

GOVERNMENT FEES AND CHARGES — COST-OF-LIVING PRESSURES

Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [10.37 am] — without notice: I move —

That this Council condemns the Barnett government for —

- (1) its failure to keep household gas prices below the consumer price index level as was promised by the Court Liberal government when it sold Alinta;
- (2) its assault on the finances of Western Australian families through its harsh rises to fees and charges; and
- (3) its failure to provide affordable housing for Western Australian families, especially in the regions.

Earlier this week, on Tuesday, a further 8.3 per cent increase in the cost of household gas kicked in for Western Australian families. That is the fourth increase in the past two and a half years. Members will recall that there was an increase on 1 July 2009, again 10 months later on 1 April 2010, 16 months later on 1 August 2011 and nine months later, this week, on 1 May 2012. There is no pattern, no rhyme or reason to the timing of these changes. Householders were effectively given two weeks' notice of the increase in 2011. This week they got, I think, actually less than 24 hours' notice of an increase. There was no capacity for families to plan and save—there was just 24 hours' notice. This has resulted in a 57.5 per cent increase in Perth household gas bills and people are really struggling. It is too much for people. On the day of the announcement, Minister Collier said on ABC radio, "I feel like I spend more time announcing utility prices than anything else." In the words of Homer Simpson, "Doh!" That is because the minister does, and WA's families feel it too.

Members will be aware that the Western Australian Council of Social Service releases cost-of-living reports from time to time. Its most recent report referred to some 10 000 referrals to financial counsellors in the last financial year on top of the number the year before—that is, an extra 10 000 families sought financial assistance. The WACOSS report is clear about the reason that was driving those people to financial counsellors; namely, WA families are in financial trouble due to increased utility costs. It is interesting to consider who is being affected by utility costs. One measure—I do not think it is an entirely accurate measure—is the number of applicants for the hardship utility grant scheme. I have said this in the house before, and I will say it again: the hardship utility grant scheme was not designed for the purpose that it is being used now. Members might recall the dreadful circumstance of a young mother in Karrinyup who had a long history and range of serious issues. To keep her family warm one night, she lit a fire in the house and she and her two children died. It was a terrible, terrible circumstance. As a result of that case, the then Labor government responded by working with the Western Australian Council of Social Service to deliver a scheme that would address the difficulties faced by a category of people who, for a range of reasons, were at risk of being disconnected or had been disconnected. With no disrespect intended, I sometimes refer to them as the "frequent flyers", because they get themselves into all sorts of difficulties for a combination of reasons, most commonly mental health issues, family and domestic violence issues, and drug and alcohol issues. For a range of reasons, everything falls apart around them. That is what we designed HUGS to address—it was for those people who are not able to manage their finances properly because they are dealing with a lot of chaos in their lives.

However, HUGS is now being used to support ordinary working families in Western Australia. The only relief available to ordinary working families is to go and beg the government for a hardship utility grant. It is now no longer being used only by people like that poor young woman in Karrinyup, or by seniors living on a fixed income; we know that from information derived from answers to questions I lodged earlier this year. I asked about HUGS applicants between February 2011 and February 2012. The number of HUGS applicants during that period was about 16 500. Of that number, the largest cohort of people receiving assistance were those aged between 18 and 54; not seniors. There were 1 206 applicants between 18 and 24; 4 331 between 25 and 34; and the biggest single cohort was people between 35 and 44—that is, ordinary working families—and there were 5 178. So just over 14 000 of the 16 500 applicants were of working age, not seniors, which is the demographic that people might first think are being hit hardest because they are on a fixed income.

Another interesting thing to note is the perception that most of the people seeking HUGS are living in Homeswest accommodation. That is not the case, either; the answers to the questions I asked show that the biggest single cohort of the 16 500 applicants was 7 090 people living in private rental accommodation, not social housing. They pay for their own housing, albeit that they rent; they do not have a mortgage. Some 9 039 of them also have children. We are talking about people who can afford the private rental market, and I will talk

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about that in a minute, because people have to be working at a reasonable wage to afford the private rental market; they will not get in the door in the private rental market if they are on minimum wage. Most of the people receiving HUGS are ordinary folks living in the private rental market, with kids, and aged between 18 and 54. It is a sad indictment on Western Australia that we just keep adding to the pressure of those people who are in that cohort.

I want to turn to the Anglicare report that was released earlier this week. For the second time, Anglicare has provided a kind of snapshot across Australia of the private rental market. If someone is living on a fixed income because they are on a benefit, or because they are on a low wage, what is their likelihood of entering the private rental market? The answer is: not very likely. On Saturday, 14 April Anglicare did its second rental affordability snapshot in Western Australia. It looked at online listings and assessed the properties that were listed on that date in terms of affordability and appropriateness for a number of different household types and assumed incomes. “Affordable rental” was being defined as that which constituted 30 per cent or less of a family’s or individual’s income, and that is the common indicator—if people are paying any more than 30 per cent of their income, they are deemed to be in housing stress.

The findings were really pretty dire, and I am sure members will have followed the public commentary made by the CEO of Anglicare, Ian Carter, and others during the course of the week, about what those numbers are showing us. Less than one per cent of rental properties are affordable for single aged pensioners, but with no disrespect intended to single aged pensioners, we have known for some time that things were really tough for seniors on a fixed income; these figures are starting to show us the impact this is having on working people. The report showed that the vast majority of rental properties on the market were not affordable for low-income earners. I am sure that other members, like me, have had people come to their electorate offices to advise them of the auction process that goes on in the rental property market. Real estate agents, to maximise the benefit for property owners, can advertise a rental property at, say, \$550 a week, but if someone walks through the door and says, “Well, actually, I’ll give you \$600,” they will take it; why would they not? The people we are talking about, who have been hit by this most recent gas price increase this week, cannot afford to go into an auction like that. If they do not fit the image of the neat young couple with two kids, they might as well not even bother turning up. If they are in any one of the categories that rental agents can be picky and choosy about, they need not even bother turning up, because they will not get a look in.

The Anglicare report shows us that working families cannot pay the rent. The day after this snapshot report was released, the government said, “Here you go, take this—the fourth increase in two and a half years; another 8.3 per cent on your household gas”. Interestingly, it was announced just at the time that the temperatures started to change; I do not know about other members, but last week we got our gas heater out of the shed for winter because the temperatures at night had started to go down. We have not turned it on yet; I do not know whether we can afford to, and I am on a very comfortable salary. There are families who have to make that decision—families in Western Australia, which is the most prosperous state in this nation. We have families who have to make decisions about whether or not to turn on their gas heaters, and that is an appalling indictment.

