

MINISTER FOR WATER — PERFORMANCE

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson) informed the Assembly that he was in receipt within the prescribed time of a letter from the Leader of the Nationals WA seeking to debate a matter of public interest.

[In compliance with standing orders, at least five members rose in their places.]

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Nationals WA) [2.45 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the Minister for Water for his lack of leadership and policy in the water portfolio, including the lack of progress on water reform legislation and cuts to programs designed to secure water resources for communities and businesses in regional WA.

We do not bring this motion to the house lightly. It is a very serious issue. We debate this motion today because the McGowan Labor government is failing our community. The Premier has put in charge of this most vital portfolio a minister who is bereft of ideas, has proven again and again that there is no agenda for the water portfolio and is incapable of managing the portfolios he has been tasked with. I think that the question that was asked today should have been anticipated by the minister, whether it was today or any other, because he asked enough questions of me, as a previous water minister, and the member for Warren–Blackwood about water reform to understand that this was a considerable issue for the previous government. Our government had undertaken significant consultation. We had done all the preparatory work to get that legislation to the point at which it had been given approval for drafting. It was handed to this minister on a platter, yet two and a half years later, having asked multiple questions in opposition, we still see no sign of this vital legislation. This minister has a less than glowing track record. He has forced his own Premier on a number of occasions to step in and clean up the mess that he has left behind. He mangled the attempt to seize 1 700 tonnes of rock lobster from the industry under the guise of increasing the amount of affordable crayfish to the local market, which we now know was really an attempt to secure a greater financial return to the government’s coffers.

Mr D.J. Kelly: That’s the water portfolio, is it?

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I am just talking about the minister’s record and why he is not capable of holding this portfolio. We now know that that was an attempt to secure a greater financial return to the government’s coffers, not for any of the reasons that the minister proffered. Then when he was caught out, he was not even gracious enough to say, “Sorry; I got that wrong.” He left it for the Premier to come in and sweep it under the table. Despite his efforts to rewrite history, we know that the minister lost the trust of the industry in his fisheries portfolio, and he threw his own government under the bus.

The SPEAKER: Member, are you talking about your motion?

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I am.

The SPEAKER: This is about water.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I am talking about why this minister is incapable of being in charge of this most vital water portfolio and I am giving a short preamble about his performance over the last two and a half years. I am saying that this minister is not capable of holding this most vital portfolio. There has been plenty of critical analysis by not only those of us sitting on this side of the chamber, but also those in the media who follow these debates. If members go through some of that media, they will see phrases and critical terms such as “cringe-worthy”, “minister’s mishandling of the issue”, “hapless” and “disingenuous disgrace”. That is a reflection of his handling of the fisheries portfolio and the SMART drum line and crayfish issues, and now this is becoming evident in the water portfolio. Even if we set aside that bungling and the ineptitude of past decisions, we say that this minister has a paper-thin agenda for the water portfolio. The water portfolio is critical to our state’s economic and social success.

The previous Liberal–National government’s agenda for water was bold. There were a number of KPIs that we set for ourselves and that every water minister should seek to meet. Firstly, has the minister planned and invested so people can turn on their taps, fill their glasses with safe drinking water, have a shower and flush their toilets? This is a fairly basic premise for the Minister for Water to uphold. Secondly, have groundwater and surface water resources been managed sustainably? We should look after the environment and make sure that we are leaving something for future generations. Thirdly, is the minister facilitating the development of liveable and productive communities right across the state? To spice it up, the Minister for Water in Western Australia is charged with doing this in a rapidly drying climate in one of the driest parts of the driest continent on Earth. It is no small portfolio to be handed to a minister in any government.

In government, we added another key performance indicator: water cannot be a limiting factor as we press forward with an agenda to grow the state’s economy. That involved the creation and implementation of a plan that was set

out in 2010, shortly after we came to government. We talked about some of the challenges that we had in government, facing that rapidly drying climate: shifting extraction from shallow to deeper aquifers; committing to a groundwater replenishment scheme; expanding seawater desalination capacity; continuing to make gains under water use efficiency; and using wastewater recycling as a resource for industry, public open spaces and agriculture. That was the plan set out by the member for Nedlands, who is sitting next to me now as Deputy Leader of the Opposition. He set out the plan in 2010, and by 2016 we had met and set out a plan to invest and make sure that we were adhering to that plan.

Mr D.T. Punch interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I am talking about a fairly significant program of works, which I will elucidate for the member, who was not sitting in this chamber at the time and was of no use in the discussions that we were having at that point in time. By 2016, we had achieved those goals in the context of a climate that was drying much faster than indicated by any scientific data provided to any of our departments, the CSIRO or anyone working in this space, and we had also had a massive increase in population. We have done a significant amount of work.

