

WARMUN COMMUNITY — FLOODING

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.59 pm]: When I was speaking about Warmun last night, I concluded my comments by talking about the need to replace essential infrastructure in that community following the mid-March floods. Tonight I want to make a few more comments about what happened to the Gija people when at least half of Warmun was destroyed by the floods. At the close of my remarks I spoke about the early learning centre that has been destroyed, the clinic and the sports facilities that have been laid to waste, and the fact that the town has lost its swimming pool.

Last night I did not have time to talk about the destruction of the art centre, which is why I am giving myself another opportunity to speak tonight. As many honourable members would know, the art centre is an internationally recognised centre for those very great artists who live in Warmun and are part of the Gija community. About \$1 million worth of art was lost in the flood. I have some pictures that I am happy to share with honourable members of what the Warmun Art Centre looked like before the floodwaters went through. It is a truly beautiful building. The art centre was set up about four years ago. When the waters rose, one whole wall blew out completely from the force of the water. That was a wall of glass. It had louvres and doors in it. The floodwaters rose to about halfway up the wall. The photos show the mark where the floodwaters rose to. It is a very eerie feeling to walk through that building now because obviously all the paintings have gone—most of them were washed down the river—but we can still see all the plaques on the wall, which told us what artworks were hanging there. The water went straight through the building and washed out walls on the other side. The whole place has been destroyed.

Sadly and almost inexplicably, as honourable members will have noticed by the question I asked in question time yesterday, as of today the insurers, who I will not name tonight because we are still hopeful that the insurance company concerned will have another look at the assessor's report and change its mind, are refusing to pay up on the policy that covered the building. The reason they are refusing to pay is that they are claiming, on the basis of the assessor's report, that the flood was caused by a rising river and not by a flash flood. Last night I gave honourable members an account of how the flooding occurred. When one sees the building, it is perfectly evident from which direction the water came. For the art centre, that is the critical question. If the flood was caused by the rising river, the water would clearly have come from the opposite direction. We do not need any specialist meteorological training to see that the water went from one direction to the other. It has taken all the glass and loose material with it. The walls look like they are made from hessian. There is not a wire fence left in the community because of this vegetation that has covered all the wire fencing. It is very clear to see from which way the water came.

I was a bit disappointed by the response I received to the question I asked yesterday about whether the government was aware that the insurers were refusing to meet the claims, because I had hoped for a response that was more along the lines of that given by the Queensland government when exactly the same excuse was made by Queensland insurers for not covering certain types of water damage. Honourable members will recall that the Premier, Anna Bligh, made some very, very strong statements about the community expectations of insurance companies showing some good faith in these circumstances. I had hoped for a similar statement from the government. I was disappointed not to hear it. I urge government members to talk to Hon Brendon Grylls and Hon Wendy Duncan, who has carriage of these matters in this place, and suggest that this Parliament might be a little stronger in putting some pressure on the insurance company. In fact, the Warmun Art Centre, under the direction of Maggie Fletcher, who I mentioned in my speech last night, needs about \$700 000 to build a storage facility in which to store the arts so that this will never happen again. It is evident from the buildings that have survived that at some stage in the distant past a similar amount of water must have gone through the community, and I will tell members why, because it is quite interesting. The one building in that area that has remained intact was built on concrete stumps. The community members told us that it has always been a source of puzzlement about why that type of building was built there. It is obvious now that when it was built in the 1903s, it was built by someone whose memory stretched back to perhaps 50 years before then and knew that the buildings needed to be built not just high up, but also in a stable way. As I said, the building was built on concrete stumps. A storage facility is needed in Warmun so that if the waters rise again, the community will have a safe place to take the paintings. The facility is estimated to cost about \$700 000. We need the insurers to reassess their decision so that the Warmun Art Centre can be quickly rebuilt. As Hon Wendy Duncan said, the art centre has received about \$20 000 from the state government and about \$30 000 from the commonwealth. Frankly, Hon Wendy Duncan should know that that money goes only to pay the salaries of the staff who run the art centre to enable them to stay there during the rebuild.

While I am on the subject of receiving a slightly disappointing response from the government—I was happy yesterday to pay accolades to Jeff Gooding and the members of the Warmun Aboriginal community re-

establishment taskforce—I am disappointed in the government’s response to the amount of cash that was paid to community members to assist them. Hon Wendy Duncan said yesterday that they were given financial assistance to purchase clothing and personal requisites. In fact, as they got off the buses that eventually deposited them in Kununurra, they were given just \$100. When someone has lost everything, that is not very much money. A person would have to be a remarkably astute shopper in Target Country to use that money to buy a couple of sets of clothing and all the other things people need for their day-to-day requirements. Again I ask members to compare that with the response in Queensland. I know people in Queensland who were separated from their families for two or three nights because of the floods. They were not in particularly extreme circumstances; they might have been stranded at a friend’s place or at their parents’ house after going there to check something while their parents were away. The Queensland government paid those people several thousand dollars in a very timely manner for the inconvenience they had suffered. I again tell this government that we should be looking at equivalent provisions for the people of the Warmun community.

I want to finish by paying a couple more tributes. I made the point last night that we need to tell the story of some very heroic actions carried out by some very special people in very trying circumstances. I must mention Sister Theresa. She is giving the kind of care to people that can be given only by someone who truly loves her community. I also mention John Echo, who welcomed us to the Kununurra end of the operations. Last night I mentioned Keith Rivers and Chris Clare and the story of Patrick Mung Mung, and his wife, Betty Carrington, both of whom are artists. Patrick Mung Mung carried his grandchildren to safety on the afternoon of the floods. Patrick has said, “Warmun art, we will be strong again.” I emphasise to honourable members this great spirit of optimism that they will find if they visit that community. The people there are already telling stories about the big wet. I hope I have been able to play a small part in the telling of those stories.