The Anglicare report assessed some 3 828 private rentals across the state, and only 29 of those properties were affordable for people on benefits or pensions. For the first time, the capacity of minimum wage earners to pay market rents was also included in the review, and less than two per cent of the market was affordable for those people. Fifty or 60 properties were available to them out of 3 828. It is astonishing. I am sure my colleagues will touch on this because I am not sure I will have time to do it, but in the north of the state not a single property was found to be affordable to families, including those with two earners on a minimum wage—not a single property. The average weekly rent across the Pilbara and the Kimberley was a staggering \$1 374 per week. That is the average. I have heard examples of rents that are much higher than that and I am sure other members have as well.

I want to just go back to the promises that were made when the Liberals were in government last time—the Court government—and Alinta was sold. What was put to Western Australians at the time was that the benefit arising to the state from that sale included, according to Hon Norman Moore from *Hansard* of 14 October 1999 —

... delivering lower gas prices to consumers; facilitating more consumer choice through increased competition; ...

Who else can we buy gas from? Is there anybody else we can buy gas from? I do not think so. Hon Norman Moore also told us back in 1999 —

The objectives for the sale of AlintaGas have been set within the context of the Government’s broad objectives for the energy sector ... with continual improvement in services to customers, reduced energy prices ...

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Hon Norman Moore also told the house back then —

The sale of AlintaGas is the next logical step in the process of energy reform in Western Australia ... its major objectives are —

to reduce energy prices in the State;

He then went on to tell the house —

There has not been any evidence that private ownership ... translates into higher prices to customers or any reduction in the availability of gas to meet customer needs.

He also went on to make the point that the regulation making power—members will be interested to hear how this was being used —

... will also enable regulations to be made which provide for a cap on tariff increases for residential customers post contestability, to prevent tariff shock if effective competition does not emerge in the residential market ...

Hon Norman Moore went on to say on 15 December 1999 —

Post July 2002 it is expected that the average price rise will be around the CPI and for certain classes of customers it is expected that there will be significant falls in the price of gas under the combined impact of deregulation and privatisation.

By the time the bill had come to this place it obviously had been through the other place, where the bill was handled on behalf of the Liberal–National government by one Hon Colin Barnett. What he had to say can be found in *Hansard* of 16 September 1999 —

In reality, we expect the average price rise to be around the CPI and, for certain classes of customers, we expect there to be significant falls in the price of gas under the combined impact of deregulation and privatisation. We expect to see continuing real price declines for householders.

He went on to say —

The estimation from the financial consultants is that the small business sector will be the big winners and the main beneficiaries of this privatisation and deregulation. It is anticipated ... in real terms, small businesses will receive a 47 per cent reduction in gas tariffs. I stress that consumers are protected by market competition, by the regulatory regime already established under the national access code and are further protected by price controls to be implemented.

This was said by the now Premier, who earlier this week said that he has nothing to do with gas prices. He said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Of course I have nothing to do with setting the price!”

Hon Ken Travers: Maybe he was asleep in the cabinet meeting in which they did it.

Hon SUE ELLERY: Maybe. But he did tell Western Australians back in 1999—he stressed to consumers—that they would be protected by market competition and by a regulatory regime, and further protected by price controls. He said that all those aspects would look after consumers. The way he and his energy minister today have looked after consumers is by telling them that they can have their fourth increase since 2008, when this government came into power. That is the way consumers will be protected! Gas prices are not the only thing impacting on consumers. The price of electricity has increased by 57 per cent. At the same time, there have been increases in other fees and charges across the board. Also, some assistance for families has been withdrawn, such as removing assistance for parents whose children are at school through the It Pays to Learn program, which was put in place by the previous government. Motor vehicle costs have gone up, utility charges—electricity, water, gas, sewerage, drainage—have all gone up, public transport fees have gone up, the emergency services levy has gone up and stamp duty on general insurance has gone up as well. The average household bill under this government just continues to increase. At the same time we know that the divide between those who are doing very well out of the current prosperity from the resources boom and those who are not continues to grow. All the research from around the world says that the bigger that divide gets, the worse inequity and inequality there is in the community. The bigger the divide gets, the more those people who are not able to take advantage of the resources boom will start to fall off the system—their children will start to fall out of school or will do less well in school. All social indicators say that the bigger the divide between the rich and the poor in a community, the worse the social problems will be. While we will have legislation after legislation saying that the way to address antisocial behaviour and law and order issues is to lock up more people, all the research from around the world says that if we address the gap between the rich and the poor, we will eliminate those problems. What is this government doing in the most prosperous state in one of the most prosperous nations in the world? It is adding to the burden on ordinary working people. The majority of the people who now have to seek hardship utility grant

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scheme payments are young families who live in the private rental market. We are squeezing and squeezing them. The effect on those families is too much to bear.

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Minister for Energy) [10.56 am]: The Liberal Party certainly will not be supporting this motion. I would like to go through both areas, particularly in my area of responsibility in terms of gas and gas tariffs, and also with regard to electricity. Hon Robyn McSweeney is going to talk specifically about hardship allowance payments and I know that Hon Wendy Duncan will make a contribution on regional housing, so that we cover all areas of the motion.

I take on board what the Leader of the Opposition said with regard to making announcements on tariff increases. I do not like it. I genuinely do not like it. It is one aspect of my job that I do not like. It is not as if I sit down with my cabinet colleagues every Monday to work out a way in which we can screw Western Australian householders for as much as we possibly can. That is not what I want to do. That is not what we want to do. We do not want to do it.

Hon Sue Ellery: Then stop doing it!

Hon PETER COLLIER: I did not say a word when the Leader of the Opposition spoke. I ask her to show me the same respect.