What else did we do? We had a bold plan. We had a \$20 million regional estuaries initiative—the single biggest investment in the state’s history in managing our at-risk regional estuaries. We created Watering WA, a \$30 million investment in securing regional community non-drinking water supplies; a \$40 million Water for Food program, in cooperation with the then Department of Regional Development, the Department of Water, and the Department of Agriculture, which was about growing and diversifying our agriculture and food sector through 11 key irrigated agriculture projects; and innovation in urban design through a partnership with the Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities. There were projects such as the new suburb of Brabham, and White Gum Valley, where we were doing water reuse at a precinct-level scale rather than at an individual scale, trying to get to that next level of water efficiency. We turbocharged the then Department of Water’s groundwater investigation, so that we could prove up new sources of water for industry, agriculture and the community to make sure that our economy was not being limited by the fact that we live in a significantly dry part of the world, and we commenced the modernisation and digitisation of scientific data right across the spectrum. All of the data that was sitting in every office of the Department of Water was digitised and made available for government and industry.

In the area of water reform, we undertook a comprehensive review and consultation process to modernise the six pieces of legislation, some of which were 100 years old. We made sure that we consulted very closely with the stakeholders involved. That work was handed to the incoming government on a silver platter, yet, over halfway through this government’s first term, that legislation is still nowhere to be seen. The minister could not tell us whether his stakeholder reference group had met recently. From our perspective, that shows a lack of priority by this government to progress this in a timely manner. The only consultation feedback available on the new department’s website dates back to the work done by us in government, when the member for Warren–Blackwood, as minister, released in 2013 the position paper “Securing Western Australia’s Water Future”. It is very disappointing for the people who took a significant amount of time to make sure that they provided their expertise as part of the drafting process, and it is certainly of great concern to us. Despite the minister announcing amid much fanfare in August last year that the cabinet had approved and was progressing drafting for the water resources management legislation, he has refused to mark out a time line, and he did that again today, through an interjection in this place. It is no doubt languishing in the same place as the Attorney General’s promised legislation for animal activism.

Very few new ideas have been championed by this minister. Any good ideas that we brought forward have been handballed to other departments. Instead of demonstrating leadership and innovation in the water space, the Minister for Water has made his mark by passing responsibility for programs to other ministers, and cutting funding to vital programs such as the country water supply program, the community water supply program and the farm water rebate scheme. These programs are about trying to improve and increase self-sufficiency on farms and in communities so that there is a lesser reliance on scheme water, which means we do not have to invest as much up-front, from taxpayers’ dollars, into a system that is large and spread over significant distances. It costs taxpayers an enormous amount of money, so whatever we can do to reduce our reliance on scheme water should be invested in, but the government cut those programs as soon as it came to power. They are gone, after making such fantastic improvements and providing the opportunities for communities to participate in improving their own self-sufficiency.

The fact that we find most difficult to swallow is that the minister is using royalties for regions funding, through the Water Corporation, for the community service obligation. This is something we never anticipated royalties for regions should ever be used for. The community service obligation always came from consolidated revenue, but now it displaces funds that could be used to improve self-sufficiency for communities in regional areas right across the state. It is very disappointing to see a big chunk of royalties for regions simply being spent on the ongoing running of the Water Corporation, which is delivering to the government, by the way, a significant dividend that it spends predominantly in the metropolitan area. We can see that our regional constituents have deep concerns about this minister being in this portfolio, and from our perspective we would say that this minister is bereft of

policy and ideas, and his track record shows that he cannot and should not be in charge of such a significant and critical social and economic policy.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [2.57 pm]: I also rise to condemn the Minister for Water for his lack of leadership and lack of communication. That is what I will focus on today. In the electorate of Roe, the standard of communication from the minister and the Water Corporation has been below disappointing. It started within three weeks of me coming into this place. The minister went to Gnowangerup in my electorate, where there is a fantastic project of reticulating the oval at the Gnowangerup District High School. Sure enough, I was not notified. When I spoke to him about it, he said, “That’s what you guys used to do.” As far as I am concerned, I am not interested in what used to happen; it is important that the local member be notified if there is a project in their electorate. This was not the first time that it had happened, nor will it be the last.

For me, the biggest impact on water in my electorate came on 22 January this year, when Terry Smith from Lake Grace rang my electorate office and said that seven standpipes in the Shire of Lake Grace had been cut off. He had been there the day before getting water for his stock at the standpipe, but then, when he turned up the next day, they were locked up. There was no notification. The Water Corporation had cut off seven standpipes and then, after a fair bit of a song and dance from people carting water for their sheep and for household use, he asked the shire to go out and put notices on the standpipes. The Water Corporation did not even want to be bothered doing that. The shire then had to communicate on behalf of the Water Corporation to all the users; many of whom were very low on water. From there, we had the episode with the Lake Grace town dam. It has a magnificent catchment of about four or five hectares of bitumen, but now we can barely see the bitumen for weeds and small trees. It was a perfect opportunity for capturing water run-off into the Lake Grace town dam, but now we have four and five-foot high trees, patches of grass and the whole package. As it turned out, the Shire of Lake Grace was asked to make some changes so that the Water Corporation could put in a temporary standpipe. That took about four or five months. I congratulate Denise and the Lake Grace shire for their efforts.

