what that looks like. I was fairly disappointed actually with the government's response yesterday. Even from the Chief Health Officer, when we asked about what the suppression strategy was, the difference between suppression and elimination seems to be fairly semantic. What would you like to see the government do in terms of communicating what the endgame is and what it is going to look like for your members?

**Mr PIPER:** Well, business is always about certainty. It is knowing what to expect out of this. So what are we looking for? Are we looking for a dozen cases a day, are we looking for 50 cases a day? What is it that is going to mean that we can go into the next stage? And is the next stage going into phase 3? Are we going to return to where we were? Are we going to be able to live with this? Is that the intention, that we have to live and work with this virus continually? It seems to us a number of our members are talking about what the Europeans are doing. Rightly or wrongly, they seem to have all gone back to work, going on holidays and dealing with the virus under those conditions. I do not know whether that is the right thing for us to be doing in Victoria, but we do not seem to have an endplay at the moment for what might be going on even in five weeks from here. That is what businesses want. They want that certainty.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Yes, it is very unclear what the long-term strategy is, and it does not appear to be very well communicated at all. I imagine we will be discussing Europe a bit more this afternoon with our next witness maybe. But in terms of communicating these sorts of targets, is what you are talking about, if the government said, 'All right, we want the number of cases below this per day', you think that would be a really helpful thing for business, then they could say, 'All right, well, we know when we get to this level, then we will be able to start doing X, Y and Z'?

**Mr PIPER:** I think it would give us all a semblance of understanding as to where we are heading and what our challenge is—if we can get to a stage where New South Wales is at the moment. I know it is difficult for the health people—I am not suggesting that it is not—but at the same time business is being left in limbo. Businesses believe that they are taking these really severe measures, and they are taking it on the chin in many circumstances. So where are we going with it, and when can we expect to pull out of it and return to a better position? It is not going to be perfect by any means, but a stage where we can be reopening again.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Mr Piper. I believe we are out of time. I would love to talk more but thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** We are. Thank you, Mr Limbrick. And thank you, Mr Piper, Ms Toth, for appearing here today on behalf of the Australian Industry Group. Thank you very much for your time. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee will take a very short break before consideration of its next witness, and we declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you for your time.

**Mr PIPER:** Thank you, Chair.

**Ms TOTH:** Thank you for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**