I do not want to have to do it. The simple fact of the matter is that the Liberal–National government was faced with dealing with the irresponsible attitude that the Labor government had had towards the entire energy sector during its time in office. Let us just face reality. Prior to the last election there was a gas explosion on Varanus Island. What was the attitude of the Labor Party towards that? It was to tell people to turn off their stoves and turn off their heaters. What was its attitude towards electricity? We ran out of electricity. What was its attitude towards tariffs? Its attitude was to not worry about it and to not put them up, as they could be bailed out from the government coffers. That was the attitude of the Labor Party. I inherited, quite frankly, a balls-up with regard to the energy sector. We have done an enormous amount to overcome the deficiencies in all those areas. One of the legacies of that absolutely irresponsible attitude of the Labor Party to the energy sector was the disconnect between electricity prices and the cost of producing and distributing electricity. There were also some inherent issues with the gas market that we had to address. A lot of it was out of our control, quite frankly. There were issues with Babcock & Brown when it took possession of Alinta. It had issues resulting from the global financial crisis, and that brought inherent problems. There are issues with regard to gas. Again, the Labor Party had an irresponsible attitude to it.

In its last year, the Labor government said gas prices would increase by 10 per cent. That was absolute nonsense.

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon PETER COLLIER: Do you mind! Just calm down! You will get your chance in a minute.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Col Holt): Order, members! I listened closely to what the Leader of the Opposition said and there were no interjections at that time, so we will allow the minister on his feet to continue.

Hon PETER COLLIER: I obviously struck a raw nerve; there is a bit of sensitivity on the other side of the chamber.

The Labor government said there would be a 10 per cent increase in gas prices. It was not a 10 per cent increase at all. In some households, the increase was up to 50 per cent. The Labor government proposed a stepped increase. The first step was to increase prices by four per cent; the second step by 45 per cent and the third step by 79 per cent. It was not a 10 per cent increase at all. Last year this government said there would be an across-the-board 10 per cent increase. Might I point out that that 10 per cent last year was not what Alinta Energy asked for. Alinta asked for an increase of 30.2 per cent. That was unpalatable to me, as Minister for Energy, to the cabinet and to the government. We could not impose that increase on Western Australian householders. That came at a cost to Alinta, as a private company, which made Alinta very vulnerable. In fact, that cost was around \$25 million. This year we had exactly the same scenario. Discovering, extracting, processing, distributing and retailing the gas comes at a cost. It is a regulated market. We do not sit and decide what we are going to do. We do not say that we are going to have a five or 10 per cent increase. We take advice from the regulator on the distribution component. We take advice on the cost of the gas, which continues to increase. We take the combination of retail and processing costs and we put them together to come up with a recommendation. We allowed for an increase of 8.3 per cent, which for an average user is 90c a week, or around \$47 a year. In some families this is extreme; I understand that. It does come at cost to families, and the government understands that, and as a government we wanted to make the increase as minimal as we possibly could. We did not give Alinta what it wanted, and there will be continuing cost imposts with gas and repercussions for Alinta.

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The government has to do what is good for Western Australian consumers and householders at the same time as ensuring the financial viability of Alinta. We came up with what we thought was a fairly moderate increase. From that perspective, that is the justification for the increase. As I said, we did it for the least financial burden we could possibly impose on Western Australian householders, and at the same time countering that with the notion of ensuring the financial viability of Alinta. In addition, we have done as much as we could for the gas market to ensure a more vibrant and dynamic gas sector in Western Australia. That is why, through this house, with support from all parties, we passed the Gas Services Information Bill just prior to the last break. This provided for a gas bulletin board and a statement of opportunity, for which all sectors of the gas market have been calling for years. This government has done that. That was a recommendation of the Gas Supply and Emergency Management Committee. We have runs on the board, and that will make it a much more vibrant and dynamic market.

The government has also provided for gas storage with the Mondarra gas facility. If we have another situation in which there is a trip in the pipeline, we will have a contingency plan. We will not have the energy minister racing up to Varanus Island saying, “Oops, we’ve had an explosion!”, which is what happened in the last administration. This government took this on board and did something about it. We are providing gas security for Western Australians, while at the same time ensuring we keep costs at a minimum. That is what this government is doing.

We are doing the same thing with electricity. When I rocked up as energy minister, one of the first documents on my table was the final recommendation for electricity increases to get to a point that is commonly referred to as “cost reflectivity”, which is when we actually pay for the cost our electricity. When the Liberal–National government came into office, that recommendation was for a 116 per cent increase. Members should bear in mind that in the draft report that Premier Carpenter received in the previous year, the recommendation was for a 72 per cent increase. What was Premier Carpenter’s response to a 72 per cent increase? He announced a 10 per cent increase for the following April, which coincidentally would have been after the proposed election date—only the most cynical member would suggest that that might have been his motivation for waiting for 12 months. Then, 12 months later, there would be a further 10 per cent increase and thereafter annual increments at a similar rate. I will tell members the repercussions of that. If electricity prices had increased by annual increments of 10 per cent, by 2020 that would have been a cost burden on Western Australian taxpayers from consolidated revenue of \$6 billion, and we still would not be close to cost reflectivity. That was the attitude of the previous Labor government. That is the attitude of the Labor Party today—it does not matter! The government wants to make sure that we keep electricity costs down, and we intend to get to a point at which we have a user-pays system. But if we went down the irresponsible line of the Labor Party, electricity would come at a cost of \$6 billion. Can I say to members opposite that that would be wonderful! I would love to be sitting around a cabinet table saying to ministers, “Sorry, guys, you cannot have any more schools or allocation of resources for fisheries or child protection; we just do not have any money because we are bailing out the electricity corporations!” That would be completely and absolutely irresponsible

Hon Norman Moore: It is more than all the royalties we receive.

Hon PETER COLLIER: The Leader of the House is spot on! The Labor government’s justification for the increases was of interest to this government. We then made a decision that we had to catch up with the rest of Australia. Our energy charges are the cheapest in Australia. We had to get to a point at which we were getting remotely close to a user-pays system. That is why we had the steep, necessary increases, which came at a cost to the community, and I am very, very conscious of that. As I said, Hon Robyn McSweeney will show just how mindful we are of that in trying to assist those who are least able to pay.

I thought, “How can I get to a situation as energy minister whereby I increase electricity prices by 116 per cent to get to cost-reflective levels?” The Labor government told us when it was going to split up Western Power that Western Australia would have a reduction in electricity prices. We were told this ad infinitum. As energy minister in 2002, Hon Eric Ripper stated —

These reforms will deliver substantial and sustainable benefits to Western Australian consumers and the economy, through greater competition and lower electricity prices.

In 2003, Hon Eric Ripper repeated this and stated —

... in other words, compared with what would happen if we were to stay with the status quo—electricity prices will fall by 8.5 per cent by 2010.