I also want to comment about the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, which has made the effort to go out and map and quantify the dams that are there and how much water is in that area. However, many of the assets owned by the Water Corporation in that area are not being maintained. I think the minister needs to go out there and have a good, hard look at it.

I would like to add some other brief points. One reaction I got from my constituents was that at the same time as these standpipes were being cut off, hundreds of thousands of litres of water were being taken from the Wickepin standpipe to be used for the upgrades to the Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd bins in the Wickepin region. Farmers were saying, “Hold on a minute; our standpipes are being cut off, but there’s no problem with the Water Corp supplying hundreds of thousands of litres to do the CBH renovations!” That was one thing. The other issue was with Lake King. Padlocks were put on the dam there. That was another dam that farmers tried to access. It got to the point at which farmers wanted to go in and cut the padlocks. I strongly advised the regional manager of the Water Corporation that he needed to communicate with the farmers of the Lake King area, which he thankfully did after a week or two.

The minister did turn up in Ravensthorpe—obviously, again I was not notified, but I am getting used to that. The minister did turn up. We have a lot of issues in Ravensthorpe, Jerramungup and Lake King. It was great to see that after we got the federal minister, David Littleproud, to come across and we showed him what was going on, Minister Kelly finally turned up in Ravensthorpe shire.

The farm water rebate scheme is incredibly valuable to our farmers. As our leader said, the scheme is about reducing dependence on scheme water. It is such a short-term measure to cut off a scheme that encourages farmers to improve their own water resources. To me, that is vital. My constituents can now get only federal money, not all of which is suitable, to try to replace the farm water rebate scheme funding. I urge the minister to have another look at that.

Finally, I see that the minister has spent a lot of money on advertising that climate change is real. I understand what the minister is saying there, but I urge him to spend the equivalent amount of money on communicating with farmers, communities and shires in Western Australia.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [3.02 pm]: I rise to support this excellent motion from my colleagues in the Nationals WA. I will give a brief contribution, because I greatly anticipate the contribution of the member for Warren–Blackwood. There is so much material to use but so little time, so I will focus on the Wanneroo area. As I have pointed out in this place a number of times, I am becoming quite familiar there. I was there last week talking to water users. Boy, I can tell members that they are cranky with this government, because it is setting out to destroy their livelihoods in that area. Earlier this year, the minister was running around saying, “The Liberals were going to cut 25 per cent of your water. That’s what they were proposing. I’ve come in as your saviour!” He knows that is not true. He knows that the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation recommended a 25 per cent cut and that a consultation process was going on. There was no proposal by any government to cut it by 25 per cent; the department proposed that that be considered. The minister came in as the saviour and said, “I’m going to save you

from the demon. It's a 10 per cent cut, but don't worry—it's in nine years' time." This is somehow going to give the water users in the north Wanneroo area some surety. A number of good people in this chamber, on this side at least, understand farming and the horticultural industry. Very few people in horticulture make more than a 10 per cent profit. In fact, most of them make a five per cent or so profit. If the government cuts 10 per cent of their water, they will go broke. It might as well say that it is cutting 100 per cent of their water. This is the minister's solution to a water shortage.

We are pumping 124 billion litres of water into the ocean. We can look at that and say that the government is doing something. A water recycling plant has been set up and is currently recycling 10 per cent of our wastewater, which is in excess of that 124 billion litres. There is a proposal to put it forward. The minister should talk to the City of Kalgoorlie. That is a fantastic city. The City of Kalgoorlie is re-using 70 per cent of its greywater. Members should go and see that facility. I am not sure whether Labor members got out much when the ALP went to Kalgoorlie, but some of them may have done. Seventy per cent of the greywater in Kalgoorlie is recycled. Now we have an ambitious target—we will hopefully get to 20 per cent, but we are not sure how it is going.

Instead of the minister saying that he will grow the horticultural industry in the north Wanneroo area, he is going to cut farmers' access to water and make their businesses unviable so that they go out of business, because he cannot get off his butt and establish new industries with new water. I hear from the growers there—I was chatting to a few of them last week. They said that the minister was running around trying to prove that everything I have said is wrong. Representatives of the department are down there saying, "Oh, Honey said this. We'll show that he was wrong." The trouble is that the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and the Water Corporation do not even look at their own facilities. They do not look at the wastewater treatment plant at The Spectacles, which is infiltrating water and raising the watertable there. They do not look at their plant in Gordon Road, which is already infiltrating secondary treated wastewater. They do not look at the examples overseas. For example, Los Angeles, which is a big city, is infiltrating secondary treated wastewater and abstracting it downstream for its potable water supply. It is not just for horticulture; it is for its potable water supply. There are plenty of examples of how to grow and develop an industry, but the minister is choosing not to do it.

As I said, I am going to cut this contribution short because I am greatly anticipating the contribution from the member for Warren–Blackwood. The minister is the gift that keeps giving. People are naming their children after me in Wanneroo now, based on the contribution that the minister has made. I have become very popular in that area!

Several members interjected.

