

*Waste and Recycling Industry — Adjournment Debate*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [10.10 pm]: In the past couple of weeks since the budget was brought down two quite serious calamities have befallen the waste and recycling industry in Western Australia. The first occurred over the weekend, when a substantial part of the recycling facility of the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council burnt down. I, along with the former Minister for the Environment, David Templeman, and many other members on this side of the house, have taken a very close interest in what was going on at the SMRC plant. While recognising that certain problems were still to be overcome, there is no question about the groundbreaking work that was being done in bumping up recycling rates in Western Australia. It was a truly innovative facility, and I can only hope that the government is working as hard as it should to make sure that we do not see a massive increase in landfill as a result of that facility being out of action for a while.

The second calamity that has befallen the waste and recycling industry is what this government is trying to pull off in the budget. I thought initially that it was some sort of stunt but now, some 12 days after the budget was brought down, we are receiving a slow trickle of information about what the government's real intentions are. In no sense have we got to the bottom of this yet, and like many other members on this side I am very much looking forward to 18 June, when there will be a day of estimates hearings in which we will be able to grill ministers in more depth than we are able to in the normal course of events, to find out what on earth is going on. In the past 12 days we have seen this slow drip of information. It began with the announcement in the budget speech that there would be a 300 per cent increase in the landfill levy. That took many of us by surprise, particularly people like me who had some working knowledge of the Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery Act 2007. As parliamentary secretary, I carried that legislation through this house.

The previous government put in place a planned rolling series of increases to the levy, the idea being that if it was done at the right rate, consistent with information from other states and countries where these schemes have been in place for longer, it would be possible to change individual behaviour. As we all know, when it comes to protecting the environment, much significant change happens at the level of the individual. The budget was actually brought down 13 days ago—how time flies when we are enjoying ourselves! The 300 per cent increase came in 13 days ago. As I said, there was a long-term target to move to increase the fees. Initially, we were surprised that there had clearly been no consultation with local government, which is one of the major stakeholders in the waste management industry. It is also a significant cost impost on families, who are looking at something like a \$24 annual increase in rates. It was a serious problem, and we were very keen to talk about it and make sure that people understood the potential problems.

The next thing we discovered a couple of days later in response to questions in this place was that, in order to put this increased levy in place, a legislative change would be required; not just a change to the regulations, but a change to the WARR act itself. It came about because the government decided that just because it was increasing their fees by 300 per cent would not necessarily mean more money would go into waste recycling and resource recovery. The act states that all the money raised by the levy must go into programs that look at improving waste management, but the government has decided to change that with an amendment to the legislation. There are big problems already.

One of the honourable members on the other side, in making his inaugural speech tonight, referred to the fact that this chamber has never blocked supply. That might be true, but, of course, the second sleight of hand by this government is that although it announced in this place the budget and all the measures that it will take over the next 12 months, it forgot to tell us that it is not relying just on us passing the appropriation bills; it is relying on us passing another piece of legislation, without which there will be a big hole in the middle of the budget.

The third bit of information dripped out—I do not know that “dripped” is the right word; it is more like extruding the last bit of toothpaste from the bottom of the tube—in this place yesterday when I asked the minister whether she was proposing any other kind of legislative change in order to make the change to the waste levy work and she said that, yes, she was. The government had listened to us when we said that one of the problems with such a massive immediate increase in the waste levy bill was that no measures were put in place to take account of illegal dumping. All of a sudden, guess what we have? A statement was made yesterday in the house in answer to a question that I asked, and, yes, the government is going to change the Environmental Protection Act as well. The government must have done a bit of quick thinking on that because last week in the other place we were told that maybe there would be a change to the Litter Act, the Environmental Protection Act or even the Conservation and Land Management Act. No-one was quite sure because a conversation had been held somewhere in a corridor with someone who mentioned that something might be done about illegal dumping.

So far we have had these three little nuggets of information. We do not know what is coming next. We can only guess. We can only wait for 18 June. I will go through the problems so that they are clear for members opposite. The first problem is that there is a whacking big hole in the Department of Environment and Conservation

budget. There is more than a 20 per cent reduction in the appropriation. We have found out that the changes that the government has proposed, which go part of the way to plugging that hole, depend on other legislative change about which there has been no consultation. The government has no idea whether it will be able to effect that change. Had the extra \$39 million a year not been there to plug that hole, the decrease in appropriation would have been far bigger. It currently stands at about \$50 million, so it would have been closer to \$90 million a year. The first problem is the big black hole in the middle of the DEC budget.

The second problem is that the government clearly has no plan. How many times are we going to have to stand in this place over the next four years and remind members opposite that during the election campaign we said that they could not be the government because they had no plans? The Liberal Party has cobbled together a minority government with the National Party, but it still has no plans. And it is the people of Western Australia who will suffer because of this. Labor had a plan. We introduced the waste avoidance and resource recovery legislation. One of the provisions in the Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery Act is for extended producer responsibility. The powers are in the act to put in place things like extended producer responsibility. Have we heard anything about that in the past 13 days? We have heard not one whisper.

The third problem is that there is clearly a major issue with the relationship that this government and this minister have with the Waste Authority. We need look no further than the report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, "Municipal Waste Management in Western Australia", which is sitting on the table of the house awaiting consideration. We need look no further than the evidence given by Barry Carbon, the head of the Waste Authority, when he was asked by the committee in a public hearing how he was running his show. When he was asked what staff or resources the authority has access to in carrying out its role, he said that the authority has no staff. He also said that the act provides a mechanism whereby the Minister for Environment is to supply appropriate staff who are to be deemed officers of the Waste Authority and that that function is left to the chief executive of the Department of Environment and Conservation to fulfil. He went on to say that, so far, despite significant negotiations and attempts over a nine-month period, there are zero staff of the authority who are deemed to be officers of the Waste Authority. This is a very big problem and it is a problem about which I will pursue this minister and this government until we get some proper answers to these questions.