Again in May 2008, Hon Eric Ripper said, “I believe that policy does exert downward pressure on electricity prices.” Not only did he say that it would put downward pressure on prices, but also he stated that prices would be reduced by 8.5 per cent. Imagine my dismay when I came along as energy minister, thinking that my first

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announcement would be to reduce electricity prices by 8.5 per cent, and the advice from the Office of Energy was, “Sorry, minister, you have to increase prices by 116 per cent.” In the words of Homer Simpson, “D’oh!” What can I say as energy minister? Why on earth did the previous government have such an irresponsible attitude, particularly given that it had received enormous advice that the so-called disaggregation process would lead to lower prices? In fact, the chair of Western Power wrote a letter to Hon Eric Ripper in October 2002 stating, in part —

The Board supports the concept of further reform in the State electricity industry to increase competition and reduce power costs. These changes should be introduced in a way which manages risks and protects the value of one of the State’s most important assets. On this basis, the Board would endorse proposals for the establishment of a wholesale market and an independent transmission business. However directors would not support the disaggregation of the generation and retail sections of Western Power in the short to medium term. Board members believe that the sequence and timing of reform will be crucial to the efficiency and reliability of the industry.

I will not go through the whole letter, but it continues later on the “Extent of Structural Reform” and states —

The ERTF argument for the creation of standalone generation and retail businesses is not compelling. Based on the Deloitte Study chaired by Treasury and supported by Western Power the Board believes that disaggregation into three separate entities would

- reduce profitability
- reduce value to the owner
- reduce payments to Government
- raise concerns about Generation’s longer term viability and
- threaten Retail’s short to medium term viability.

We note that it is commonplace to staple “retail” to other business units.

In discussions with energy companies operating in Australia, we were told that they have a clear preference to invest in either regulated activities (wires and pipelines) or unregulated activities, but not both. The reason for this is to lessen the risk of being caught at the wrong point in the electricity price cycle.

As I said, the previous government cannot say it was not warned. In 2002 the previous Minister for Energy was given the Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu “Report on the Financial Impact of the Proposed Market Reforms on Western Power Corporation and its Successor Entities”, which identified some real risks with the disaggregation process and the pressure it places on electricity prices. I promise that I am not saying the disaggregation process was solely responsible for the increase in prices. There have been significant pressures on electricity prices in recent years—in particular an ageing network, which brings with it enormous cost. In recent years we have injected more than \$3.6 billion into the network to bring down that appalling backlog of pole maintenance, which was a legacy of the previous government. In addition, there are generation cost increases, renewable cost increases and fuel cost increases. All those cost imposts put pressure on the cost of producing and distributing electricity. Electricity is not cheap.

As I keep on saying, we are not “Nigel No Friends” in this space. It is an international phenomenon. Believe it or not, electricity prices in the Western Australian jurisdiction remain among the lowest in Australia. That comes as small comfort to Western Australian householders and I appreciate that; I really do. All I am saying is that Western Australia is not alone in this space; it is an international phenomenon. The fact that we did not have any increase over the duration of the previous government’s administration has increased the burden significantly on Western Australian households. Had the then government had a much more responsible attitude about electricity tariffs —

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon PETER COLLIER: Because we were told that it would reduce electricity prices, but it did not. If the previous government had had a more responsible attitude about electricity prices and, for example, had gone along with CPI plus one or two per cent over seven or eight years, we would have been reasonably close to cost-reflective levels. The Western Australian public would have been much more attuned to those increases as opposed to having significant increases in the last three years. As I said, I am very conscious of the impact of those increases. However, had there been a more responsible attitude and a gradual increase in electricity prices, Western Australian householders would have been much more receptive to those increases, as opposed to the significant increases in recent years.

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In conclusion, I am very conscious of the impact on Western Australian householders. I do not want to increase electricity prices and we are doing all that we can to assist those who are least able to pay.

HON ADELE FARINA (South West) [11.14 am]: I am pleased to support the motion moved by Hon Sue Ellery. I commend Hon Sue Ellery for bringing this important matter to the attention of the house. My only regret is that the 10 minutes allocated to me is not enough time in which to do justice to this important issue. The cost of living and the lack of affordable housing are two of the issues most frequently raised with me by my constituents. The high cost of living in this state under the Barnett government is affecting not only low-income earners, people on welfare and retirees, but also middle-income earners in vast numbers. People who have historically been able to manage their finances have not been able to avoid the financial pain meted out under the Barnett government. Successive massive increases in household costs under the Barnett government have pushed unprecedented numbers of WA families and WA households to the wall. It is the horror gift of the Barnett government that just keeps on giving. Families are struggling financially. The pain is real and the consequences for many WA families are dire.

Under the Barnett government, the average WA household has been hit with a 45 per cent increase in water costs, a 57 per cent increase in electricity costs and a 22.26 per cent increase in household costs across the board from other government charges. By anyone's assessment, this is a massive hit on WA households and one that is beyond the capacity of the vast majority of households to absorb. The government occasionally makes soothing noises about understanding the pain of WA households, but it has done little to reduce the burden on these households or to ease their pain. The Barnett government simply does not care and thinks that it can ignore the issue, but it does so at its own peril.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's paper, "Worldwide Cost of Living 2012" placed Perth as the twelfth most expensive city in the world. Five years ago Perth was ranked fortieth. That is a massive increase in a very short time. It is now more expensive to live in Perth than it is to live in New York, London, Rome or Vancouver. The cost of living continues to skyrocket.

The recent government-sanctioned increase in the cost of household gas is the latest proof that the Barnett government does not understand and does not care about the financial pain it inflicts on WA households. To add insult to injury, the 8.3 per cent increase came into effect with less than 24 hours' notice, providing no ability for WA households to adjust their household budgets, and less than nine months after the last 10 per cent increase.

This most recent gas price hike also illustrates the Premier's failed privatisation efforts. It was the Premier, then in his capacity as Minister for Energy in 1999, who moved for the privatisation of gas supply in this state. On 16 September 1999, the Premier, then the Minister for Energy, stated that the sale of AlintaGas would deliver lower gas prices to consumers. He said —

In reality, we expect the average price rise to be around the CPI and, for certain classes of customers, we expect there to be significant falls in the price of gas under the combined impact of deregulation and privatisation. We expect to see continuing real price declines for householders.