Dr D.J. HONEY: It is a very popular name, members. I will sit down and hand over to the member for Warren–Blackwood to continue.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren–Blackwood) [3.07 pm]: I was hoping that the Minister for Water might get up and make a contribution at this point.

Mr D.J. Kelly: I want to hear what you've got to say.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I am sure he wants to hear my views! They are strong views and views that he should consider. One thing I want to support is the point the member for Roe made about consultation and engagement with the community. There is no greater issue than that of water in a state like Western Australia, and particularly in regional areas of Western Australia. It is a massively important resource for not only regional development, but also the very economy of our state. The minister does not have a level of engagement that is commensurate with the issue that water represents to this state. A case in point is what has happened in Denmark. I have asked a couple of questions about the Denmark issue. The minister is intent on trying to find an argument on climate change. He is trying to find a denier in the house who wants to take up some sort of debate on that rather than on the issue of what is actually happening in Denmark. I asked when the community was going to be told that it would have stage 5 water restrictions, whether there was any lead-up to that, and whether the minister had had a chance to talk to the community about what options might be available. It is a really environmentally sensible community down there that actually wants to do the right thing.

The Denmark River is the one river system in Western Australia and one of the few rivers nationally in which the salinity level is coming down and we are able to use that water as a water resource. It is a massive achievement. The community has done that. The community has achieved that. We invested in infrastructure that is able to convert the brackish water that is there, because it is largely a cattle-farming catchment, into water that could be shandied up with the Quickup River Dam to be able to manage the water supply issues of Denmark. We had a plan in place. The Leader of the Nationals WA highlighted the plan the state had, which drilled down to local schemes in and around water, including a network. I do support the network investment. It was not anticipated that it would come on this soon—absolutely. It was anticipated that it would come on down the track a bit. The minister has announced it, under some stress I am sure, because it is not what we would want to see at this time because we believed that the water issues could have been resolved. The plan was supported. We invested in that. Unfortunately, the area has been three years dry, which the minister highlighted yesterday and which has necessitated a bigger investment. But the Denmark community wants to know what is happening as the minister goes along with this,

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Ms Mia Davies; Mr Peter Rundle; Dr David Honey; Mr Terry Redman; Mr Dave Kelly

and that is not happening. It wants to do the right thing, but is not getting a chance. I support the network investment. I also supported the \$15 million towards wastewater recycling in Denmark, which would have been an opportunity to put some treated wastewater into some of the municipal supplies, including for the golf course, taking broader pressure off the system. That was cut by this minister. Again, there was no leadership and no engagement—the very stuff that people want to see from ministers and government. I think the Denmark issues are a highlight of that in recent times. I support the scheme, I am not backing away from that, but I think the minister has neglected community engagement.

I turn to the community of Manjimup. I am not going to talk about the southern forests irrigation scheme; it has my full support. The minister knows that. I have written to him and the Minister for Regional Development on that case. Because of where agriculture is at and the investment interest, particularly in horticulture and the opportunity it presents, water is again coming to the forefront. People are chasing licences. They are trying to get bigger dams and water security over time, as well as class A and B water to allow them to make investments. There is not the engagement that the government should have with that community on water issues. That goes to starting the discussion about water reform if the minister wants to see and develop an agenda for reform in the legislation. We have all been a part of that, and we have been able to take the community along. As the Leader of the National Party highlighted, the only feedback on the government's own website now is from 2013. There is no recent feedback from or engagement with various stakeholders about what should or should not be in those reforms. If the minister wants those reforms to happen, he needs the community to walk through the very issues it has engaged in now: spring rights, environmental allocations and how the licensing system works for class A and B licences. I do not think that has been handled well by this government in the Manjimup region. That is one of the things that are leading to many of the tensions down there. I am right behind the community on that.

Whether people are for or against the southern forests irrigation scheme, the issue of water is still alive and well. If the minister does not engage with the contemporary issues now, the only thing his bill is going to be when it comes around is toilet paper; that is the only thing it is going to be. The minister will be looking at the wrath of industry, with it asking him, “What the hell are you doing? What is in your bill? What is this reference group that is supposed to be engaging us?” The minister said today that presumably it has been meeting this year. We might find a surprise there—that it is engaging with stakeholders about what is in the bill. Are there going to be water entitlements? What are the issues with spring rights, statutory water management plans and all the issues that have been part of the National Water Initiative reforms that the state has been endeavouring to get into place? What happens? The minister smashes it with other stuff. He smashes it with the debate he is trying to get into about climate change and he smashes it with the debate about trying to get some cost recovery on water fees. That came adrift. That is another measure of this minister's incapacity to show leadership. The minister is throwing all these hand grenades into the water debate, which is taking us away from the very agenda we should be trying to achieve—that is, fresh, new water reform legislation to deal with water security over time in the state of Western Australia. That is not there. This minister has come out well short.

