

HOMESWEST TENANCIES — ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Grievance

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot) [9.45 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Housing and Works. Let me start by thanking the minister for visiting some of the more troublesome hotspots in my electorate a few months ago. I am sure I am not the only member of Parliament who has approached the minister with numerous problems to do with Homeswest tenancies that have gone bad. I should also take this opportunity to acknowledge the excellent work that Senior Sergeant Craig Sweeney does in my electorate. He is the sergeant in charge of Murdoch Police Station. He takes a very active role. He is only a mobile phone call away if there is a problem around some of these areas. I will not divulge the locations, obviously to protect the innocent. He is always there as the result of a phone call. He is seconds away and he does an absolutely outstanding job.

I understand that the role of any government is to provide adequate housing, shelter, food and water for all its citizens. I would never suggest that the government should not do that. The government's job is to look after those who are less fortunate and who cannot, for whatever reason, look after themselves. For that reason people are granted Homeswest or government housing. We have had situations in my electorate and a number of other areas, and one such situation was recently resolved, for which I thank the minister. In those situations people abuse the tenancy given to them, to the point where it takes an unbelievable toll on their neighbours who are doing the right thing. As an example I will refer to the main crisis area in my electorate, where there are nightly all-night parties emanating from one particular Homeswest residence. I have written urgent letters to the Minister for Child Protection when concerns have been raised about very, very young children roaming the streets, unfed and unchecked—almost being run over. We have regular instances of stolen cars being driven through neighbours' fences. It is a war zone. I will not go into the details because the matter will be before the courts, but in a recent incident someone threatened violence with a table leg against neighbours. I have walked down that street many times. At any time I could take anyone there and pick up syringes out of the gutters in front of the particular house. There are stolen motorbikes and stolen cars. There are burnouts outside neighbours' houses at any time of the day or night. Dogs are allowed to freely roam the street and bite neighbours' children. The list is endless. It is very disturbing.

Basically, my constituents have had an absolute gutful of putting in complaints to Homeswest and an absolutely gutful of calling the police, who do their very best with the resources they have. As I said, although I understand that the government's job is to give everyone shelter, it is just not fair to keep these people living in this neighbourhood when they have such a negative effect on every part of their neighbours' lives, even to the point where it affects the residential property value of their houses. When someone wants to sell his house and move on, he will not get quite as much for it because the neighbourhood has turned into an absolute war zone.

I guess my questions to the minister are: What are we doing about it? When does it become a situation in which the government will step in and say, "You have been granted this. We have had umpteen million complaints. Enough is enough. You have to start to take responsibility for your actions, especially considering that you are living in a house that has been provided by the taxpayers of Western Australia"?

MR T.R. BUSWELL (Vasse — Minister for Housing and Works) [9.50 am]: I thank the member for the grievance. I also thank the member for raising publicly, some months ago now, the impact that antisocial behaviour has on some tenants in his electorate. My recollection is that, at the time, the member for Cockburn was somewhat critical of the member for daring to raise the concerns of his constituents. I went out with the member for Jandakot to meet Senior Sergeant Sweeney from the Murdoch Police Station and residents in two locations in the member's electorate. It was an experience that had a big impact on me. It is easy to just sit in one's ministerial office. I get a lot of letters from MPs and a lot of letters from the people of Western Australia complaining about antisocial behaviour. There is a standard letter that I assume the Department of Housing has been using forever to send back. Having met with those people and seeing —

Ms J.M. Freeman: Does the minister meet with families of the tenant as well?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: No. I met people in the streets who shared with me horrific stories of the impact that these tenants have had on their lives. In one instance I met a deaf couple who were in tears. This couple live together, trying to get ahead. They have been absolutely terrorised by people in their street. That firmed my resolve to do something. My view is that there is a pendulum of responsibility that swings between whether we do or we do not lean towards the tenant as we review a case. Some tenants have tragic backgrounds, but they represent only a very small minority of Homeswest tenants. I am a very strong supporter of the bulk of Homeswest tenants. In my view the pendulum needed to swing back towards community responsibility; that is to say, we provide tenants with a taxpayer-subsidised house and the tenant has responsibilities to the people who live in those communities to be a good participant in community life.