He could not have got that more wrong. The reality has delivered nothing of the sort. Hon Norman Moore in 1999 also declared that the sale of AlintaGas would deliver lower gas prices to the consumer. Again, he could not be more wrong. Hon Norman Moore said in response to concerns by Labor members about the sale that —

There has not been any evidence that private ownership across Australia translates into higher prices to consumers ...

Hon Norman Moore was wrong again. We now have the evidence that we need. Hon Norman Moore also said that —

Post July 2002 it is expected that the average price rise will be around the CPI and for certain classes of customers it is expected that there will be significant falls in the price of gas ...

Hon Norman Moore was wrong once again. Under this government we have witnessed price rises greater than CPI. The sale of AlintaGas has been an abject failure in all the objectivities espoused by the then government. At a time when the people of WA are paying the price for the Liberal government's economic mismanagement, WA families are struggling financially and this government is doing nothing to ease the burden. The reality is that the cost of living in WA is rising faster than wages, especially for low-income earners, leaving households struggling to make ends meet. It is a simple mathematical equation that the Barnett government is struggling to understand or is simply ignoring. When the cost of living increases at a faster rate than a family's income increases, the consequences are dire. One can tighten one's belt only so far before it breaks and for many WA families the belt is broken and they are in a downward spiral.

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Calls for assistance from the hardship utility grant scheme have increased dramatically. That has been detailed by Hon Sue Ellery. In the south west alone there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of approved HUGS grants over the past two years. This is despite all the extra challenges faced by south west families to access HUGS. Yesterday I asked the Minister for Child Protection to detail the number of normal HUGS grants paid at the maximum amount payable; the number of exceptional-circumstances HUGS grants paid at the maximum amount payable; and the number of people who have been refused additional funding assistance under exceptional circumstances. The minister declined to provide the information. I am not surprised. The picture that this information would have painted would not have been a pretty picture for this government. Last Tuesday I asked the minister whether the government would increase the maximum funding assistance to families under HUGS. The minister refused, saying it was last modestly increased in July 2011. The minister ignores that there have been substantial increases in household costs since July 2011 and the cap is now too low to address the financial needs of a growing number of WA families. This government simply does not care. I asked the minister, in view of the recent AlintaGas price hike: what new measures will the government provide to assist families? The answer is none. This government does not care about struggling WA families. I also note that Busselton Water and Aqwest do not participate in the HUGS direct application process. This means that customers of these utilities are required to apply for HUGS through a registered financial counselling service.

Despite the government slashing funding to 24 financial counselling positions across the state and the minister being regularly told of the long delays in the south west for accessing these services, these customers are still required to go through that long, cumbersome process.

Hon Norman Moore: What are you quoting from?

Hon ADELE FARINA: I am reading my notes.

Hon Norman Moore: I thought you were quoting from something.

Hon ADELE FARINA: And I did indicate that it was in response to a question that I asked the minister the other day.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: Tell the truth.

Hon ADELE FARINA: I am telling the truth, minister. I know that she does not like to hear this.

This places Bunbury and Busselton residents at a distinct disadvantage to other people across the state, and I believe this is unacceptable. The minister needs to explain why it is an option for quasi-government agencies such as Busselton Water and Aqwest to decline to participate in the direct application process and why the minister believes it is acceptable for her constituents—in fact, for any resident in Western Australia—to be disadvantaged in this way. It is little wonder that the number of applications for hardship utility grant scheme assistance for Busselton Water and Aqwest bills is so low. The task of securing such assistance has been made unreasonably difficult for my constituents. This is unfair and needs to be immediately addressed by the government.

The Anglicare report stating that homelessness is spiralling in Western Australia is of no surprise but of great concern. The lack of affordable housing, the lack of affordable rental properties and the massive increase in foreclosures in this state are all indicators that all is not well in our state and that a growing number of people are facing extreme financial hardship. The Barnett government sits idly watching these spiralling statistics and does nothing. The people of Western Australia expect better of their elected government. In view of the government's failure to act, it is more than appropriate that it be condemned for its inaction. I commend the motion to the house.

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West — Minister for Child Protection) [11.22 am]: I certainly do not agree with this motion. I seem to remember some time ago when Geoff Gallop was Premier that he said there would be no new taxes. What happened after that? Tax after tax. Every government that comes along has an obligation to look after those people who cannot look after themselves for whatever reason. They do need help to live in our society. We are morally bound to look after the less fortunate, and every government must have compassion.

Every opposition since time began has criticised a current government and spoken glowingly of its time in government. Many have short memories and time seems to dim the mistakes they made, and that goes for all governments. However, when governments around the countryside such as Labor get arrogant, they have to meet in a phone box. I was in absolute delight when watching the Queensland election results. I could not believe that Labor was left with only seven seats but, being a Liberal, it was very great to look at.

Hon Adele Farina: How is that helpful?

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Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Because Labor had seven years in government and it was kicked out.

Hon Sue Ellery: Take responsibility for what you are doing to working WA families with children. Take responsibility!

Hon Peter Collier: You struck a nerve there.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I must have.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Col Holt): Order, members! The Minister for Child Protection has the floor. Continue.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I do believe that I am on my feet.

No matter what major party is in government, we all have a responsibility to look after the homeless, to look after people who are in crisis, no matter what the social issues are, and to look after dysfunctional families. We have an obligation to look after them. Our government has a good, solid reputation in the community for delivering, and deliver we do. We have delivered \$600 million to the non-government services—something that Labor never did over the seven years that it was in government. It is actually the Liberal–National government that works with the Western Australian Council of Social Service to give a better deal out in the community.

Hon Adele Farina interjected.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I listened to the member; now she can listen to me.

Hon Adele Farina: No, you interjected on me.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! Please let the Minister for Child Protection continue.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I actually interjected on Hon Adele Farina because she misled the house. She said that I declined to answer.

Hon Adele Farina: You didn't reply.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: The member said that I declined to answer a question yesterday and I answered that question. I answered the question; I said —

- (3) The HUGS unit does not collect this information.
- (4) Utility hardship policies will need to be sourced directly from each individual utility.

I will check later, because the member said that I declined to answer and I did answer, so she should stop gilding the lily in here.

As I said, we were the first to give \$600 million to the non-government sector in this state, and I am very proud that that came from a Liberal–National government. It must be hard for members opposite to accept that, seeing that they have been asking and asking.