The other things he seems focused on are his little pet issues such as the Perth Regional Alliance. He shouted from the rooftops just recently about bringing things back in house and taking away the competitive pressures that the commercial sector has been able to bring into those areas, and he highlighted that there have been \$2 million or \$3 million of savings on whatever. I would like the minister to table the business case for that, because I am not sure it would stack up quite how he is saying. I would not mind betting that some ripper emails have gone off at certain times to the board of the Water Corporation saying, “You will bring this mob back in house, because I have got this mob sitting behind me called the union that thinks that is a good idea.” The other thing that I am sure is sitting in the sites now is the Aroona Alliance, which is the other alliance that Water Corp has for some of the capital works stuff it puts in place.

The minister is coming up short on consultation with the community. What is happening in Denmark now is not where he should be. When GWN was there interviewing that community, it was told that the news was an absolute surprise to everybody. It was a surprise to me. I meet every six months or so with the Water Corp leadership there, and I did not hear about it. Now I hear about the decision for a \$28 million or \$30 million investment in a piece of pipe infrastructure as well as stage 5 water restrictions. There was no lead-up to the issues of stress or crisis those decisions have presented. The community should have known about it. It wants to be a part of it. That community is engaged in that. In fact, I think that community has among the lowest per capita water use of any town in Western Australia. If the minister is going to pick a community to have a chat with, that community would probably be it. I think it would be right onside to do things to mix in with the minister's objectives in this space. There are issues in Denmark. There are issues in Manjimup causing tensions right now. I cannot highlight enough for the minister not to underestimate the capacity of those issues to inhibit the challenge of government taking up water reforms. They are important to us, and I think they are important to the minister. He made a big statement in August last year. In question time he pointed out the former water ministers in the chamber. I guess we expected that. Now it is on his plate, and a lot of experience has gone past, including conversations I had with the late John Kobelke

about this issue. That was the first time I experienced the challenge of taking on the reform process. I think the big challenge is the broader reform issue. The feedback process is not there—that feedback loop.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water) [3.15 pm]: I rise to speak against this motion. Having listened to what has been said, I ask: what have the Nationals WA really said? The member for Warren–Blackwood criticised people on this side for talking about the impact of climate change on the water debate. We just heard the member for Warren–Blackwood say that talking about climate change is like throwing a hand grenade into the water debate. That just typifies the problem that the National and Liberal Parties have with water issues. They were in government for eight and a half years. That government told public servants that they could not mention climate change; they had to use the term “drying climate”. They could not mention climate change, because so many people on the other side actually do not believe in it. The federal Minister for Water Resources, National Party member David Littleproud, said he did not know whether climate change was man-made or not. He just does not know. There is no leadership on this issue at all. Barnaby Joyce, the spiritual leader of the National Party, said he did not believe in climate change.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members, you were heard in silence. I will have the same for this side, please.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call you to order for the first time. I made a statement.

Mr D.J. KELLY: At the federal level, we really want and need leadership on the water issue, but there is nothing from the National Party on climate change. In fact, it does everything it can to stop the federal government from being able to take action on this. What it does do in the water policy area is all focused on the Murray–Darling Basin—absolutely all focused on the Murray–Darling. The federal National Party will spend millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money in Bob Katter’s electorate trying to win his votes, but we hardly ever see it here in Western Australia. I completely reject the member for Warren–Blackwood’s assertion that the debate about climate change is somehow a side issue in the water debate; it absolutely is not.

The Leader of the National Party spent a considerable amount of time talking about lobsters and SMART drum lines, which just goes to show how little substance there is in this debate. She talked about the former government’s key performance indicators. I remind members opposite about the Gallop Labor government. When it got elected in 2001, Premier Geoff Gallop made himself water minister, and he set in train a desalination program that has been crucial to securing potable water supplies for Perth. Members opposite, including the former Leader of the Liberal Party, Mike Nahan, the member for Riverton, said that the first desalination plant would be a great white elephant, along with the Mandurah train line. Actually, the Gallop and Carpenter Labor governments got desalination rolling in this state.

Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup: I don’t reckon that’s right. Kim Hames did, prior to 2001.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I do not know what the member for Dawesville was doing when he was in the Premier’s office. Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Fair go! You guys were heard in silence. I would like the minister to be heard in silence and everyone will be happy—maybe.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Whether it be desalination or groundwater replenishment, those programs began under the Gallop and Carpenter Labor governments. I do not want to hear anyone from the other side claiming credit for initiating those programs because they did not. People on this side have a fantastic record in managing the state’s water.

The Leader of the Nationals WA talked about KPIs, such as having clean water, liveable communities and sustainable groundwater, and water not being a limiting factor. I never heard her mention those KPIs when she was in government. That is the first time I have ever heard them.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Nationals!

Mr D.J. KELLY: I will tell members something about water management by the other side. In its eight years in government, it had three Ministers for Water: Bill Marmion, the member for Nedlands; the Leader of the Nationals; and then the member for Warren–Blackwood. They absolutely chopped and changed. The member for Roe complained that I did not let him know when I visited his electorate. He did not care if that was the standard practice under the previous government. It is hardly a mortal sin to take up time in an MPI on matters like that.