So what are we doing? We are doing a few things. Firstly, from my point of view perhaps the most important thing is to work with tenants. We have established a task force in the south east metropolitan area. We have called it the early intervention pilot. The early intervention pilot is a very intense support process whereby problem tenants and potential problem tenants are identified. The early intervention team engages with these tenants to assist them to better understand the requirements on them as tenants and to give them better skills to be good tenants. That is working well. Sixteen tenants have so far moved through the early intervention pilot. Two people refused to participate, and they have been evicted. The other 14 tenants—as has been reported to me—are making significant progress. That is a start but we have to do more.

We have recently approved a new antisocial disruptive behaviour in public housing policy. I call it the antisocial behaviour crackdown. It will be pretty severe.

Mr P. Papalia: The minister sounds like him.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: When the member writes to me about people in his constituency, whose lives have been ruined, we will do something.

Mr P. Papalia: I'm glad you're doing something. It's good. It sounds like a good Labor plan!

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Let me tell the member what it is. The early intervention pilot is good. The crackdown does several things. We will move to amend the Residential Tenancies Act to give the department greater power to evict people in cases where their behaviour is irresponsible. We will establish some protocols that define poor tenancy behaviour. Those tenants will receive formal warnings in a very short period of time. If a tenant receives three formal warnings in six months, he or she will be evicted. Under the current system, the tenant gets a warning and that warning lasts two weeks. If there is another complaint in two weeks' time, it just rolls on and on. These things can go on for years. So, three warnings in six months and the tenant is out. If it is severe, I suspect the tenant will be evicted straightaway. In the interim—as the protocols will take some time to prepare—I have instructed the Department of Housing to reintroduce the use of section 64 of the Residential Tenancies Act. I expect we will see an increase in evictions of public housing tenants under this approach. Quite simply, the department is not going to turn a blind eye to poor behaviour.

We are also replacing what are called acceptable behaviour agreements. Acceptable behaviour agreements have historically been a document signed between the tenant and the department with a thing called a tenancy behaviour condition. A tenancy behaviour condition will be a legally enforceable set of conditions that the tenant commits to. If the tenant breaches those conditions, he or she will be evicted.

We will increase the use of probationary tenancies—tenancies for short periods of time. If a tenant has a history of problems—for example, if there is a chance that a person will be a problem tenant—that person will get a periodic tenancy of maybe six months. If that tenant behaves inappropriately during that time, the tenancy will not be renewed. One of the problems at the moment is that once a tenant is in, he or she is practically in for life. Probationary tenancies, as I understand it from housing officers who use them in the field, are a very powerful tool for forcing people to behave in an appropriate manner.

Another thing we will be doing is introducing visitor sanctions. One of the defences that is often offered up for poor tenancy behaviour is, “It's not me. It's the people who come and visit me.” I suspect that in many cases that is the case. We need to use whatever tools are available to us—that is, restraining orders and, potentially, the prohibitive behaviour orders that the Attorney General has talked about—to keep visitors away from homes where those visitors have caused antisocial behaviour in those communities. It is basically a major change of tack for the housing department.

I have to say that I think it will take a little bit of time for a cultural change to sink through, but the feedback I have from officers working at street level in communities is that they want these tools. Officers from the Department of Housing want to be able to go into areas and fix up problems, because they are sick and tired, historically, of trying to fix up a problem with a bad tenant only to have their decision overturned and that bad tenant retained in that property.

What the member for Jandakot will see—and, in part, this is because he encouraged me to meet with tenants in his electorate—is a significant crackdown on poor tenancy behaviour through the four areas I have outlined. That will happen with a very clear understanding that we have an obligation in the first instance, through programs like the early intervention pilot, to engage with people to help make them better tenants. We are not going to solve the problems overnight, but when we err, or when we have to choose, we will side with better community behaviour over the tenant. I think that is our obligation.