Hon Sue Ellery: We welcomed it.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Yes. I am very pleased that they welcomed it. As well as that, there was \$18 million over five years for education, training and support for the public and non-profit organisations; \$96 million dedicated to the application of the non-government human service sector; and indexation policy for payments to the not-for-profit organisations, recognising the ongoing costs to that sector. Of course, that sector gets out and helps people. They are the people on the ground who certainly help others. That component one funding has been paid for all relevant contracts and, along with that, I think the index rate has put four per cent on all state funding services. Funding of \$117 million was also provided in the 2011–12 state budget for component two funding, which represents a second funding injection equivalent to an average increase of 10 per cent across eligible contracts, to apply from 1 July 2013. Of that \$117 million, \$51 million will be available in 2013–14, and \$66 million in 2014–15.

I will go to the hardship utility grant scheme, which was set up in 2008 by the then Labor government. I think it was just in its beginnings when the Labor government was kicked out of office.

Hon Peter Collier: Which we extended to gas.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: We extended it, yes. We have done a lot of extensions of the hardship utility grant scheme. Since coming to government through to the end of February 2012, HUGS has provided 33 060 grants worth \$11.8 million. Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition, Mark McGowan, went out, spruiked a few furbies and said that we were going to stop the hardship funding. That causes terrible circumstances out in the

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community because it is not true. This is demand funded. I have made no secret about it being demand funded. If it is needed and if —

Several members interjected.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Mr Deputy President —

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! We were going so well with the first three speakers. Let us continue with this next speaker; thank you.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. The rabble over on the other side will not keep quiet, so I cannot get out what I want to say.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! I suggest that the minister stick to the motion. We may have fewer interjections if she sticks to that content.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you, Mr Deputy President.

As I said—I will just repeat it—from August 2008 to the end of February 2012, HUGS has provided 33 060 grants worth \$11.8 million; 11 272 grants totalling \$4.6 million have been made in the 2011–12 financial year; and \$6.6 million was allocated in 2011–12 to continue HUGS, resulting in a total allocation of \$10.1 million. Further to that, we have done some refinements to further enhance the effectiveness of the HUG scheme. These are the inclusion of an additional grant, the inclusion and subsequent expansion of the exceptional circumstances criteria, grant limit increases in accordance with the utility cost increases —

Hon Adele Farina interjected.

Hon Peter Collier: Shush.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Hon Peter Collier; it works! He said “shush” and they did. I am very impressed.

Hon Peter Collier: I’m a former teacher.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: There are grant limit increases in accordance with the utility cost increases and improvements in the grant processes to ensure the process is efficient.

Hon Adele Farina: What are you going to do for Aqwest and the Busselton Water Board customers?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I will take the interjection. I explained yesterday that there were only four applications and 10 applications respectively.

Hon Adele Farina: The reason is they can’t get in to see a financial counsellor because the queues and the waitlists are so long.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: We fund 52 financial counsellors and I go around the state talking to a lot of financial counsellors.

Hon Adele Farina: How many did you cut—24 positions?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: They are very welcome in their community; the financial counsellors do a wonderful job.

Hon Adele Farina: They are very welcome in the community. We need more of them in the south west.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Hon Peter Collier, can you work your magic, please?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Col Holt): Order! Minister, you did invite the —

Hon Sue Ellery interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members, please! I suggest the minister continue with the content of her speech and stop inviting interjections and we will get on. Thank you.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you. I would never invite interjections from that unruly mob across there.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, minister!

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon Sue Ellery: You’re pathetic and you need to go back to your anger management classes.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, order, order! Continue with the content of your speech, please.

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Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Thank you. I would say that was bullying from across the way there, and absolutely disgraceful.

Several members interjected.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: I go back to the HUG scheme, which is a very good program. We have spent nearly \$12 million helping people in our community who are experiencing hardship.

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Did you swear? Did I hear a swear word?

Hon Sally Talbot: It was a bit of an obscenity, but I do not think it was a swear word.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Sorry, Mr Deputy President, I thought I heard a swear word.

The HUG scheme is a very good program that helps many families. We have expanded the exceptional circumstances criteria along with the funding that goes with it. People in the south can get a normal grant limit of \$475 and exceptional circumstances assistance of up to \$790. People in the north can get \$790, which is a normal grant, or exceptional circumstances hardship assistance of \$1 180. They can apply for grant funds, within a limited amount, every 12 months.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [11.32 am]: The terms of the motion moved by Hon Sue Ellery are very clear; it is in three parts. The first part refers to the failure of the Barnett government to keep household gas prices below CPI levels, as was promised by a previous Liberal government. The second part condemns the government for its assault on the finances of Western Australian families through its harsh rises in fees and charges. The final part condemns the Barnett government for its failure to provide affordable housing for Western Australian families, especially in the regions. There is nothing obscure or ambiguous about that motion. That is the motion we have asked the government to address in this place this morning. Those are the issues that it has spectacularly failed to take on. It has steadfastly walked away from its responsibility to provide people in our community with answers to these hard questions. All we heard from Hon Peter Collier was technical gobbledegook. All we heard from Hon Robyn McSweeney was her usual trick of blaming everyone else. These two senior ministers have stood in this place today and blamed everyone, except the government of which they are a part, for what is going on.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: We are very proud of our government.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: They start by saying something along the lines of “They made me do it.” These two ministers sit around the cabinet table and take no responsibility for their actions. They just say, “They made me do it; we were forced to do it.” They both say, “We had no choice.” I was waiting for them to say, “This hurts me more than it hurts you”, but they know that would be just a step too far because it is simply not true. This government is walking away from its responsibility to save the Western Australian community from the pain of the price increases that it has inflicted over the past three and a half years.

Let me quickly go over those increases in charges. Total government charges have gone from an average of, to use round figures, \$4 800 a year to \$5 800 a year. That is about \$1 000 a year extra. The average electricity prices have gone from about \$950 to about \$1 500. I am comparing 2008–09 figures to current figures. The average water charges have gone from \$400 a year to \$580 a year and, of course, the gas provided by Alinta has gone from about \$390 to \$560. Those are monumental increases and the community of Western Australia deserves an explanation from this government. But, of course, what the government has demonstrated once again is that it has absolutely no understanding of the pain it is inflicting on ordinary households. It has absolutely no concern for those cost-of-living pressures for which it and it alone is responsible.