We are still working on the water resource management bill. After eight and a half years in government, the opposition did not complete the task. We are continuing to work on it. I say to the Leader of the Nationals that it is not the case that all the work had been done and the bill was handed to us on a platter. Substantial work on that bill still needs to be done, and that was the condition in which it was handed to us when we came into government. It is absolutely not the case that all the work had been done. We are continuing to work on it.

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I listened to the member for Warren–Blackwood in silence. I will not take interjections from him.

We continue to deal with the impacts of climate change, particularly in regional WA. The member for Bunbury will be aware that we committed \$15 million to securing Bunbury’s water supply by building the new water treatment plant in Glen Iris. The member for Warren–Blackwood may not understand the water portfolio, but Bunbury’s water supply is basically groundwater. Its bores on the coast are being threatened by saltwater intrusion, rising sea levels and declining groundwater, all as a result of climate change. Aqwest put up budget submissions on a number of occasions for the capital to build that water treatment plant, all of which were rejected when the Liberal Party was in government.

Mr D.T. Punch: They weren’t interested in Bunbury.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The opposition certainly was not interested in Bunbury and that is why it lost the seat. When we came into government, we committed \$15 million to the water treatment plant at Glen Iris to secure Bunbury’s water supply—a project that the National Party repeatedly knocked back. Again, that is because it basically does not believe in climate change. It does not listen to the science that saltwater intrusion is a significant —

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am saying to the member for Warren–Blackwood that we are investing in regional WA. We committed \$32 million for that pipeline in Denmark—again, as a direct result of climate change. Three of the worst years on record for Denmark’s water supply have occurred since 2014 and it looks like this year, as far as stream flow goes, will be the fourth-worst year on record. When the former government had this issue on its plate in 2015 and it had to introduce level 5 water restrictions, it decided not to build the pipeline from Albany but to spend \$12 million building a pipeline between the two Denmark dams—Quickup River Dam and Denmark River Dam. Both of those water sources are rainfall dependant. Four years down the track, they are not sufficient to secure the people of Denmark’s water supply. Had the former government taken the difficult, more expensive decision in 2015 and built the pipeline from Albany, that pipeline would be in place now; it would not have wasted \$12 million on the pipeline between the two dams and we would have dealt with that issue. The member for Warren–Blackwood comes in here and says that climate change is just a hand grenade. It absolutely is not. It is affecting regional water supplies—it is affecting Denmark and it is affecting Bunbury. I had the same discussions with people in Busselton. The member for Vasse probably does not understand these things. The bores on the coast that supply Busselton are similarly threatened by saltwater intrusion, so eventually decisions will have to be made about Busselton’s water. This is an issue throughout regional WA.

With respect to the member for Roe’s general complaint, if I can interpret it that way—that we are not doing enough in regional WA—we have had a very dry year in some areas of the wheatbelt, and we have declared a number of water deficiencies. The Shires of Lake Grace, Kent and Ravensthorpe have all had areas subject to water deficiency declarations. The member for Roe said that he is very unhappy with what the Water Corporation has done but he thinks that the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has done a good job. It might surprise the member for Roe to learn that I am also the minister responsible for DWER. I said to the Water Corporation, DWER and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development that I want those three government agencies to sit in the same room and talk about what response they can make to those dryland areas that are suffering through this dry year. For the first time, those three agencies are working together to look at what can be done to secure emergency water supplies and town water supplies in the wheatbelt.

Mr P.J. Rundle interjected.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Hang on. The Premier is very keen on not wanting agencies to work in silos; he wants them to work together. It frustrates me when I find agencies that have overlapping responsibilities not talking to each other. Those three agencies will start meeting to deal with this issue. This year alone we have spent over half a million dollars on developing and upgrading 16 community water supplies in dryland agricultural communities, with a further \$110 000 committed for the coming year. We have spent more than the former government did in its eight and a half years, on a year-by-year basis. In its eight and a half years, it spent \$780 000. So there is half a million from us in one year, and \$780 000 in eight and a half years under the previous government. The two former water ministers might have some explanation for that. The investment by the previous government to boost community water supplies needs a lot of explaining. We are now getting some results because I got those three agencies together to talk to each other.

I also want to mention to the member for Roe the role that local government plays in this issue. Local governments need to be the eyes and ears in the community to assist agencies such as DWER and to alert us when there are problems. As a government, we obviously cannot have officers going out and measuring the water levels of individual farm dams. It is simply not possible. We need local governments to talk to their community and to provide that information to government departments. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation tells

me that every year it puts the call out to local governments to ask them which communities may come into difficulty and may have to make a water deficiency declaration. If the department gets that information early, it can make arrangements. If it does not get that information, it becomes difficult. The engagement from some local governments has been pretty poor. DWER told me that it has sent out emails and made phone calls to local governments asking for feedback on what is happening to their farmers, and the response of some local governments has been less than it should be.

This year, the Water Corporation spent \$225 million in regional Western Australia on its asset investment program. The Water Corporation is continuing to invest in regional WA, and DWER, the Water Corporation and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development are working more closely to ensure that community water supplies are in the best possible condition they can be, so that if an area gets an unusually low rainfall, we are in the best position to help those farmers. We are responding to the needs of regional WA in a way that the previous government never did. The people in Bunbury had to put in an application to secure their water supply year after year. The response was—nothing, nothing, nothing! We got into government and put \$15 million on the table for Bunbury's water supply. We are getting the job done and the wastewater treatment plant is being built. It is a similar situation in Denmark. In 2015, the previous government chose the cheap option—a \$12 million pipeline between two dams, both of which are climate dependent. Where are we now? We have had to commit \$32 million to fix the problem once and for all.

The member spoke about the farm water rebate scheme. That scheme had been running for a considerable time—I think since the early 2000s. It was started at a time when things like climate change concerns were not well understood in the community. A rebate was provided to people to droughtproof their farms or make them water resilient. One reason for doing that was to encourage debate to make sure that people understood what the issues were and to give them some sort of financial assistance to start to get the job done. My understanding is that over the years, over 1 000 farmers have taken up that program, which amounts to about \$8 million in grants. When we came into government, we looked at that program. Certainly there is not a farmer out there who does not understand how important water is, that we are in a continuous drying climate, and the importance of the impact of climate change. The question was: should we continue to subsidise that infrastructure on farms, which are essentially small businesses, when the message is well and truly out there? If we remember that the previous government left us with \$40 billion worth of debt —

Mr I.C. Blayney: It was \$31 billion.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I will teach the member how to read the budget. The previous government left us with \$40 billion worth of debt. It spent when it did not have money, and when it had spent that money, it spent again. That program had been around for a long time and the message was well and truly out, so we decided that it was not appropriate to continue to subsidise that work. However, in order to get the capital investment under the original program, a person had to have a water audit done on their farm and submit a water plan. I think a person could get up to \$750 towards that water audit. We increased that to \$1 000. There is still an incentive for people to get the audit done, but once the audit is done, and given that the message of how important water is is well and truly out there, I do not think it is unreasonable to expect that businesses will do what is required to make their farms water resilient.

We have done other things in the water portfolio. I am very proud indeed of what we have done in the hardship area—an area that was completely ignored by the previous government and previous three water ministers opposite. Each year under their government, over 2 500 households had their water restricted because of non-payment issues.

Mr D.T. Punch: No social conscience.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Yes; it affected 2 500 households per annum at the end of their tenure. It is pretty humiliating for a person to have their water restricted because they cannot pay their bills. When I became Minister for Water, I said to the Water Corporation that it was not good enough and there had to be a different way of dealing with this issue. The Water Corporation went away and then it came back and said that it would try to be proactive. Its officers could tell if the bills were getting a bit high or people were getting behind in their payments, so rather than restricting their water, they were going to try to talk to these people. They prioritised the customers that were having the most difficulty. One of the officers in the Water Corporation's customer service unit described this work as the best thing that they had ever done in their working life at the Water Corporation. Instead of lowering the boom on someone who is struggling to pay their water bills, they were trying to find out what the problem was and to come up with a payment plan or some other program to assist those families. Instead of 2 500 households per annum having their water restricted, it is now down to about 750 households. That is a massive drop in the number of families who have to go through that process. It is not costing the Water Corporation significantly more money because it costs money to cut off people's water: a technician has to be sent out to install a restricting valve, the customer has to be dealt with, and then the technician has to go out and remove the restricting valve.

There is a cost to that process. I am really proud of the fact that fewer Western Australians are having to go through that process.

The member for Warren–Blackwood and Leader of the Nationals WA would be interested to know of a 75 per cent reduction of customers in the agricultural region who have had their water restricted. The Leader of the Nationals WA did not mention that in her contribution. I would have thought that if this debate was anything other than just cheap politics, she would have given this government credit for the work that it has done—namely, a 75 per cent reduction in the number of families in the agricultural region who have their water cut off because they cannot pay their bills. Member for Warren–Blackwood, there has been a 92 per cent reduction in the south west. Again, there was no mention of that in his speech. It just shows that this whole debate has been a stunt. There has been a 31 per cent reduction in the number of overdue water notices issued. That is a substantial improvement in the way we deal with customers going through hardship. I am proud of a lot of programs, but I will highlight one. When customer service officers from the Water Corporation started talking to customers undergoing hardship, they found that people had particular reasons for their hardship. One of those groups included those who do home dialysis. To assist the health system, we want people to do home dialysis because it is less expensive than alternatives, and customers generally like doing it at home. One of the side effects of dialysis is an enormous water bill. What we have done under the medical assist program is give someone who is doing home dialysis a free allocation of about 170 000, maybe 180 000, litres of water each year. Approximately 100 home dialysis patients now benefit from that free allocation. Dialysis is pretty awful; they are probably waiting for a kidney transplant, so they are stuck on a dialysis machine. The last thing they want to do is worry about their water bill, so I am really pleased about that. The feedback is really good and the association representing dialysis patients thinks it is a great idea. Again, there was no mention of that in the member's contribution.