I want to wear a couple of hats this morning as I contribute to this debate. I am shadow Minister for Youth and shadow Minister for Peel. With those two hats on, I draw honourable members’ attention to the article on page 20 of *The West Australian* this morning by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. I am sure the minister’s office will have read that article. Michelle Scott talks about the stress inflicted on young people in our state. She makes the observation that to a significant degree, stress on children and young people is caused by the stress on their parents. Do not let the government get away with the claim that it is just technical stuff to do with the price of utilities. It is not. This motion today addresses the stress, the pain and the misery being caused to real, live people all over the state. They do not buy this empty vacuous explanation from the government that it has no choice. They want to know what the government is going to do. At the same time they are experiencing this pain and stress, they see the government putting billions of dollars into trophy projects. If we add the money going into the Premier’s palace over the road to that, the billions of dollars going into the Waterfront development and the stadium, we can see living proof that this government is quite happy to sit around its cabinet table and syphon off money to its trophy projects while, at the same time, telling Hon Peter Collier and

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Hon Robyn McSweeney that they have no choice but to suck it up and pass on the increases to their constituents, who are suffering.

Earlier this week we saw the figures from the Anglicare survey about affordability of rental properties. These numbers are simply appalling. Let me briefly run through them as they apply to the area that includes Mandurah. We saw there was zero—a big round fat figure of zero—affordable and appropriate properties available for single people with two young children. No affordable properties are available for single people on the Newstart allowance, none for single people aged over 18 years and none for single people wanting to share a house. None. That is an absolutely shameful situation facing us in Western Australia in 2012. In the great southern and the south west, areas that include Bunbury and Albany, we find similar disastrous results in this survey of affordable rental housing. There are no properties available for single young people on the Newstart allowance. If a person is single, aged over 18 and on youth allowance, there are no properties available. For single people on youth allowance wanting to share a house, there are no properties available. Those are figures that we cannot feel anything but shame about.

I take my hat off to a young man in Mandurah called Matt Cotterell who, a couple of weeks ago, decided he would go public with his story. I will give honourable members a flavour of this young man's experience, which was reported in the *Mandurah Mail*, and which we know is reflective of the experience of hundreds of young people around the Peel and south west regions of our state.

Hon Sue Ellery: The biggest proportion of homeless people are young people.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: As Hon Sue Ellery says, the biggest proportion of homeless people are young people. Members, can listen to his story, which reads —

SLEEPING on rooftops, in deserted buildings and under bridges is no way to live, but for many Mandurah locals it's a reality they face every night.

... Matt Cotterell knows the cold, dark and uncomfortable places to sleep in Mandurah all too well.

The 19-year-old experienced a troubled home life with his mother and stepfather for 17 years and decided to escape the "horrible environment" more than a year ago.

...

He said he wanted to run away and escape the hostilities he was subject to at the age of eight but didn't have the opportunity until he turned 18.

I am going to use a swearword, Hon Robyn McSweeney—or at least one that she would probably consider to be a swearword—because I am quoting young Matt, who stated —

"Life at home was really s..t and the only good people I had in my life were my Godparents," ...

Here is this young man who has done very, very well at school; he has had to get out of home, and what does this government offer him? It offers him a life of homelessness. According to the article, young Matt stated —

... there was definitely a limit to homeless services in Mandurah for youth under 25, especially affordable housing.

There is, because as I have shown this morning the accommodation available to those young people is zero.

This week we also had news that Habitat for Humanity is opening up in Bunbury. Do members know where else in the world Habitat for Humanity operates? It operates right through the Third World.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: So does Save the Children Fund.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Yet it has found it necessary to open up services in Bunbury in the south west of this state. Every time we mention the two-speed economy we get a howl of derision from the government —

Hon Robyn McSweeney: No, I said Save the Children Fund is all over Western Australia, too!

Hon SALLY TALBOT: — yet we have Habitat for Humanity—which is a fantastic organisation and I am not derogating what it does one iota—having to provide the services it provides in Africa and the Third World to the people of Bunbury.

Finally, I will raise a topic I have drawn to this house's attention before: what is happening to financial counselling services in the Peel region. Hon Robyn McSweeney says there has been no diminution of the services, but in fact she has overseen an arrangement whereby two counsellors are withdrawn from Peel, and all

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Hon Robyn McSweeney has said is that other services can pick up that shortfall. I can tell you, Mr Deputy President, they cannot.

HON WENDY DUNCAN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.43 am]: I agree with Hon Adele Farina that 10 minutes is not long enough to cover this subject, and I will be talking about, in particular, the provision of affordable housing in Western Australia, with a focus on the regions of course.

Let us look at the scenario that we are dealing with, which is that, as we all know, the cost of private housing has risen dramatically over the past 10 years; in particular, home and unit prices doubled between 2004 and 2007, under the previous government's watch, and rents more than doubled between 2003 and 2008, again under the previous government's watch. Also, during that time public housing stock did not increase in line with demand. At the end of the 2001 financial year the total number of Homeswest houses was 35 111; by the end of the last financial year of the previous government—2007–08—there were 35 473; an increase of 51 dwellings. Hon Adele Farina accuses this government of “sitting idly by and doing nothing”, but her government saw a housing crisis looming and what did it do? It spent its \$2 billion surplus on paying off the Perth–Mandurah railway in full. This government has had to deal with this situation, and it is well and truly aware that housing prices are high, which is why the Liberal–National government is committed to tackling the demand for affordable housing by in May 2011 releasing the state's first ever affordable housing strategy.

This motion focuses on regional areas, so I will start my comments there. Through royalties for regions we are investing considerable resources into the housing shortage and affordable housing in the regional areas of the state. More than \$1 billion is committed to a large range of initiatives and major programs developed throughout the state that are designed to increase housing stock, improve access to housing and improve amenity and lifestyle in regional Western Australia. This is the first time that a Western Australian government has invested such significant resources in both detailed planning and structured strategic investment to improve amenity and living standards in regional areas.

Let us look at a few of these initiatives, one of which is delivering affordable housing to key workers in regional Australia. An amount of \$355.5 million was approved by cabinet on 19 March 2012 for a newly approved initiative that will deliver increased affordable housing opportunities to key workers in regional Western Australia. The objectives of this program are to provide affordable purchase and rental opportunities targeted to key workers; to deliver of a wide range of housing types into the marketplace, with a focus on one and two-bedroom dwellings—we noted the comments about the different family structures requiring housing; supporting private sector development in regional areas to grow local businesses; and to increase the number of households living in the regions.

There is also the non-government organisation strategic housing intervention. This initiative of \$35 million announced in July 2011 is targeted at non-government organisations to help sustain the delivery of key government-funded services in selected locations in the Pilbara and Kimberley, where there is a significant shortage of affordable housing. The program was developed in response to concerns that NGOs were struggling to attract and retain the necessary staff in some regional areas due to, in many cases, the limited availability of affordable and/or appropriate housing. This is a targeted program, so funding was allocated for one financial year, and it delivered 58 affordable houses—32 in the Pilbara and 26 in the Kimberley. The houses are owned by the Department of Housing and leased to NGOs at a discounted rate. As at 29 February 2012, construction had been completed on 44 of these houses and the NGOs that are eligible to receive these houses are selected through an independently chaired allocation project.

Then there is the Government Regional Officers' Housing program, for which \$200 million was announced in February 2009 to provide 400 units of accommodation to house government employees in regional Western Australia.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: Something that has not been done for a long time.

Hon WENDY DUNCAN: That is right.

That not only provides improved housing for our government employees, but also takes them out of the private market, freeing it up for others. I can itemise the numbers that have gone into various regions, but in view of the shortage of time I will talk to members about that afterwards.

There is the Jarrah Glen Lifestyle Village for which \$1.05 million was announced in September 2011 to construct four out of six units in stage 1 to provide accommodation for self-funded retirees in Walpole in the south west region. That funding has been provided in 2011–12.

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Cabinet approved \$5 million in funding for Ngarluma Aboriginal Sustainable Housing in Roebourne on 7 February 2010. The NASH project is being undertaken with the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation and is aimed at increasing accommodation and improving the social and economic wellbeing of the people of Roebourne. It involves the development of 50 hectares for a 380-lot residential development. Stage 1 of the project will include 100 lots, including 50 for social and government employee housing. I got a bit confused there! There will be 380 lots, a school, seniors' housing and a commercial centre. Stage 1 of the project involves the creation of 100 lots, comprising 50 lots for social and government employee housing and 50 lots for the Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation. On 14 March 2011, cabinet approved \$5 million for the Roebourne housing initiative. The Department of Housing owns 131 houses in Roebourne. A number of these assets are located in the village and are in an extremely poor condition. The proposal is to commence a program of demolition, with the first stage being 25 units located in the village, and then embark on a creative and dynamic design of the area that will deliver better outcomes and more housing for people in Roebourne.

Cabinet approved \$13 million on 10 October 2011 for the Indigenous visitors hostel program to provide housing for transient visitors in Kalgoorlie and Derby. The proposal was originally for Broome, but there is difficulty in determining a location there, so we will start with Derby, and Broome will be included when it is ready.

Cabinet approved \$15 million in funding for stage 1 of the Aboriginal community housing project in the Kimberley in Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra. This has resulted in the construction of 10 homes in Kununurra, eight in Halls Creek, and, when completed, six in Fitzroy Crossing.

Cabinet approved \$30 million on 9 November 2009 for the Karratha service workers' association project to provide housing for service workers in Karratha, where the price of rentals and the cost of housing skyrocketed due to lack of attention under the previous government. That has been an excellent program delivering 100 units, ranging from one bedroom to three-bedroom units—that is, 250 beds to help address the shortage of housing in Karratha. Cabinet approved \$17.3 million in 2010–11 for Coral Bay seasonal staff accommodation at a 58-room self-contained village. There is also the SuperTowns development project.

This is what should have happened under the previous government—looking forward, seeing where population growth is going to happen, planning for it, preparing for it, making sure that government has the housing on the ground when it is needed, and not trying to plug the hole in the dyke once it is already there. That is what this government has been left to do following the abject neglect of housing under the previous government.

An amount of \$40 million has been allocated to the northern towns development fund, which is to prepare those towns for their growth and ensure —

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Col Holt): Order, members!

Hon WENDY DUNCAN: It will de-bottleneck land release. Land release has been a very big focus, and it is thanks to this government and the negotiations that have successfully taken place with Aboriginal communities that we have released so much extra land.

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (Agricultural) [11.54 am]: In the brief time that I have to speak, I thank and congratulate the three opposition members who have spoken thus far, because it is patently obvious that the compelling case they put to the house is something that, I believe, the government needs to take on board with some degree of rapidity.

There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that families, and individuals for that matter, around Western Australia are struggling by the day. While families struggle, we have a state government that, if I remember my figures from my speech in reply to the budget last year, is going into debt to the tune of something like \$12 million to \$15 million a day. That is what we are adding to gross state debt. That is a dreadful indictment on this government, given the sorts of problems that this opposition has alerted the house to today.

In the brief time I have, I will read a couple of quotes from *The Geraldton Guardian* about cost hikes and the public housing situation. These are both from articles by a journalist by the name of Samantha Robin. The first article is from 15 April 2011 and states —

The rising cost of living is hitting Mid West households hard, with spiralling energy costs and increasing mortgage rates set to get worse.

An investigation by the Geraldton Guardian found an average family with two children and combined income of less than \$100,000 would be struggling to meet day-to-day living costs.

The Guardian found that based on average living costs, these families may be in the red by up to \$650 a month.

The other article is about public housing and states —

Public housing in Geraldton has reached breaking point, with more than 800 people on the waiting list.

The average waiting time to secure a home in Geraldton is nearly two and a half years.

Many people on the waiting list face a daily struggle to get by.

Hon Sally Talbot posed the question that everybody should be thinking about. She asked the government, “What are you going to do?” The government comes up with bandaid and patchwork approaches to this, but I do not see any long-term strategic approach. There was a submission to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly Community Development and Justice Standing Committee in January 2011 by an organisation called Shelter WA. I do not have time to go through the committee’s inquiry terms of reference, but the main term of reference it sought to address was “the role of government, and the private and the not-for-profit sector in facilitating affordable housing”. For members opposite, and members on this side for that matter, who have not seen the Shelter WA submission, I suggest it is compelling reading because it has 44 recommendations that this government might like to take on board if it is in any way, shape or form to address these issues, particularly the issue of affordable public housing.

Really, that is about as much time as I have to talk about this. I simply put it to the house that this is a compelling motion, I support it entirely and I recommend that members take on board the issues associated with it.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.