The member for Warren–Blackwood rails against the Perth Regional Alliance contract being brought back in-house. As the member for Warren–Blackwood should know, when a fatberg blocks the system and the proverbial hits the fan, these are the people who have to get down and dirty and do the job. These people were contracted out—privatised by the Court government in 1997—so over 20 years they have gone through a number of contract variations. We decided to bring them back in-house because the board of the Water Corporation believes that it will not only save money by doing that, but also be able to run a better business. These people, as well as swimming around in the proverbial —

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am not taking interjections from the member. He has done an FOI on this, so he can wait to see what response he gets and then he can come back and talk to me.

The Water Corporation wants a direct line to its customers. These people are out there in the community representing the Water Corporation. It wants those Water Corporation staff to be part of the Water Corporation team, because they have that important customer interface. It also wants to marry up its maintenance and capital expenditure budgets under the one stream of management. I am very pleased that the PRA contract has now been brought back in-house. The staff are over the moon about that decision. There are, I think, about 150 of them—they are absolutely over the moon. When we made that announcement at one of the depots, a member of that group came up to me and said that he is going to retire in a couple of years and can now retire with dignity as a Water Corporation employee. He said that when he was employed by the contractors, they did not recognise him for the service. But Water Corporation employees get recognised and he had been doing that work for 30-plus years. Another member of staff had been with the Water Corporation, gone through the contracting phase and was now coming back in-house. He said that all that time he had always refused to wear the logo of the contractors because he did not feel as though they respected him. But he would proudly wear the logo of the Water Corporation. It is about creating a teamwork environment at the Water Corporation. Contrast that with what the Leader of the Nationals WA did when she privatised the construction division at the Water Corporation. When I raised that in this house, she said she was doing it to secure the jobs of those construction workers; it was all about securing their long-term employment. We now know, of course, that within two years of that work being transferred to RCR Tomlinson, it went broke; it went belly up. That is the difference in the attitude that we have on this side of the house for people who provide essential services, compared with the National Party's attitude. We believe in looking after people and making people a part of the team and proud of the work they do, because they do absolutely incredible work.

Mr D.T. Punch: Great ministerial vision, I think.

Mr D.J. KELLY: That is absolutely right.

I will just finish up on not only the hardship measures, but also the water price increases put in place since we came to government. The previous government put up water prices by 61 per cent while in government. They were put up by 6.5 per cent, then eight per cent, 8.5 per cent, 6.5 per cent, five per cent, 6.2 per cent, 4.5 per cent, and 4.5 per cent, and it left us with a budget that had water price increases of six per cent, followed by six per cent and, again, six per cent. Since we came into government, despite the financial carnage that the previous government

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 18 September 2019]

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Ms Mia Davies; Mr Peter Rundle; Dr David Honey; Mr Terry Redman; Mr Dave Kelly

left us, the water price increases have been six per cent, then 5.5 per cent and 2.5 per cent. The 2.5 per cent increase is the lowest increase since the early 2000s. Notwithstanding the carnage that the previous government left us with, we have made great steps to assist the people of Western Australia to not only turn their taps on and get clean water, but also pay their bills. On this side of the house, we are proud of what we have done. There is a lot more work to be done, but it would be pleasant if, for once, rather than trying to score cheap political shots, members opposite would try to support us in some of the things that we do.

Division

Question put and a division taken with the following result —

Ayes (17)

Mr I.C. Blayney	Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup	Mr J.E. McGrath	Mr P.J. Rundle
Ms M.J. Davies	Mr A. Krsticevic	Ms L. Mettam	Mrs A.K. Hayden (<i>Teller</i>)
Mrs L.M. Harvey	Mr S.K. L'Estrange	Dr M.D. Nahan	
Dr D.J. Honey	Mr R.S. Love	Mr D.C. Nalder	
Mr P.A. Katsambanis	Mr W.R. Marmion	Mr D.T. Redman	

Noes (34)

Ms L.L. Baker	Mr D.J. Kelly	Mr P. Papalia	Mr C.J. Tallentire
Dr A.D. Buti	Mr F.M. Logan	Mr S.J. Price	Mr D.A. Templeman
Mr J.N. Carey	Mr M. McGowan	Mr D.T. Punch	Mr P.C. Tinley
Mrs R.M.J. Clarke	Ms S.F. McGurk	Mr J.R. Quigley	Mr R.R. Whitby
Mr R.H. Cook	Mr K.J.J. Michel	Ms M.M. Quirk	Ms S.E. Winton
Mr M.J. Folkard	Mr S.A. Millman	Mrs M.H. Roberts	Mr B.S. Wyatt
Ms E.L. Hamilton	Mr Y. Mubarakai	Ms C.M. Rowe	Mr D.R. Michael (<i>Teller</i>)
Mr T.J. Healy	Mr M.P. Murray	Ms A. Sanderson	
Mr M. Hughes	Mrs L.M. O'Malley	Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski	

Pairs

Mr K. O'Donnell	Ms R. Saffioti
Mr V.A. Catania	Mr W.J. Johnston

Question thus negatived.